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New Pak-US era?

THE new deal reached between Pakistan and the US marks a breakthrough in their oft-strained relations. Both sides claimed on Thursday that they have reached a deal. American President Donald Trump said it will help the two allies tap Pakistan's "massive oil reserves".

"We are in the process of choosing the Oil Company that will lead this Partnership," he announced on social media. While the US president did not mention tariffs, Islamabad said the agreement would lead to a reduction in the steep reciprocal import taxes Washington had slapped on its exports under the so-called Liberation Day duties announced in April but temporarily suspended for 90 days to give room for trade talks. Pakistan faces a potential tariff of 29pc.

The country's finance ministry said this deal signals "the beginning of a new era of economic collaboration especially in energy, mines and minerals, IT, cryptocurrency and other sectors". Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb described it as a win-win situation for both nations. While neither side gave too many details, Pakistani authorities expect the pact to boost bilateral trade, expand market access, attract investment and foster strategic cooperation.

The minister said: "From our perspective, it was always going beyond the immediate trade imperative. The whole point of this is that trade and investment have to go hand in hand." The announcement came a day after Mr Trump slapped 25pc tariffs on imports from India to punish it for its Russian oil purchases. Therefore, the 'symbolism' of the pact is likely to matter more than the sketchy specifics of the agreement — especially the tariff reductions which Islamabad claims to have secured.

That said, the deal reflects a willingness on the part of the leadership of the two countries to recalibrate their transactional security-focused relationship in favour of a greater focus on strategic trade and investment ties. This surprise turn in bilateral relations should send a positive signal to foreign investors, especially American firms, which have so far been reluctant to bring their capital to Pakistan due to the chill in relations for the last several years.

Whether or not Mr Trump plans to convert his energy cooperation rhetoric into action will only be known after a final tariff deal is announced. Islamabad is seeking a substantial reduction in reciprocal tariffs from 29pc to 15-20pc, on a par with other recent US trade agreements, particularly with Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. But Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar believes that Pakistan should be fine "as long as we are better than or equal to our peers". A favourable tariff deal is critical for us as the US is our single largest export market. The deal will also determine the future direction of economic and investment cooperation between both states.

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Hasty disqualifications

THERE were no surprises here. Earlier this week, four lawmakers associated with the PTI, including the leader of the opposition in the Punjab Assembly, were disqualified and their seats vacated by the Election Commission of Pakistan based on recent convictions in the May 9 cases. On Thursday, a Faisalabad anti-terrorism court gave the ECP more ammunition by convicting and handing down lengthy sentences to several other lawmakers, including the opposition leaders of both the National Assembly and Senate. The Constitution, under Article 63(1)(h), requires a lawmaker's disqualification in case of a criminal conviction where the sentence exceeds two years of imprisonment. This was the technicality cited by the ECP when it formally disqualified and de-seated the previous lot of lawmakers. Morally, however, this is a different issue altogether.

There is little doubt in the minds of many that the convictions being handed down by the ATCs to political leaders have been excessive and unjustified. Serious questions have been raised about the quality of the evidence presented against the accused, and there have been concerns throughout about the denial of due process to those alleged to have committed serious crimes. The counsels for the defendants in these cases firmly believe that the convictions will not stand if they are subjected to a fair hearing in higher courts. In these circumstances, it would have been far better for the ECP to have proceeded with some restraint. It should have allowed the affected lawmakers some time to appeal their convictions. It is strange that technicalities quickly come to bear when a particular outcome is possible, but rules and regulations are otherwise treated as worth less than the paper they are printed on. This has been the story of our democracy for the past many years, even decades. Inevitably, other considerations come to prevail, and such convictions are rendered meaningless. This has been a running feature in every political cycle. Still, it must be repeated that the ECP's main responsibility is to uphold the people's mandate. Given its many failings with respect to this responsibility — as exemplified by the botched conduct of the last general election and the subsequent mishandling of the many controversies that followed — it should seek to limit the damage it causes. The people's mandate is not something to be trifled with; alas, this is something the ECP consistently fails to appreciate.

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Selfless act

EVEN in death, some courageously choose to offer others a second chance at life. The recent example of 23-year-old Sultan Zafar, whose kidneys were donated by his grieving mother — a doctor at the very institution (SIUT) where the transplants were performed — is deeply moving. In a moment of unimaginable personal loss, Dr Mehr Afroze chose to give two strangers the gift of life. This brave and selfless act deserves the highest recognition, as does the decision by Dawn's own former staffer, Zubeida Mustafa, who donated her eyes after her recent passing.

Such stories highlight not only individual courage but also the life-saving power of deceased organ donation.

The government has done well by announcing last year that a special logo will be added to the CNICs of registered donors. It is a welcome step towards normalising the practice. But much more needs to be done to build a culture of donation. First and foremost, information about how to register as a donor must be made easily accessible in hospitals, clinics and Nadra offices, and widely disseminated through media campaigns in regional languages. Doctors must be trained to initiate these conversations with patients and their families. Islamic scholars — who have already declared organ donation to be sadaqah-i-jariyah — must continue to reassure the public that religion supports this noble act. Every organ donor has the potential to save up to eight lives and transform many more through tissue donations. And yet, myths and misconceptions continue to stand in the way. It is time society collectively shed its hesitation. Acts like those of Sultan Zafar's family — and countless unsung others — must not be the exception, but the norm. Choosing to become a donor is a profound declaration of hope, even in death. Let us honour those who have made that choice — and urge others to do the same.

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Going nowhere

THE Sukkur-Hyderabad Motorway seems to be paved with broken promises and not much else. No matter how many times the authorities promise it is near completion, it stays right where it has been, that is, going nowhere. Recently, there has been another announcement that construction on the long-delayed M6 project will begin in April 2026. It sounds vaguely promising, but is not something that has never been heard before. For context, the project was conceived nearly a decade ago, with construction originally expected to begin in 2017. It did not. The project was formally inaugurated in December 2022, with assurances that the M6 would be completed within 30 months. It was not. It is no wonder that stakeholders are frustrated. Traders, lawmakers and weary travellers alike have called out the government for failing to prioritise the M6, with many rightly pointing to its importance for national connectivity, trade and public safety. Their pleas continue to fall on deaf ears.

Once billed as the final link in the Peshawar-Karachi corridor, the M6 has become emblematic of Pakistan's inability to rationalise and prioritise development spending amidst difficult financial conditions. The project is certainly not a luxury. Delays have imposed real costs: longer travel times, higher freight charges and frequent accidents on the congested N5. They have also denied Sindh's heartlands improved connectivity with the rest of the nation. It may be recalled that in April this year, the Senate's Standing Committee on Communications had directed the National Highway Authority to treat the M6 as a top priority and to halt all other roadworks until it was finally underway. But no structured plan was disclosed, and from what the NHA chairman told a National Assembly panel on Thursday, a lot still remains up in the air. If the government is truly serious this

time, it should at least publish a project schedule and clarify funding sources. It cannot build a motorway with words alone.

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USC's closure

TO many, the closure of the state-owned utility stores highlights the failure of successive governments to reform what they believe could have been turned into an effective nationwide social safety net for low-income households. Created over half a century ago to shield the lower middle-class households from market volatility and provide them with a wide range of quality essential kitchen items at subsidised rates under one roof, the network had modernised the retail sector when Pakistani consumers were hardly aware of the concept of chain department stores and supermarkets. Yet these stores lost their utility soon due to massive mismanagement, corruption and embezzlement. For more than half their life, the utility stores represented the most fraught chapter in Pakistan's public sector management. According to the latest finance ministry's report, the Utility Stores Corporation had posted a loss of Rs4.1bn during the first six months of the last fiscal year, with cumulative losses rising to Rs15.5bn. This underscores the structural and operational challenges in the network's management.

In recent years, there had been some talk of official plans to restructure the stores. But no meaningful progress was made. The demand for restructuring them was rooted in the widely held view that the government could use technology to digitise inventory and plug leakages, as well as tighten its oversight of the store network. However, the fact remained that it was unrealistic to expect any government, let alone one as fiscally overstretched and under-resourced as ours, to efficiently manage and run a vast retail operation of nearly 4,000 stores without incurring significant financial losses. Retail has turned into a fast-moving, competitive sector that demands management efficiency — a quality not typically associated with Pakistani bureaucracy. More crucially, the era of blanket, untargeted subsidies is over. With the government cleaning up its stable full of loss-making state-owned enterprises, it is important for it to stop sending across confused signals about the future of these white elephants as it did in the case of the USC. The decision to wind up the stores — as well as the push for the privatisation of PIA — represents a policy shift to get rid of a big financial burden on the budget. Yet despite repeated declarations, progress on this front remains very slow due to the absence of a clear-cut policy framework.

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TTP footholds

SINCE the Musharraf era — that is, for over two decades now — KP, particularly the ex-Fata region, has been a war zone, suffering from terrorist attacks, as well as the effects of repeated military campaigns.

Yet despite these operations, terrorist groups, particularly the banned TTP, have yet to be completely defeated. For example, in Tirah, local tribes have apparently asked TTP fighters to leave the region. As per reports, the militants said they would ‘consult’ their leadership in Afghanistan regarding their withdrawal from the area.

This shows how entrenched the terrorists are in parts of KP, besides highlighting the fact that the TTP command structure remains intact in Afghanistan. It is because of the continued militant presence in parts of KP that the military has yet again launched an operation in parts of Bajaur tribal district.

With the launch of Operation Sarbakaf, the local people once again find themselves caught in the crossfire between the terrorists and the military. Bajaur’s people had staged protests against the latest military campaign, with the tribal population saying they were not given advance warning of the operation and the related curfew. Fear of more death and displacement haunts them.

The PTI government in KP had initially criticised the campaign, but the chief minister, in an apparent U-turn, backed the action. However, the PTI continues to oppose military action in KP’s affected areas. The tribal people’s reservations about repeated operations are understandable, and there have been large demonstrations against both militancy and military campaigns after terrorism resurfaced in KP following the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan in 2021. They rightly ask why terrorism has still not been eliminated after decades of counter-insurgency campaigns.

Perhaps the main issue with counterterrorism operations in KP is that while security forces have fought hard and given sacrifices — succeeding in the ‘clear and hold’ phases — the ‘build’ phase of CT campaigns has failed to deliver. For this, both the civilian and security leaderships are responsible; the former for not building the capacity of civilian LEAs, and the latter for not completely stopping infiltration attempts from Afghanistan.

However, during a meeting of the ‘Harden the State’ committee on Thursday, the PM discussed a multipronged strategy involving operations, legislation and public outreach to combat extremism. While the issue of terrorism must be taken up with Afghanistan, local responses should ensure that this time, CT actions are thorough, so that KP’s people do not suffer endlessly.

The state must establish its writ across the country, and there can be no fiefdoms where terrorists dominate. All points highlighted in the revised NAP need to be implemented, as kinetic action

alone is not enough. Moreover, CT operations should ensure that there is minimum collateral damage and that terrorist groups such as the TTP are uprooted permanently.

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Hybrid Ruin

IS it hubris or something else that motivates the regime to set the bar lower each time it has an opportunity to put things back on track?

In recent days, various anti-terrorism courts have handed down wholesale punishments to elected leaders and political workers affiliated with the PTI, over various cases related to the violence and rioting that broke out in parts of the country on May 9, 2023.

Scores have been convicted and handed lengthy sentences in relation to cases that were long criticised as politically motivated, built on 'fabricated' or weak evidence, and prosecuted without regard to due process. Several elected lawmakers, including the opposition leaders in both the Senate and the National Assembly, stand to lose their seats under Article 63(1)(h) of the Constitution. Some have already been de-notified by the Election Commission, including the opposition leader in the Punjab Assembly, in what critics describe as 'undue haste'.

The scale of lawfare against political workers is unprecedented in Pakistan's history. Never before have so many lawmakers and political workers been convicted during a period of what is supposed to be democratic rule, and never before have political workers been tried as terrorists. One must give credit where it is due: to politicians who campaigned long and hard for civil supremacy and democracy, and judges who once decried judicial capture.

Unfortunately, these very politicians abandoned their principles as soon as the doors to power were flung open for them, while the judges appear to have surrendered their independence and responsibility. These are difficult times, with no end in sight. The damage already wrought will take decades to heal and reverse. And yet, sadly, there seems to be no recognition or acceptance among even the civilians who hold the present regime together that it may be time to turn back.

At least those left out by the system still have the luxury of speaking rationally. Friday's declaration, shared after the opposition's multiparty conference, has sought a truth and reconciliation commission that could probe the collapse of the constitutional order and bring to book those "judges, generals and politicians" who have violated the Constitution, harmed democracy and usurped people's rights. It also seeks a new charter of democracy between all political parties, along with the abolition of the 'hybrid system' of governance recently extolled by the defence minister.

If civil supremacy is indeed what Pakistani leaders seek, this may be the most sensible way out of the present mess. However, given their proclivity for partnerships with unelected powerbrokers, it still seems like a distant dream. The PTI may be suffering, but it still wants the blessing of its tormentors more than the sympathy of their other victims. And this, unfortunately, is our democracy's Achilles heel.

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No Advantage

THE new agreement between Pakistan and the US, heralded as a 'strategic' breakthrough in their trade and investment ties, has sparked hopes of a potential boost in our exports to America — our single largest market. However, the sketchy details of the deal suggest that the reduction in the punishing US reciprocal tariffs on Pakistani goods — from the previous 29pc to 19pc — levels the ground but does not give the country an edge over its competitors in the US market. That we have dodged a steeper tariff is a relief. But it will not push Pakistan into the American market ahead of its regional rivals. In fact, our key regional rivals — barring India — have received a better deal than us. For example, countries such as Vietnam and Bangladesh were initially slapped with higher ad valorem duties of 46pc and 37pc respectively. That gave Pakistan a clear advantage. But the subsequent reduction in duties on these nations to 20pc has eroded that advantage. At best, Pakistan now retains parity with most of its competitors. We have lost the opportunity to secure the preferential, greater market access needed for a decisive export surge to the US.

Unless the details of the deal are made public, an element of uncertainty regarding the consequences of inconclusiveness of the pact will persist. In his executive order, President Donald Trump has tied his revised global tariffs to broader security and economic cooperation with its trading partners. The failure of talks will automatically invite 10pc ad valorem duties on any faltering trading partner of the US. Pakistan, as per the executive order, falls into the category of countries that have either finalised an agreement, or are close to agreeing on meaningful commitments, with the US. Unless we have concluded the pact and signed it, the threat of additional punitive import taxes will continue to loom large over our goods. Further, if India, despite its current higher tariffs, manages to strike a more favourable deal in the weeks ahead, Pakistan's perceived gains over its arch rival could quickly evaporate. The new trade deal with Washington may give some breathing space, but it is also a reminder that Pakistan needs to urgently address issues such as exorbitantly high energy costs, steep taxes, policy inconsistency, etc, which are affecting the international competitiveness of its goods, besides working on economic diplomacy to obtain greater market access from Washington.

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Starvation politics

THE visit of US envoy Steve Witkoff to Gaza's aid corridors underlines how broken the West's humanitarian response is to the Gaza war. Rather than help restore UN-led relief efforts after Israel blocked most humanitarian access to the occupied territory, the US has backed an alternative aid model, the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, whose poorly managed food distribution points have become death zones. More than 1,300 Palestinians, many of them women and children, have died trying to access aid. Some were trampled in stampedes; others were shot by Israeli forces as they queued for survival. With Gaza now in the grip of famine — and malnutrition ravaging a quarter of its children and pregnant women — the GHF model is indefensible. UN agencies have rightly refused to endorse it, warning that these chaotic distribution centres are neither neutral nor safe. Human Rights Watch has called them “bloodbaths”. Still, Washington continues to prop them up.

Mr Witkoff's visit comes amid diplomatic movement. A peace conference was held in New York recently with proposals for a two-state framework, Hamas disarmament and hostage release. Encouragingly, countries such as France and Canada favour a Palestinian state. But such signals are long overdue. Western governments, particularly the US, have indulged Israel's devastating war for far too long. Their selective outrage — vocal on hostages, silent on mass Palestinian suffering — has cost tens of thousands of lives. President Donald Trump, who once gave Israel carte blanche, appears to be softening his stance, acknowledging “real starvation” in Gaza, and Israeli author David Grossman— once reluctant to utter the word — has called his own country's campaign in Gaza “genocide”, explaining he now uses the term “with immense pain and with a broken heart”. But words will not suffice. The global community must act now. A ceasefire is imperative. UN access must be restored — and most crucially, Palestinian statehood must be recognised within a two-state framework.

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Terror potpourri

DESPITE persistent denials by the Afghan Taliban that terrorist groups are using their country as a safe haven, the global consensus — backed by evidence — is that Afghanistan indeed continues to be a base for militants and violent extremists.

For example, the latest edition of the relevant UN Security Council monitoring report on IS and Al Qaeda reveals that both the banned TTP and IS-K continue to operate in Afghanistan with relative freedom.

In fact, where the latter group is concerned, the report says that IS-K poses a major threat regionally and internationally. The UN document again validates what Pakistan has long been arguing — that the Afghan Taliban are not doing enough to address the presence of terrorist groups on their soil, and that these outfits pose a significant challenge to regional security.

With regard to the TTP, which has been carrying out terrorist attacks in Pakistan with regularity, the report states that the outfit has some 6,000 fighters, and that it “continued to receive ... logistical and operational support” from the Afghan Taliban.

This is despite the fact that some within the Afghan Taliban were of the view that Afghanistan’s de facto rulers should distance themselves from the TTP. The document also observes that the TTP maintains ties with IS-K, Al Qaeda as well as Baloch militants.

Interestingly, the TTP seems to be ‘diversifying’ its options, as it has links with both the Afghan Taliban and IS-K, which oppose one another. The UN report points out that IS-K “is the most serious threat” regionally and internationally. For this country, it should be a matter of great concern that this dangerous group is reportedly operating “close to the Pakistani” border, where it is training suicide bombers, who include minors.

These findings should prompt the Pakistani state, regional countries as well as the international community to address the problem of militancy in Afghanistan with alacrity. Though the Foreign Office has said there has been “better receptivity” to Pakistan’s concerns in Kabul, concrete action is needed from the Afghan Taliban regime to ensure that the potpourri of terrorist groups operating from Afghan soil do not transform into a global security nightmare.

While Pakistan needs to secure its borders and ensure that TTP and IS-K terrorists are not able to enter the country and find a foothold here, on its part, Kabul must do much more to neutralise the militant threat in Afghanistan. The prospect of the TTP and IS-K joining forces is a frightening one, and this budding terrorist alliance must be nipped in the bud.

The TTP has spilt innocent blood for years in this country, while the world has witnessed the horrors that the IS is capable of inflicting in the Middle East. Therefore, urgent action is needed to address the problem of terrorist groups in Afghanistan.

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I honour’s name

THE blood of women continues to be spilled in the name of honour and still, the state remains a spectator. A recent high-profile killing involves Bano Bibi and Ehsan Ullah Samalani, killed in Balochistan, reportedly on the orders of a jirga. The murders, filmed and widely circulated online, showed Bano being shot allegedly by her own brother. The footage went viral and triggered national outrage, forcing the authorities to act. Sixteen individuals, including a tribal leader and

Bano's mother, were arrested, though the gunman remained at large. The Balochistan chief minister has called this a "test case", pledging to dismantle illegal tribal courts. Yet many suspect this urgency stems more from public pressure than genuine resolve, and worry it may fizzle out once media attention wanes. In Rawalpindi, 18-year-old Sidra Bibi was allegedly suffocated after marrying by choice, again reportedly on the orders of a local council. Her body was buried in a concealed grave until a post-mortem confirmed foul play. Nine suspects, including her father and ex-husband, were arrested. These are but two out of an unknown number of such tragedies. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 405 'honour' killings were reported in 2024, up from 226 the year before. Rights groups estimate the real toll to be closer to 1,000 annually, as most cases go unreported or are misclassified.

Despite a 2016 amendment that removed the loophole allowing families to pardon the killers in such cases, enforcement remains patchy. Jirgas continue to pass unlawful rulings, especially in tribal and feudal areas, and police are reluctant to act. Convictions are rare. Survivors receive little state support. Witness protection mechanisms are almost non-existent, and families who resist such customs face ostracisation or violent reprisals. It begs the question: how many more women must have their fate sealed by a bullet fired in the name of honour before the state cracks down? The 2019 Supreme Court ban on jirgas must be enforced without delay. Informal courts must be dismantled and replaced with accessible legal institutions. 'Honour' killings — a rash of which have been reported lately — must be prosecuted swiftly and both the killers and those who sanction the murder brought to book. A national database to document gender-based violence is essential for transparency and accountability. Outrage alone cannot deliver justice. The law — not custom — must dominate.

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The plastic problem

PLASTIC waste, produced in large quantities, causes substantial damage to people and the ecosystem. The inauguration of the first Polyethylene Plastic Recycling Plant, in collaboration with a waste management company, at the Garbage Transfer Station of the Sindh Solid Waste Management Board in Hyderabad, is a step in the right direction to treat the city's plastic garbage. A part of the World Bank-funded PLEASE project (Plastic Free Rivers and Seas for South Asia), the public sector venture will produce manhole covers — frequently stolen by drug addicts — from recycled plastic. The company, with SSWMB, is also searching for a landfill site where, over the next two years, it can establish a plant to generate power from garbage for electricity needs. It aims to create awareness about reducing waste and identifying recyclable items. Currently, as per the project head, out of the 1,100 tonnes of municipal solid waste collection, eight tonnes is polyethylene plastic; 3pc of the latter is being used to manufacture 100 manhole covers for civic bodies.

It is well known that plastic waste poisons entire water bodies, resulting in devastating effects on marine life. The Hyderabad initiative's success should, therefore, be ensured and replicated across the country, particularly in Karachi. The latter has turned into a vast garbage landfill. An earlier endeavour in Punjab of a plastic-infused road was a success. In 2023, Sindh announced the same ambition but it came to naught. As for packaging, utilising reusable plastic, instead of single-use plastic, can conserve resources and reduce waste. While the world searches for a permanent sustainable option, paper, glass and metal are suitable replacements for now. The impact of any material on the environment needs to be monitored to ensure that it does more good than harm. Administrative resolve to tackle socioeconomic and environmental losses must be visible and aggressive.

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No sporting spirit

It was high time Pakistan made itself heard. India's continuous mixing of sports — cricket in particular — with politics came to a head during the World Championship of Legends, which concluded on Sunday. Having refused to play a group game during the tournament for retired players, India also declined to take the pitch for the semi-final against Pakistan on the pretext of strained ties. By announcing the ban on Pakistan's participation in future WCL matches, the Mohsin Naqvi-led Pakistan Cricket Board has taken the right step. The PCB's dissent is rooted in the fact that points were shared between India and Pakistan for the called-off group game, despite the former country having forfeited the clash. The PCB stated that the press releases announcing the cancellation of the games were tainted with "hypocrisy and bias". The WCL had said that the India-Pakistan semi-final had been called off keeping in mind the "public sentiment". The PCB indicated that it had been done only to appease India and that the WCL had succumbed to a "specific nationalistic narrative". Despite their skirmishes in May, Pakistan has been open to playing against India according to the arrangements of the International Cricket Council. The PCB has advocated the separation of sports and politics and the Pakistan Champions team also had no qualms over taking on India. After all, the two nations have been squaring off in other sports. Last month, Pakistan beat India on their way to winning the Asian Under-16 Volleyball Championship.

Cricket, however, brings out India's negative side; their players apparently stated they 'were not comfortable' playing against Pakistan. They only made it as far as the semi-final thanks to the wrongfully awarded point against Pakistan. The PCB's firm line over the WCL comes after Mr Naqvi, as chief of the Asian Cricket Council, convinced the Indian hosts to hold the Asia Cup in the UAE. One hopes the tournament goes ahead without drama, although India's cricket board has faced backlash for agreeing to hold it. Earlier, cricket helped Pakistan and India build bridges. But with India continuously burning those bridges, the PCB is right to take a firm stand.

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On the right track

WITH the multibillion dollar ML-I project — a key part of the CPEC initiative aimed at upgrading the railway line between Karachi and Peshawar — making no headway, the government seems to have renewed its attempts to rehabilitate the decaying rail structure from its own pocket. According to a Pakistan Railways official, the department plans to invest Rs12bn on rehabilitating its tracks as well as improving signalling and communication systems during FY26. Additionally, the authorities intend to spend Rs10bn on the repair and maintenance of the rolling stock. During the last couple of years, the government has repaired and replaced the tracks in Sukkur Division, where most derailments and accidents have taken place in recent times. Last year, it spent Rs22bn from the federal development programme on railway infrastructure repair and replacement to revive the long-neglected rail sector. Besides federal funds, PR authorities are also using a part of their revenues for infrastructure.

This is a welcome development; the dilapidated railway infrastructure, especially the decrepit tracks, has been responsible for dozens of fatal train accidents and hundreds of derailments. The investment is showing in the declining number of accidents and derailments. However, the federal funds being allocated for railway work are a mere fraction of what needs to be invested to provide safe and comfortable travel facilities to millions of low-income passengers, particularly for longer destinations. The operational improvements and enhanced freight activity, due to better infrastructure, have also resulted in increased railway revenues, which are said to have climbed from Rs45bn in 2018-19 to Rs93bn in the last fiscal. That said, the railways' sustainable turnaround will depend on the complete modernisation of the infrastructure as envisaged under the ML-I plan and privatisation. The department needs to be bifurcated into separate entities and companies — each responsible for providing different services — while encouraging private investment in freight and passenger train operations. The one-off expenditure spikes and initiatives such as the Business Express train service recently inaugurated by the prime minister, or temporary boosts in freight traffic, can accomplish only so much. Much work remains if PR is to shed its reputation for poor safety standards, inefficient services and financial haemorrhaging. The sooner it is done the better.

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Pezeshkian's visit

THE focus of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian's visit to Pakistan, which wrapped up on Sunday, was trade and security, and the challenge before Tehran and Islamabad remains translating the many deals and MoUs signed during the talks into concrete agreements.

This is mainly so because of the poor relations between the US and Iran, particularly the former's sanctions that threaten any state wishing to expand ties with Tehran. The visit is significant as it comes after the June Iran-Israel war, in which the US also participated, and at a time when geopolitical alliances are shifting rapidly.

Dr Pezeshkian and his delegation met the top civilian and military leaders of the country. Among the matters discussed was the bloodbath in Gaza; the Iranian leader also appreciated Pakistan's support during the Israeli aggression.

Dr Pezeshkian expressed his desire to raise bilateral trade to \$10bn, while the need to jointly combat terrorism, especially along the border in Balochistan, was also discussed. The Iranians further sought to join Pakistan and China in expanding regional trade as part of the Silk Road initiative. At least 12 MoUs and deals were signed covering various sectors. Of course, the elephant in the room is US sanctions; unless both sides address this irritant, it will be difficult to achieve the economic goals both Pakistan and Iran desire.

Perhaps the biggest casualty of foreign sanctions has been the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline; Tehran has completed the project at its end, while Pakistan is wary of finalising the scheme lest it attract Washington's wrath.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif promised an "early resolution" to the pipeline issue when he was in Iran in May, but the issue did not come up during the Iranian leader's visit, at least not publicly. It appears that Pakistan is willing to import petroleum from the US in order to satisfy the Trump administration, and is not willing to import Iranian gas for fear of annoying the US. Unless the pipeline imbroglio is settled amicably, without fear of foreign pressure, Pakistan may have to fight an ugly arbitration battle, which will harm ties with Iran.

Along with trade, militant groups reportedly active on both sides of the border must be neutralised so that they are unable to damage ties. In 2024, due to the malign activities of armed non-state actors, both capitals traded missile fire; thankfully, the issue was resolved before things could escalate.

But it serves as a reminder of how militant groups can create highly volatile situations. Pakistan indeed must walk a tightrope between Washington and Tehran. But while we must maintain good ties with the US, it is essential to have cordial relations with a neighbour with whom we share a long border, and a long history.

Bangladesh in limbo

A YEAR has passed since the people of Bangladesh rose in defiance of a brutal autocracy, bringing an end to Sheikh Hasina Wajed's 15-year rule. The image of protesters breaching the gates of Ganabhaban, dancing in its halls and swimming in its lakes, captured not just the collapse of a regime, but the arrival of a rare moment of collective power. Now, the Ganabhaban has been turned into a museum. Yet the country is still stuck in a dangerous limbo. The caretaker government led by Muhammad Yunus, the elderly Nobel laureate and a widely respected figure, promised a reset. It swiftly banned Sheikh Hasina's Awami League from politics and moved to prosecute her allies for crimes ranging from corruption to crimes against humanity. But a year later, the roadmap to democracy remains vague. Political groups that once stood shoulder to shoulder are now at odds. Disagreement over the scope of constitutional reforms — including proposals for a bicameral legislature and electoral proportionality — has mired the National Consensus Commission in deadlock. Meanwhile, instability is rising. Crime is up, the police are demoralised, and rival political factions jostling for dominance in towns and tenders alike. While economic indicators have improved — inflation is down, reserves are up — political legitimacy is lagging.

The revolutionaries of 2024 did not march for indefinite caretaker rule, nor for one unelected elite to replace another. Bangladesh needs an election — not in early 2026, as currently promised, but much sooner. The longer the wait, the more brittle the interim consensus becomes. Crucially, the credibility of that election depends not only on reform but on inclusivity. Banning large swathes of the political spectrum may please the revolutionaries, but it will not restore democratic normalcy. Delay too long, and Bangladesh risks repeating the very cycle it sought to break.

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Still in chains

THE media landscape in Pakistan has seen many ups and downs since independence. At times, there have been periods of 'glasnost', when the press has spoken with relative ease. But, all too often, the media has seen dark periods of censorship and violence, with journalists unable to express themselves freely. Through the decades, activists for media freedom, including the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists — which recently marked its 75th anniversary — have struggled to safeguard democratic rights. And while many battles have been won, the struggle for media freedom and democracy continues, with Pakistani society continuing to face challenges. To mark its 75th year, the PFUJ held a meeting of its federal executive council and issued the Karachi Declaration 2025. The document highlights the grave obstacles the Pakistani media continues to face in the current era, including legal attempts to silence critical voices. In particular, the PFUJ has deemed the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, 2025, and the Punjab Defamation Bill, 2024, as "authoritarian" and designed to suppress voices. It has called for the withdrawal of these

laws. It has also expressed concern over the “fabricated cases” and life threats journalists, media workers and content creators face, while demanding an end to retrenchments in the media industry.

While 75 years of activism do mark a milestone for the PFUJ, it is a sad fact that nearly all unions in Pakistan have been weakened, and media organisations work in an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship. Today, rights bodies limit themselves to issuing press releases, or staging token protests. While it is true that activists and journalists face threats from state and non-state actors, in previous decades, brave individuals and organisations confronted powerful quarters, often at great personal cost, in their defence of basic rights. The Ziaul Haq dictatorship immediately comes to mind — an era when journalists were lashed and jailed for confronting the military strongman. Today, as we face an equally suffocating atmosphere, journalists, rights groups and civil society must continue the struggle for a more egalitarian society, and democratic rights. A free press — which questions power and speaks up for the voiceless — is indispensable to a truly democratic dispensation. If the current set-up is serious about respecting basic rights, it must address the issues raised by the PFUJ and other groups, particularly regarding anti-media laws.

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Another Attempt

IT has taken the PTI two years to arrive at an impasse. Despite persistent efforts — big and small, peaceful and chaotic — the party has remained unable to secure the release of its founder.

Meanwhile, Imran Khan’s reluctance to engage in dialogue has only deepened his isolation. It is unclear how much longer the PTI can sustain its resistance, or how far its leader is willing to go.

So far, pressure and disappointment do not appear to have broken him. But with the party’s organisational capacity severely diminished, questions remain about how long its stand-off with the state can continue.

Aug 5 was supposed to mark a symbolic turning point: two years since Mr Khan’s arrest.

The party, whose ‘final call’ to secure their leader’s release last November had ended in blood and tears, had been instructed to re-mobilise and demonstrate its vigour. From initial reports, it appears to have fallen rather short of its goals.

Will this lead to a reassessment within party ranks, or perhaps even by Mr Khan himself? It remains to be seen.

What is clear is that the state has responded to each attempt by PTI workers to mobilise with firm resistance and is likely to continue to do so in the future. The intent appears to be to discourage

any agitation by repeatedly demonstrating the latter's futility. However, its heavy-handedness has not won the state greater legitimacy or public favour.

On the contrary, each crackdown has further alienated segments of the public and accelerated the erosion of trust in institutions. Those in power are surely aware of this, but there is a certain resignation to the status quo that nobody, especially not the civilian leadership, wishes to challenge. This is why Pakistan seems to be going nowhere; there is no end to the crisis in sight, and this is how things may continue.

The PTI has certainly been subjected to extraordinary pressure, and many of the actions taken against its leadership appear deeply troubling. Any political party would feel compelled to assert its rights in the face of such repression.

Yet, the PTI also ought to have realised that every failed attempt to challenge the regime would only embolden the latter further. The announcement of yet another round of protests last month invited disbelief because the party never seemed to have the strength or the strategy to mount a credible challenge. The PTI has long suffered from a lack of internal cohesion and organisation, and it, therefore, seemed fanciful of its leader to trust it with launching a forceful nationwide movement when it has never been weaker.

The attempt now seems to have faltered, and Pakistan remains just as mired in political stagnation. Without any leverage, the PTI could soon face tough choices.

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Second chances

FACING the ignominy of the state auctioning off its assets, Bahria Town has appealed for another chance to settle its debts. Few could have imagined that the controversial real estate developer would one day be humbled thus. It was, after all, considered untouchable for a large part of its history.

Yet on Tuesday, as its chairman issued a lengthy statement beseeching the state for "serious dialogue and a dignified solution", it seemed that Bahria Town might finally be feeling the heat. "[...] We assure you that we will participate in any arbitration and implement its decision 100 per cent. [...] If the arbitration decision requires payment of money from our side, we will ensure its payment, God willing," the statement read. It was prefaced with a long account of Bahria Town's 'contributions' to Pakistan, as well as a lament on the dire straits the company now finds itself in.

One wonders if the many citizens dispossessed by Bahria Town's aggressively expansionist real estate projects have felt schadenfreude over its predicament. As part of several investigations into the developer's activities, this publication came across scores of accounts of citizens who had been rendered helpless by Bahria Town's immense clout and heft. Even the Supreme Court

had struggled, during its examination of the developer's BTK project, to account for the impunity it enjoyed during its expansion, which was aided by unprecedented levels of government corruption and state connivance.

But though the settlement Bahria Town eventually agreed with the apex court to atone for its misdoings had seemed relatively modest at the time, it seems it continued to haunt it. For some reason, Bahria Town never made good on its commitments and began defaulting very early on against scheduled payments. Why this did not invite the court's scrutiny sooner has never truly been explained.

The state now wants Bahria Town to pay, and is willing to exercise all options at its disposal. The Bahria Town chairman suggested in the past that the developer was being targeted due to his refusal to become party to the Al Qadir Trust case against former prime minister Imran Khan. That case revolved around assets worth £190m seized from Malik Riaz by the UK government and repatriated to Pakistan, which the present government believes were misappropriated to 'benefit' Bahria Town by adjusting them against its dues to the Supreme Court. The authorities are now even seizing Bahria Town properties tied to other cases.

But if the present regime at some point offers some 'benefit' to Bahria Town in return for Mr Riaz's 'cooperation', it would be considered guilty of the same malfeasance it accuses Mr Khan of. Justice demands that Bahria Town be prosecuted fairly and fully by the authorities — independent of all other considerations.

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IHK tinkering

SIX years after India's attempts to create new 'facts' on the ground by bifurcating held Kashmir into the union territories of Jammu & Kashmir, and Ladakh, and discarding the disputed region's limited autonomy, New Delhi continues to dream up new schemes to further complicate this decades-old issue. But the truth is that unless there is a solution based on justice, the Kashmir question will remain unresolved, and the occupied region's people will continue to suffer due to India's machinations and oppressive rule. The newest plan reportedly in the works is to grant occupied Jammu statehood. The Indian media reported that meetings have apparently been held at the top level to discuss the scheme. Here, Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar alluded to the development while speaking at a rally in Islamabad on Tuesday. India can divide and subdivide occupied Kashmir into as many bits and pieces as it wants; but it does not take away from the fact that Kashmir remains a disputed territory in the eyes of the world. While the Kashmiris' plight may not attract global attention — just as countries watch Israel carry out a genocide in occupied Gaza without doing anything about it — even India's closest foreign partners will not contest the fact that Kashmir remains a disputed region as per international law.

After Aug 5, 2019, India has attempted to change the demographic profile of held Kashmir, along with employing brutal tactics to keep its population in check. It has also held onto many powers, turning the region's legislative assembly into a largely symbolic institution. Yet these moves have not resolved matters. Last year's legislative elections returned parties that campaigned for the restoration of statehood for the entire disputed territory as it was pre-2019, even though they remained loyal to New Delhi. This means that India's moves to scupper Kashmir's autonomy and dilute its unique identity face rejection across the political spectrum — from freedom fighters to loyalists. The Indian supreme court is due to hear a plea to restore J&K's statehood. But hopes should not be high. The solution to the Kashmir imbroglio is political, and must be acceptable to all main stakeholders — the Kashmiris, Pakistan and India. Any attempts at gerrymandering the disputed region's boundaries, or disenfranchising its people, will only prolong the crisis, and worsen the atmosphere of mistrust in South Asia.

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Trading babies

CHILD trafficking is the most repellant avatar of human sale. Not new to Pakistan, it reduces minors to easy commodities. In this context, the FIA's arrest of Dr Mubina Agboatwala, who heads the NGO HOPE, following complaints by US consulate authorities about her alleged role in the "illegal business of trafficking minors" is unsettling news. The complaint, according to the FIR lodged, lists three adoption visa cases, noting that the centres named in the application did not show any record of the infants. Reportedly, the social welfare department said that HOPE was not a Pakistani orphanage and had "no provision in its constitution for adoption of children". Interestingly, the objection was sent on Sept 15, 2023 to the agency.

Pakistan's 'good Samaritans' are often in the spotlight. Last year, rights activist Sarim Burney was arrested on a "human trafficking complaint" by US officials. There is silence around his case. It is too early to say whether the charges against Dr Agboatwala are correct. But it should be mentioned that the FIA asserted that HOPE had given "abandoned babies" to families of a community abroad. The NGO, according to the FIA, has not presented proof that these babies were discovered near its premises. Such charges require diligence as little victims are regularly traded not just for illegal adoptions, but also for beggary, child labour, organ transplant and to work as drug mules. Although the anti-trafficking laws are in place in the country, the odious practice persists owing to weak implementation. It is the FIA's responsibility to ensure that these complaints are investigated rigorously and prosecuted transparently, with solid evidence collection. The courts should not show leniency in crimes against minors. To uproot the baby black market, international engagement is mandatory so that global humanitarian regulations are observed. The state must shield its children

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Tough choices

WITH resurgent militant activity in KP's tribal districts, and public fears about further violence due to terrorism and counterterrorism operations, the state faces unenviable choices.

Over the past few days, the KP government has hosted three major jirgas in different parts of the former tribal belt to gauge public opinion about how to deal with resurgent terrorist activity. The local tribes have demanded talks with the Afghan Taliban, as well as negotiations with banned groups, while some reports suggest a consensus in the merged areas against further military operations — perhaps it is in response to these concerns that the state minister for interior has said there will be no operation. Local jirgas elsewhere have endorsed similar demands. Meanwhile, the KP administration has planned to host a grand jirga to chart a way forward.

For over 20 years, KP, including the former Fata region, has faced almost constant violence on account of both terrorism and CT operations. People have lost loved ones and faced displacement. Fatigue and desperation after two decades of conflict have led the tribal people to demand talks with the militants and an end to kinetic action.

Yet while the views of the local people should be heard, it must also be remembered that terrorist groups have mostly broken the pacts signed with the state. There is no guarantee they will honour their agreements this time; peace deals may offer temporary relief but eventually collapse. Moreover, the state — specifically the military — refers to the banned TTP as 'India-backed Fitna al Khawarij'; will this description remain if talks go ahead?

Secondly, will the militants agree to renounce violence in case of successful negotiations? Unless they do, any resultant peace deal will only weaken the state. Furthermore, the state has sent several delegations to talk to the Afghan Taliban, in order to urge them to rein in Afghanistan-based militants. No tangible long-term effects of these talks have been visible in the form of reduced violence.

Perhaps we find ourselves at this juncture because ever since the 'war on terror' was launched in this region, the state's CT policy has failed to create lasting peace. This is despite the fact that we have lost thousands of civilians, military men and police personnel in the war against militancy. Despite successive military operations, as well as CT policies such as NAP and NAP 2.0, and multiple attempts to stamp out violent extremism, we find ourselves back to square one.

A thorough review of the state's CT policies is required by the civilian leadership, the intelligence community, the establishment and area experts. This cycle of rising militancy, kinetic action, displacement, temporary calm and resurgent militancy must be broken, and a permanent solution to Pakistan's militancy problem found.

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Policy crunch

WHEN it comes to learning from past failures, Pakistan's policymakers have shown a remarkable tendency to do quite the opposite. The latest attempt to allegedly push down the exchange rate to an arbitrary target of Rs250 per dollar is yet another example of how short-term gains can take precedence over long-term economic stability in the country. Even pushback from the market has failed to deter policymakers from pursuing the artificial benchmark — a 'policy' that has previously led to rapid and sharp devaluations, pushed the country to the brink of default and undermined export competitiveness. Grey trade has also been flourishing, starving the legitimate market of liquidity ever since the authorities put pressure on the market players to meet their whimsical target. The crunch is forcing people to purchase dollars for their legitimate needs, such as travel and education, at a very high premium from the grey market.

The exchange rate is under pressure on multiple fronts — ranging from a seasonal surge in demand by individuals to an uptick in imports. The State Bank's directive requiring banks to meet import payments through their own exports and remittances inflows is further fuelling the dollar's appreciation. Facing a mismatch between dollar inflows and outflows, banks are now selling dollars to importers at a premium above the interbank rate, or refusing to entertain them at all. Exchange companies report a spike in demand for illegal transfers out of Pakistan, driven in part by businesses relocating to Dubai. The mounting pressure on the exchange rate in recent months has also prompted many to hedge by shifting their savings to dollars. The exchange companies insist that there is no dollar crunch. The emergence of the grey market, they argue, has been fuelled by growing demand and speculation. The widening gap between market sentiments and official expectations, say market analysts, shows that the target rate is unrealistic. There is a possibility that the authorities may improve the rupee-dollar parity through administrative measures. For how long, though? The country's fragile economy does not support a stronger rupee. It will only fuel uncertainty, affect exports and discourage remittances. Sooner or later, market dynamics would have to be allowed to determine the real exchange rate through big depreciations. Otherwise, we will risk another balance-of-payments crisis — or even a potential default.

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Balochistan's troubles

THE HRCP's latest fact-finding report confirms what many in Balochistan have alleged for years: the lack of governance and the violation of people's rights in the province. The report has indicated that enforced disappearances, custodial killings and harassment of families in the province are deliberate. The state's reluctance to end this practice — despite Supreme Court directives and repeated public outcry — exposes a disregard for constitutional rights and human dignity. Moreover, the use of contentious laws like the Anti-Terrorism (Balochistan Amendment) Act, 2025, which permits 90-day detentions without charge, has deepened alienation in the province. At the

other end, peaceful activists are branded as threats to national security while actual militant violence runs rampant.

The rot does not stop there. Elections, as the HRCP points out, have become a farce, with nationalist and progressive parties sidelined through alleged rigging and legal blacklists. The report documents how student leaders and opposition figures are persecuted, jailed, or worse, disappeared. It is no surprise the province suffers from a political vacuum in which unelected actors wield unchecked power and youth live in despair or exile. This is tantamount to state failure. The HRCP also asserts that the province's mineral wealth is extracted for the benefit of outsiders, while its people are denied education, jobs and representation, and that decisions taken by elected assemblies are routed through controversial investment bodies. All this is seen as a provocation that will only deepen the insurgency. The state must embark on a radical course correction. Repressive laws must be amended or repealed, political freedoms restored, parallel power structures dismantled and security agencies held to account. The people of Balochistan deserve justice, which will, among other things, turn the restive youth away from the militants. The Balochistan issue is one of consequence and must be handled with care.

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Harvesting the poor

THE shocking rescue of a young man, bound to a stretcher and moments away from having his kidney stolen in a Bahria Town house in Rawalpindi, should have been unthinkable in 2025. Instead, it is the second such bust in the city in a single week — proof that Pakistan's organ trafficking industry is thriving under the nose of the state. The Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act was passed 15 years ago to end the exploitation of the poor for profit. Yet the law is little more than paper when such rackets can operate undetected in an upscale housing society, complete with medical equipment, anaesthetic supplies and qualified surgeons. That such professionals — sworn to protect life — are repeatedly implicated points to the chronic failure of the health authorities to address the issue. The Human Organ Transplant Authority and its Punjab counterpart are equally culpable. Their job is to regulate transplants, vet donors, and investigate suspicious activity. Their inability, or unwillingness, to catch such operations before a crime is in progress makes them look like little more than rubber stamps. And then in this vacuum, law enforcement just happens to stumble upon victims by chance rather than based on intelligence reports.

Eradication requires dismantling the networks — and that means arrests leading to convictions, not quiet settlements. Surgeons involved should be permanently struck off the medical register. Private clinics and hospitals found complicit must be shut down, with owners facing asset seizure. Cross-agency task forces should be empowered to raid without political clearance, and fast-track

courts must ensure swift, exemplary sentences. Preventing exploitation requires ending victim recruitment through awareness, tighter recruiter oversight and stronger medical ethics. The state must also work with international agencies to disrupt cross-border transplant tourism. Unless the networks profiteering from such a deadly trade are effectively neutralised, the next knock on the door may come too late.

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Indo-Israeli nexus

THE cosy ties between India's ruling BJP — Hindutva's political wing — and Zionist Israel is hardly a secret. But recent developments regarding this sinister alliance should serve as a wake-up call for Pakistan, particularly where its defence is concerned. As per the Indian media, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday met New Delhi's ambassador to his country, as well as Indian journalists. According to the reports, the Israeli leader praised the role weaponry manufactured by his country played in the recent armed conflict between Pakistan and India. "The things we provided before worked very well on the field," he said, with apparent reference to India's aggression against Pakistan in the shape of Operation Sindoor. The media reports say that Israeli drones and missiles were used by India during combat. ISPR had earlier confirmed that Israeli drones deployed by India had been shot down. None of this should come as a surprise, as India is reportedly the world's top importer of Israeli weaponry. But the trade is not one-way; India also ships armaments to Israel.

Some may argue that the Indo-Israeli arms trade is simply business; Israel will sell its deadly wares to any interested party, while India will similarly trade with whomever it wishes based on commercial considerations. But there is a deeper ideological link here. Both Hindutva and Zionism are racist, exclusionary ideologies that thrive on violence and terror. This is despite the fact that Hindutva's ideological fathers had great respect for Nazism and European fascism. In the current era, both Israel and India tar the Palestinian and Kashmiri freedom struggles, respectively, with the ugly label of terrorism. In fact, some Indian officials and academics have publicly said the Israeli 'model' should be replicated in held Kashmir. It is also a fact that the BJP-led regime has said almost nothing about Israel's genocide in Gaza, and several Indian leaders have expressed solidarity with Israel. In short, the BJP's India has fully renounced Gandhian and Nehruvian solidarity with Palestine, and unreservedly backs Israeli oppression. Pakistan needs to be wary of this growing nexus, as it poses a major threat to its security. The recent revelations indicate that Israel is directly aiding India in its aggressive forays against Pakistan, hence this country must remain alert and strengthen its defences, while keeping foreign allies in the loop.

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Market opportunity

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump's decision to slap a punitive 50pc tariff on certain Indian imports — doubling the previous rate — has stunned South Asia's largest economy.

The additional 25pc marks a sharp escalation in Washington's trade offensive against New Delhi, which is a member of several US-led economic and security alliances. The trigger appears to be India's continued purchase of cheap Russian oil and its reluctance to open its market to American agricultural products. The move makes India the most heavily taxed US trading partner in Asia. Globally, it joins Brazil at the top of the Trump administration's tariff list.

Unless New Delhi can broker a breakthrough in the ongoing trade talks before the new levies take effect later this month, the impact on India's economy can be severe. Moody's estimates that India's real GDP growth could drop by 0.3 percentage points from its current forecast of 6.3pc for the fiscal year ending March 2026.

A BBC report notes that nearly all of India's \$86.5bn in annual goods exports to the US could become commercially unviable if the tariffs remain in place, with Indian exporters warning they cannot absorb more than a 10-15pc increase in tariff costs. India's hopes of expanding bilateral trade with the US from \$190bn to \$500bn now appear unrealistic.

However, the consequences of the move go beyond India's export sector. The levies risk derailing India's ambition to develop its manufacturing base, particularly in sectors such as electronics. Japanese brokerage firm Nomura likens the effect to a 'trade embargo', warning of a sudden stop in affected export flows. In the long term, the fallout may extend to investment flows.

When commercial and other factors dim a country's appeal as a manufacturing hub, it is inevitable that others will step in to fill the vacuum. The question then arises: will Pakistan's trade benefit from the high tariffs imposed on India's import? In theory, yes. Pakistan's exports to the US face lower tariffs than countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh. And the development could open up space for manufacturers, particularly in textiles and clothing.

In practice, however, the odds are stacked against us. Pakistan remains constrained by chronic dollar shortages, an unfriendly business climate, policy unpredictability, an underdeveloped industrial infrastructure, and high costs of doing business driven by expensive energy and limited access to raw materials.

Pakistan may want to benefit from this opening in the American market and attract FDI in export-oriented industries but without acting quickly to implement serious policy reforms, cut red tape, ensure policy stability and build investors' confidence regarding the security of their capital, it will not be able to do so.

The global supply chain shift — accelerated by President Trump's tariffs — is already underway. Without credible policy reforms, Pakistan can only watch from the sidelines.

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Tribunal delays

TIME has only reinforced the perception that the integrity of the last general election has never been a serious concern, not even for institutions whose entire *raison d'être* is to uphold the Constitution and the democratic system it envisages. After all, both the Election Commission and the section of the judiciary which has prevailed since the 26th Amendment have shown very little regard for the controversies that continue to surround it.

It is pointless to fault the government or the so-called establishment, because such is the nature of the beast. It was the ECP, constitutionally tasked with ensuring and safeguarding the fairness of the political process, that ought to have ensured that injustices were promptly addressed.

Likewise, the courts, mandated with protecting the Constitution and the constitutional scheme of order, should have kept a constant check on the Commission. Unfortunately, both institutions long ago resigned themselves to complacency. And that is a charitable view.

According to electoral watchdog Fafen, more than half of the many election disputes raised after the Feb 8, 2024, polls remain undecided. The law gives election tribunals 180 days to settle election disputes. The deadline was extended from 120 days — mere months before the last election. It has now been a year and a half since the last vote was cast. Article 225 states: "No election to a House or Provincial Assembly shall be called in question except by an election petition presented to such tribunal and in such manner as may be determined by Act of Parliament."

Therefore, what the prolonged delays in issuing decisions essentially mean is that the tribunals are themselves the biggest hurdle in securing electoral justice. It must be noted that the entire purpose of appointing election tribunals is that cases regarding poll disputes can be heard and decided promptly. Otherwise, they would go to the courts, which are already burdened with a significant backlog.

This is why the tribunals' failure to deliver is so egregious. To the suspicious mind, the sluggish pace of deliberations suggests that the tribunals were created merely to fulfil a formality and provide cover to the status quo.

Curiously, the ECP has felt no compulsion to prod them along in their work, even though the legal deadlines under which they are supposed to operate have long elapsed. The precedent that is

being set will undermine future political transitions as well. The message being sent is that it does not matter whether electoral victory is secured through lawful or unlawful means, because the checks and balances meant to protect the public's political rights can be rendered ineffective. This should alarm anyone who wishes to see Pakistan governed in accordance with the will of the public and not by the whims of a few powerful institutions and individuals.

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Global plastic treaty

THE world has embarked on a serious attempt to tackle the escalating plastic pollution crisis with talks organised by UNEP being held in Geneva. The second part of the fifth session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, which runs from Aug 5 to 14, is intended to deliver the text of a legally binding global treaty on plastic pollution. If nations reach an agreement, it would address plastics across their entire lifecycle, from production to disposal. The aim is to put a stop to the millions of tonnes of plastic that leak into the environment each year, poisoning ecosystems, wildlife and human health. The stakes are huge. Scientists warn that without decisive intervention, plastic leakage into aquatic ecosystems could nearly triple by 2040. The economic and health costs — already estimated at over \$1.5tr annually — will only mount. As dubbed by many, the Geneva talks are the world's "last good chance" to forge a treaty to meaningfully reverse these trends.

Yet, with talks due to end on Thursday, negotiations are gridlocked. Over 100 countries in the High Ambition Coalition want enforceable caps on virgin plastic production, the phasing out of harmful additives and robust financing mechanisms. Opposing them are powerful oil- and gas-aligned states — including the US, Saudi Arabia, Russia and China — which favour focusing on recycling and waste management, resisting upstream production limits. With over 200 industry lobbyists swarming the conference, civil society fears a watered-down outcome. Pakistan's specific negotiating stance has not been made public, but as a developing country facing surging plastic waste and inadequate waste management, it has a clear stake in an equitable treaty. Islamabad's priorities are likely to include access to climate and pollution finance, capacity-building and technology transfer to support domestic implementation. Aligning with progressive positions on production caps would also signal a commitment to systemic change rather than piecemeal fixes. For Pakistan — and the planet — this treaty must not be another exercise in futility that leaves the root of the problem untouched. Delegates should insist on binding targets to reduce plastic production, global bans on the most hazardous polymers and additives, and a dedicated fund to help developing countries transition. If governments can rise above narrow commercial interests, they can deliver an accord that future generations will be thankful for.

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Peca and journalists

IT is some comfort that some lawmakers have at least taken notice. Last week, the Senate Standing Committee on Information and Broadcasting formally sought the details of FIRs lodged against journalists under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as well as the reasoning behind each case. It was informed, during its meeting the same day, that a total of 689 cases had been registered under Peca since it was amended in January, including nine against journalists. An interior ministry representative told the committee that one journalist was among those arrested so far under the controversial law, while seven journalists were not in the country at the moment. It may be recalled that, earlier this year, there had been large-scale protests and demonstrations against the aforementioned Peca amendments, as the fear had been that the law would be weaponised against journalists. As in the case of many other legislative efforts of the government, time has eventually justified the critics' worst fears.

Some weeks ago, an Islamabad judge ordered the blocking of 27 YouTube channels under Peca on the vague pretext that they were involved in "fake, misleading and defamatory" content. That order was partially suspended after a district and sessions court learnt that the operators of these YouTube channels had never been given prior notice, which had violated their constitutional right to a fair trial and due process. Earlier in March, two journalists, one from Karachi and one from Islamabad, were arrested and jailed in deeply controversial circumstances over posting or sharing 'anti-state' content. One was arrested following detention for hours after being called in to answer questions by the FIA, while the other was simply 'disappeared' before being announced as arrested. The pattern has been evident: the state has been using Peca to spread fear and silence critics. The law must continue to be questioned at all forums and from all perspectives. Lawmakers must contribute a part in this.

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Gaza indifference

WITH Israel planning to occupy Gaza City, chances of the ongoing genocide ending in the devastated Palestinian territory anytime soon are extremely slim. And while there has been almost universal global condemnation of Israel's latest moves, it is unlikely that the regime in Tel Aviv will change tack. Words alone will not stop the Zionist state's bloodstained forays — only action will.

But action has been severely lacking, particularly where the Arab and Muslim states are concerned. For their part, most Western governments have solidly stood by Israel as the latter has murdered Palestinian civilians. As per the latest developments, the Israeli regime intends to create a 'security perimeter' in Gaza and bring in "an alternative civil administration that is neither Hamas nor the Palestinian Authority". This is a dubious plan, which intends to replace Palestine's two main representative parties with local Israeli collaborators that consist of armed gangs and looters with no credibility.

Yet it must be asked why, despite Israel's mass murder and manmade famine in Gaza, Muslim and Arab states have done nothing to stop the bloodshed. At most, they have offered statements of shock and regret. What is worse is that many regional Arab and Muslim states continue to trade with Israel and maintain diplomatic relations.

In fact, one of Israel's Arab neighbours has recently signed a multibillion-dollar gas deal with the Zionist state. Contrast this with what ordinary citizens in many Western states are doing to express solidarity with the besieged Palestinian people.

Hundreds of thousands of them have marched in London, Sydney and other cities to denounce the Gaza genocide, and demand accountability for Israel's crimes. While their governments may be complicit in the genocide, large numbers of citizens in Western states are asserting 'not in our name'. Elsewhere, some states with no cultural, geographical or religious links with occupied Palestine have taken brave steps. They include Bolivia, which has severed ties with Tel Aviv, and South Africa, which has filed a case against Israel at the ICJ. These states realise that they are linked to Palestine by the bonds of humanity, and cannot sit back and simply watch the livestreamed famine and holocaust unfold.

If the world — particularly the Muslim world — is serious about ending the nightmare in Gaza, and ensuring that no more Palestinian men, women and children are butchered by Israel, then solid action is needed. Until Tel Aviv agrees to an unconditional ceasefire, there must be a global arms and trade embargo of Israel. The Arab and Muslim states must lead the way to ensure Israel is unable to arm itself, or fund the genocide in Gaza through trade. Anything short of this will fail to stop the Palestinian holocaust.

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E-vehicle incentive

THE new initiative to roll out a Rs100bn subsidy scheme for e-bikes and e-rickshaws is an important step in Pakistan's transition to electric mobility. The goal is to distribute 116,000 e-bikes and 3,170 e-rickshaws over five years as part of the effort to reduce the country's dependence on dirty fuels, cut the oil import bill, curb pollution, offer cleaner mobility solutions to the middle class and utilise excess electricity. The scheme will be subsidised with a new 1-3pc e-vehicle adoption levy on the sale of petrol-fuelled vehicles, which is projected to generate Rs122bn. Financing will be available through interest-free bank loans of up to Rs200,000 for e-bikes and Rs880,000 for e-rickshaws. The loans will be backed by government guarantees and interest rate subsidies to help reduce the high upfront cost of electric-powered vehicles, particularly for youth and low-income individuals who rely on two- and three-wheelers for livelihoods and daily commutes.

Reflecting an integrated approach to EV transport policy — where climate goals and economic obligations will be pursued simultaneously — this levy creates a self-sustaining financing mechanism. Besides, the scheme stresses on inclusivity and social targeting, with quotas

allocated for women, students and underserved Balochistan in recognition of the equity dimension of electric mobility. Although the scheme is aligned with climate mitigation efforts, a broader push for transition to electric mobility requires more than this initiative to meet the goal of converting 30pc of new vehicle sales to electric by 2030. Pakistan needs a holistic strategy to attract investment in charging infrastructure, improving power grid readiness, introducing bank financing options and giving incentives to local vehicle and battery manufacturing in order to slash the upfront costs of the transition to electric-powered vehicles, which can be twice or thrice the price of comparable petrol-fuelled vehicles. At the end of the day, the choice between a petrol-fuelled or an e-vehicle — be it a two- or three-wheeler or a car — is determined by economic factors like the price of the vehicle. That is why the adoption of e-vehicles in Pakistan has been disappointing despite benefits like fuel savings and the ease of mobility. That said, while the new push to subsidise electric mobility through a tax on petrol-fuelled vehicles may be fine to the extent of rickshaws and motorbikes, the use of these funds to cut the prices of cars for the rich would be unacceptable.

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Fire hazards

CONSIDERING the widespread lack of public awareness regarding fire safety, poor response mechanisms and the absence of adequate protective equipment, urban spaces across Pakistan have turned into tinderboxes. At least eight people were injured after a blaze broke out at a factory in Karachi's Landhi Export Processing Zone on Thursday. Thankfully, there was no loss of life. Rescue officials told the media that it is likely the workers were injured after they had been forced by the management to salvage goods from the burning building. They also pointed out that firefighters faced issues battling the blaze due to lack of proper water supply, while fire tenders from several different departments had to be called in to deal with the situation. Such fire hazards are becoming common in our cities. Last month there was a major blaze at Lahore's Hafeez Centre, while Pakistan's worst fire incident was the 2012 Baldia factory inferno in Karachi. Though the latter disaster was caused by deliberate arson, matters were exacerbated by the fact that many exits were either locked or blocked. Clearly, safety measures at many factories continue to be poor.

As per official figures, the Karachi fire department received nearly 3,000 distress calls last year. It is also a matter of great concern that, according to experts, around 70pc of the city's buildings lack proper fire safety mechanisms. As our cities grow denser, and develop vertically, there is a dire need for proper safety protocols to be installed in residential, commercial and industrial buildings in order to prevent tragedy. No new building should be constructed unless it has proper fire escapes and a firefighting system. Moreover, fire drills are needed at the school level, while apartment dwellers and those working in factories and offices must be aware of where the closest exits are located. Provision of better equipment and coordination between fire and rescue services is also a must to prevent fatalities in emergency situations.

Another amendment?

THE dust from the 26th Amendment has yet to settle, but talk of a 27th one is already in the air.

Given the acrimony that surrounded the last attempt to tinker with the Constitution, one wonders if it will be any different this time. Much has changed since the last amendment was forced through the legislature.

The last time the Constitution was being amended, the government did not have the votes to get its bill passed. Lawmakers had to be roped in from the opposition benches to cobble together a two-thirds majority. Some came willingly, after cutting deals. Others had no choice. It did not matter. It was clear from the beginning that the law had to be passed.

Even allied lawmakers did not have full knowledge of what they were voting for, and the law minister is said to have simply been handed a draft with clear instructions.

To be clear, there is nothing concrete that is known about the '27th Amendment'. For now, it seems merely to be a topic of discussion within the PML-N and its coterie of legal advisers. No proposal has been shared with the party's allies, nor is there a draft that may be debated.

Still, it has remained a topic of discussion ever since the government inherited a two-thirds majority courtesy of the Constitutional Bench that the 26th Amendment had helped set up. The two-thirds majority might be the main reason why the government does not seem too fussed. This time, there will not be a need to abduct, bribe or coerce opposition lawmakers.

Nor will any party not already allied to the regime be able to blackmail its way into receiving concessions, or to force the government to rethink its agenda. Indeed, the amendment will be seen through without any hiccups even if the regime were to decide that it must be passed tomorrow.

It is said that the government may be seeking more 'fixes' for the judiciary. The 26th Amendment apparently did not fix it enough.

But it would be deeply unfortunate if the amendment being debated is also focused heavily on a narrow agenda. Pakistan faces several deep-rooted issues that require urgent legislative intervention. These include matters like the possibility of a new province in south Punjab; the need to revisit the role and authority of caretaker governments; addressing the inability of the ECP in fulfilling its intended purpose; and the management of the growing burden of the NFC award, among many others.

If the government decides to take all stakeholders on board, especially the opposition, the new amendment could become an opportunity to build bridges where the 26th sowed divisions. Now virtually unchallengeable, the regime would benefit by showing some grace. With power comes responsibility, and it must start to demonstrate some.

War on journalists

THE Gaza Strip has become a graveyard for journalists as well, with Israel intentionally murdering those who dare to report on the atrocities it is committing in the occupied Palestinian territory. On Sunday night, Zionist forces attacked a journalists' tent outside the al-Shifa Hospital, murdering at least six media persons. Five of them worked for Al Jazeera, including award-winning correspondent Anas al-Sharif. This was no accident, as al-Sharif had been a marked man due to his reporting, with Israeli officials earlier calling him out by name, accusing him of being a Hamas fighter — an allegation refuted by his employer. Meanwhile, the Committee to Protect Journalists had termed the Israeli campaign against the reporter a “real-life threat”. Sadly, it is clear that Israel can literally get away with murder after calling anyone a Hamas fighter; perhaps the tens of thousands of innocent children that Tel Aviv has butchered in Gaza's wasteland were also seen as militants worthy of death by the Zionist entity.

As the CPJ has put it, “Israel is murdering the messengers”. Foreign media cannot enter Gaza thanks to a blockade enforced by Israel. Hence, the brave voices that remain in this devastated Strip are targeted by Tel Aviv for doing their jobs, particularly exposing the barbarity of the Israeli regime. According to Al Jazeera, over 270 media workers have been killed in Israel's war on Gaza since October 2023, most of them Palestinians. Multiple family members of media workers have been wiped out by the Zionists, including that of Wael Dahdouh and Moamen al-Sharafi. Even before the atrocities in Gaza, Israel had no qualms about murdering Palestinian journalists, such as Shireen Abu Akleh, who was targeted in Jenin in 2022. Still, despite the immense dangers to themselves, and while dealing with the loss of family members and colleagues murdered by Israel, these brave men and women continue to discharge their professional duties. It is due to their efforts that we know of Gaza's starving children, its bombed hospitals, its maimed and bloodied citizens. Tel Aviv is exacting revenge on Palestinian journalists for telling the truth, and smearing them as militants. Will the standard-bearers of free press and expression in the West and elsewhere demand justice for Anas al-Sharif and hundreds of Palestinian media workers murdered in the line of duty? Or will the criminal silence continue?

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Climate's human Toll

IN Danyor, Gilgit-Baltistan, seven young men were crushed to death under a landslide in the early hours of Monday. They were not engineers or state rescue workers, but local volunteers trying to restore the town's only water supply after floods had destroyed it. Ordinary citizens were forced to shoulder the burden the government should have carried, ultimately losing their lives. Their sacrifice reminds us of both the human toll of climate change and the cost of official inaction. GB is on the front line of Pakistan's climate emergency. Melting glaciers, unpredictable rains and increasingly destructive flash floods are remaking the region's geography. Since late June, heavy downpours — followed by floods on July 21 in Babusar and the next day in Danyor — have swept

away bridges, roads, crops and irrigation systems, cutting off entire valleys and leaving thousands without drinking or irrigation water.

Scientists have long warned that such events will become more frequent and intense. Yet the state's response remains reactive and shallow, defined more by condolence statements than preventive planning. In Danyor, repeated appeals for the restoration of the damaged water channel were met with assurances, not action. When a temporary fix made by locals was washed away, the government still did nothing. Faced with shortages, residents took the risk themselves, working in dangerous conditions — until the earth gave way. The administration arrived only after lives had been lost, with compensation cheques and promises of medical care. This pattern cannot continue. The government must invest in climate-resilient infrastructure, building effective early-warning systems, and deploying trained disaster-response teams in GB. In the immediate term, it must restore the water supply and repair damaged links before more people are exposed to danger. The people of Danyor stepped forward because the state stepped back. Their courage should not become another statistic in a long list of preventable disasters.

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Deep mistrust

NEARLY eight decades after Partition, relations between Pakistan and India remain moribund, with little chance of improvement. Among the main drivers of distrust, lately, is India's unilateral 'holding in abeyance' of the Indus Waters Treaty, thereby threatening Pakistan's rights over shared rivers.

New Delhi took this rash step in April after the Pahalgam attack. However, the Indian move is not standing up to international legal scrutiny. For example, the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague recently stated in an award that India must "let flow" the waters of western rivers for Pakistan's "unrestricted use". The award in question is related to arbitration Pakistan initiated in 2016. An earlier award by the court in June had similarly held that India could not unilaterally hold the IWT in abeyance. Displaying rigidity, India had earlier said that it does not recognise the court. Pakistan has welcomed the latest award.

However, India's attempts to isolate Pakistan are not limited to creating obstructions on Indus waters. Attempts are also afoot to depict Pakistan as an irresponsible nation where the nuclear issue is concerned. With reference to a speech Pakistan's army chief reportedly made in the US recently, Indian media outlets have made some sensationalist claims.

The Indian external affairs ministry, using unverified reports as a peg, has accused Pakistan of "nuclear sabre-rattling", while alleging that extremists could 'compromise' Islamabad's nuclear decision-making. The Foreign Office says the field marshal's comments have been "distorted". These talking points are not new, but the Indian media — and, specifically, the Indian government

— should avoid making controversial accusations, especially with regard to the nuclear issue. Both sides, particularly New Delhi, must handle this sensitive area with care.

Historically, ties have never been perfect. In the past, the Pakistani state has made mistakes and rebuffed India's peace gestures. The Kargil misadventure is a case in point. But with the Modi regime's anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan rhetoric, ties have entered very dangerous territory.

It may well be true that following the Pakistan-India armed skirmish in May, and the subsequent warming of relations between Islamabad and Washington, New Delhi has been 'rattled'. Its attempts to isolate Pakistan globally have failed, hence perhaps the desperate moves to question the safety of this country's nuclear arsenal.

Instead of indulging in combative rhetoric, both sides must bring down temperatures in South Asia. India should particularly act with restraint, as sensationalist allegations can lead to further deterioration in ties, and may even trigger renewed conflict. While peacemaking is a distant dream at the moment, both sides can at least ensure that matters do not worsen. Meanwhile, India should listen to what neutral experts are saying about Pakistan's rights over Indus waters, and refrain from making any moves that could vitiate matters.

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Displaced again

WITH the resumption of Operation Sarbakaf, the people of Bajaur are reeling once more. It is not just a military offensive; it is tantamount to the reopening of old wounds. Once more, the thunder of artillery and helicopter gunships echoes through valleys in which the sound is all too familiar. Once more, families are rushing to load belongings onto trucks, tractors and whatever transport they can find. They do not know when — or if even — they may return. According to local estimates, some 2,000 families have already fled the region and hundreds more continue to leave as curfews take hold in Lowi Mamund and War Mamund. Schools are being converted into makeshift shelters. Some have taken refuge with relatives. Each family is a household uprooted, a livelihood lost, a child pulled from school. The trauma from displacement is not something easily measured. It lingers long after the dust has settled, in the form of destroyed homes, lost income, disrupted education and deep mistrust towards all sides of the conflict. For many in Bajaur and the wider ex-Fata region, this is a cycle they know too well: clear the area, live in camps, return to damaged towns and brace for the next round. With each repetition, citizens lose more faith in the state's ability to bring lasting peace.

The state is duty-bound to protect citizens from militant violence. But protection should not be at the expense of dignity and survival. Military operations in populated areas must be accompanied by meticulous planning for civilian evacuation, shelter and sustenance. The complaints of local leaders — that residents were not consulted and displaced families lack basic facilities — must be heeded immediately. A policy that wins battles but alienates the very people it seeks to defend

is self-defeating. Long-term peace in Bajaur will not be secured by firepower alone. The 'hold' and 'build' stages of counterterrorism have too often been neglected, leaving vacuums that militants exploit. This time, security gains must be followed by investment in infrastructure, livelihoods, political inclusion, and most importantly, by addressing grievances that feed resentment. The people of Bajaur deserve the assurance that their displacement will not become a recurring chapter in an endless war. Without breaking this cycle, the burden they bear today will become the burden of yet another generation.

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Locked Away

THE state's failure to devise legal safeguards and policies for consular protections is frequently reflected in news about Pakistanis in foreign prisons. A Senate committee was told on Monday that 17,321 Pakistani nationals are currently incarcerated abroad. Most of them are in prisons in the Middle East, whereas 85 languish in Afghanistan's jails. Community welfare attachés from Dubai, Doha and Kuala Lumpur reported 3,523, 619 and 499 detainees, respectively, with some details about their condition as undertrial prisoners and convicts.

Unfortunately, the state's hollow directives confirm that the political will to protect helpless, often uneducated Pakistani citizens, who are at the mercy of distant courts, facing trial without consular access and legal representation, is absent. Such an approach can lead to serious sentences. But even a dark past — at least 183 nationals were executed overseas between 2010 and 2023; 171 of them in Saudi Arabia — and an equally bleak future for the jailed have not resulted in any pangs of conscience. According to Justice Project Pakistan, Pakistanis imprisoned outside their country endure violations of due process because of biased translators, extended detentions and lack of access to lawyers. This abandonment has to be addressed as there are legal regimes that extend beyond our borders, obligating the government to defend the fundamental rights of Pakistanis anywhere in the world. The Vienna Convention on Consular Relations states that when a citizen is in trouble abroad, relevant embassies must be informed as well as granted the right to meet, communicate and provide legal support. International human rights law limits capital punishment to "the most serious crimes", which excludes drug infringements. In this context, the government needs to respond with immediate implementation of the Uniform Consular Protection Policy, while signing more treaties with states so that the convicted can serve their prison terms in this country.

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Devolution debate

FOR years, forces favouring a stronger centre have pushed for rolling back some aspects of the 18th Amendment to curtail provincial powers and revise the National Finance Commission in order to shore up the centre's strained finances.

The debate — fuelled by Islamabad's chronic fiscal stress — is sustained by the belief that reducing revenue transfers to the provinces would provide an easy, if contentious, fix to the federal government's fiscal woes. It is argued that the centre has to bear major expenses such as debt payments, defence needs, large infrastructure development, subsidies, social protection, etc, while the provinces get the majority share from the federal divisible pool.

Many also say that the enhanced NFC transfers have lulled the provinces into a state of fiscal complacency, leading to weak revenue-generation efforts. There has also been criticism that the provinces spend the funds to gain political mileage for the ruling parties, instead of investing in the social sector or public service delivery.

It is against this background that PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has demanded a new NFC award — in accordance with the 18th Amendment, which devolved several ministries, departments and functions from the centre to the provinces.

He said the previous award preceded the amendment, and that since devolution had increased the responsibilities of the provinces, they should have more resources. This implies a demand for further raising the provincial share from the divisible pool from the present 57.5pc. He also spoke about the deteriorating security situation in Balochistan to reinforce his case for a bigger provincial share from federal revenue transfers, and blamed the FBR's incompetence for not collecting enough taxes to address federal fiscal woes, saying this burden could not be shared by the provinces.

Mr Bhutto-Zardari's demand is consistent with his party's politics: the PPP played a dominant role in both the 2009 NFC award and passage of the 18th Amendment, and deserves credit for resisting repeated attempts to reverse fiscal devolution and alter the existing revenue-sharing framework.

However, whatever differences of opinion there may be, there is no doubt that the NFC award does require an overhaul — not to shrink the provincial pie but to make the framework operate effectively and efficiently for citizens.

For this to happen, the centre and provinces must engage in meaningful discussions to devolve powers and transfer fiscal resources further down to the third tier of governance — the local governments. Equally important are changes in the formula for resource distribution among the provinces.

The disproportionate emphasis on population should be reduced in favour of indicators such as poverty, regional backwardness and disparities, and, more importantly, provincial revenue generation efforts to ensure quality public service delivery and promote more equitable and sustainable economic development.

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Soft target

It must, no doubt, be deeply troubling to the state that terrorist outfits have taken to repeatedly targeting the Jaffar Express, as if to signal that they can resort to sabotage whenever they wish and get away with it. Earlier this week, six bogies of the passenger train derailed when a bomb attack tore up the railway track in Balochistan's Dasht tehsil in Mastung district. Thankfully, no loss of life was reported. But one can imagine the terror the ill-fated train's passengers must have experienced. There were 350 on board, travelling from Quetta to Peshawar, when the train derailed. Their minds must inevitably have wandered to the tragedy that occurred merely five months earlier on the same train, when the BLA had used a very similar method to stop and hijack it. They must have thought of the dozens killed during the rescue operation to liberate the passengers from the terrorists. In short, they would have felt very vulnerable. And this is, perhaps, precisely what the terrorists operating in the region wanted. It bears highlighting that this was the second bomb attack on the same train in just four days.

In fact, since the March 11 tragedy, the Jaffar Express seems to have become a first-choice target for terrorist outfits, likely because it is a symbol of Balochistan's connectedness to the other provinces. The repeated attempts to ambush it are a recurring reminder that the state faces an uphill battle in quelling Balochistan's unrest. It is fortunate that, since March, there has been no reported loss of life in these attacks. But given their frequency and the state's seeming inability to prevent them, the fear remains that another major tragedy could be right around the corner. It is the state that should take responsibility and act to pre-empt it. There is an urgent need to reassess the strategies being adopted to manage Balochistan's growing sociopolitical unrest, especially as observers believe it is feeding the violence breaking out across the province. Many appeals have been made to the state to exercise more restraint, especially when dealing with the province's social and political leadership, as the dismissal of all dissent as treachery and anti-national sentiment is alienating Balochistan's ordinary people. Such policies are not making the province any safer. The Jaffar Express's travails are merely a reminder of this.

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Defeated again

WHEN it ended, Pakistan's victory in the opening One-day International against the West Indies seemed like a distant memory. In fact, by the time the West Indies recorded their biggest victory over Pakistan in the third ODI for their first series win against the side in 34 years, it looked as if Mohammad Rizwan's team had not wanted to play the series at all. Pakistan had reportedly wanted the ODIs to be replaced with Twenty20 matches, but were rebuffed by the hosts; ultimately, they looked like a side without identity. They have now lost eight of their last nine ODIs; even the change of head coach failed to revive their fortunes. The situation is cause for alarm, especially with the 50-over World Cup two years away. Something is not working — even though there were some positives like the lower order depth provided by Hasan Nawaz and Hussain Talal. Coach Mike Hesson spoke of the need for more substance from the top order; senior batters Rizwan and Babar Azam scored well only in the first game that was won thanks to a sterling partnership between Hasan and Hussain. Openers Saim Ayub and Abdullah Shafique failed to inspire; they departed for ducks in the series-deciding third ODI where Pakistan went down for just 92 while chasing 295.

Another problem area noted by the coach was the death overs bowling — a phase of the game where Pakistan have been out of their depth lately. Those ghosts reappeared to haunt Pakistan on Tuesday when 100 runs were conceded in the last seven overs to put the West Indies in the driving seat. Impressive Jayden Seales proved unplayable with Pakistan's top four failing to go past single digits. The West Indies had come into the series placed 10th in ODI rankings, six places below Pakistan. Those placings meant nothing ultimately, with the West Indies showing they are on the rise, while Pakistan is stuck in a rut.

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Troubling times

LIKE previous controversial laws, troubling amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Act have been ushered through the National Assembly with questionable haste.

In approving them, the ruling coalition has completely ignored the opposition's vocal protestations and human rights observers' growing alarm. Civil and military forces may now detain "terror suspects" for a period of three months or more based merely on "reasonable or credible information" or "reasonable suspicion".

If the reader finds themselves wondering what, precisely, constitutes "reasonable information" and "reasonable suspicion", they are not alone. The language of the amendment seems to have been left vague on purpose, creating conditions in which abuse is not only possible but, given past precedent, likely inevitable.

There are plenty of reasons to fear that it will be weaponised against dissidents. For starters, this regime has consistently shown scant regard for inconveniences like constitutional safeguards for citizens against arbitrary arrest or detention, or their right to a fair trial.

The judgements recently rendered by Anti-Terrorism Courts against political workers and publicly elected leaders are still fresh in the public memory. When government representatives were arguing in parliament that the opposition's objections to the ATA amendments were 'unreasonable' because they were very similar to antiterrorism laws enacted elsewhere in the world, they should have been asked: where else are political workers tried and convicted as terrorists for the crime of rioting, vandalising public property and engaging in hooliganism?

That too, based on questionable evidence and suspicious testimonies given by police personnel who claimed to have infiltrated a closed-door political meeting without being detected by a single soul. And this is just a high-profile example. In restive parts of the country, locals are regularly branded as 'terrorists' by the authorities and pursued relentlessly, often merely for opposing state policies.

If the country's policing and criminal justice system has been hollowed out to the point that apprehending criminals now requires holding constitutional rights in abeyance, the ruling parties should reconsider their priorities and focus on fixing what is broken.

By exposing citizens to state excesses with vaguely worded laws, enacted seemingly in obedience to unelected quarters, they are inflicting a grave injury on parliament. As public representatives, their priority should be the public's welfare and creating resilient systems of governance.

Instead, by ceding unprecedented power and authority to those who have, time and again, appeared willing to abuse it, they are setting the country up for greater turmoil. Even without this amendment, the authorities had been detaining citizens without sufficient reason in peripheral areas.

Every day, the headlines bear testimony that such policies do not work. It is time to rethink, not reinforce them. A state that erodes its own constitutional foundations in the name of security will soon find itself neither secure nor free.

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Stable but fragile

MOODY'S latest decision to upgrade Pakistan's credit rating from 'Caa2' to 'Caa1' and revise its outlook from 'positive' to 'stable' offers a welcome break for the national economy — even if the sovereign remains firmly in speculative-grade territory. The move reflects the agency's confidence in Pakistan's steadily rising foreign exchange reserves, strengthened fiscal position and continued reforms under the IMF programme. Yet Moody's, one of the three top global rating agencies, has its concerns, and the upgrade comes with caveats. While acknowledging the progress made by Pakistan, it does not mince its words in underlining that the foundations of the hard-won recovery remain fragile.

Debt affordability has improved but remains one of the weakest among rated sovereigns. Governance weaknesses and political uncertainty leave the economy exposed to risks at a time when the country's external position remains fragile. Foreign exchange reserves have grown over \$14bn — equivalent to about 10 weeks of imports — but are still well below what is required to meet the high external financing needs of nearly \$50bn over the next two years. Pakistan will remain dependent on timely financing from official partners, the rating agency cautions while underscoring the importance of steady progress under the IMF programme to keep unlocking financing. The upgraded local and foreign currency ceilings also come with caveats about the state's heavy footprint in the economy, weak institutions, high political and external vulnerability risk, incomplete capital account convertibility and potential policy slippages. Like its peers, Moody's has handed Pakistan a modest vote of confidence. The move is a welcome development but not a cause for triumph. The economy remains in junk-bond territory. It means that the government is still unlikely to get competitive rates if it issues bonds in the international markets to raise funds to shore up its reserves and strengthen its external position. The message, which echoes the concerns highlighted earlier by rating agencies Fitch and S&P in their recent upgrade decisions, is quite clear: the economy may have stabilised but it is not yet out of the woods. The challenge for the political leadership and policymakers now is to turn this fragile stability into durable economic resilience. This is not an easy task as it requires enduring political stability, and policy consistency and execution to ward off another relapse into familiar fiscal and balance-of-payments crises.

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Gwadar's thirst

GWADAR was supposed to be the next big thing in Pakistan, the jewel in the CPEC crown, a shimmering entrepôt on the Balochistan coast that would transform both the country and the province. But a decade after that landmark project with China was launched, the people of Gwadar still struggle for basic facilities such as regular water supply and uninterrupted power. In fact, the lack of such facilities has engendered resentment in the port city and the wider Makran region, feeding into the greater sense of alienation that affects Balochistan. Gwadar and other towns in Makran have witnessed large demonstrations calling for basic civic facilities, amongst other demands. Perhaps sensing the situation — albeit a bit late in the day — the prime minister has

formed a committee to look into Gwadar's water and power woes. The body, consisting of officials from several departments, is due to meet today, and the PM has reportedly ordered the water issue to be resolved within days.

The water problem in Gwadar is not new, as the port town is located in an arid zone, with scant rainfall. It is also true that official projects to resolve the issue have been plagued by financial irregularities — a nationwide malaise. It is hoped that these are not more empty promises, and that the civic issues of Gwadar and the rest of the Makran coast are resolved on a long-term basis. The state's plans of transforming Gwadar into a regional shipping and logistics hub sound farcical if its people do not have water and power. This is, in fact, reflective of the overall official approach towards Balochistan: tall promises, but little on the ground. It is this neglect that has fuelled resentment in the province. Balochistan's people need basic facilities and must be partners in their province's development to ensure national progress. The state cannot afford to neglect Balochistan any longer.

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Thin ice

THE Independence Day festivities have stirred something long thought to have been dormant within our political class.

Addressing the main event held to mark Independence Day, which, for some undisclosed reason, was organised on the eve of Aug 14, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif invited "all" political parties to become part of the Misaq-i-Istehkam-i-Pakistan, or the compact for Pakistan's stability.

The latest in a series of 'compacts' sought by the political class, this agreement, according to the prime minister, would let the world know that "[political] differences have their own place but we are all one for the sake of our beloved Pakistan". The prime minister wished for the country to move on from political divisions, leave aside personal interests and reject empty slogans to "adopt collective thinking for Pakistan". These were noble thoughts, befitting an auspicious occasion.

If only the prime minister had not followed up with a thinly veiled diatribe against "fitnas" who "riot and vandalise" to "defame and curse and rebel against the state". It seemed that the prime minister made an attempt to muster up magnanimity, but failed.

Two days earlier, National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq set a much better example. In an attempt to mollify the opposition, which had been prepared to boycott another sitting of the National Assembly, the Speaker offered to facilitate talks between the government and the opposition.

To demonstrate good faith, he even nominated Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar, Minister of State for Interior Talal Chaudhry and PPP MNA Syed Naveed Qamar to the government team that would

engage with the opposition. Stressing that dialogue was the only way to resolve political differences and bridge the divide between the two camps, he urged the opposition to continue engaging with the government on issues that mattered. To his credit, the law minister, too, echoed the Speaker's words.

Meanwhile, the PTI had a rethink about its plans to turn Aug 14 into another day of protest. The party chairman, Barrister Gohar Ali Khan, announced on Tuesday that the PTI would eschew its planned agitation in favour of celebrating the day of independence.

Though the announcement got lost somewhere in the noise, it marked a significant shift in the party's narrative. The question naturally arises: why did the PTI forego a good occasion to make some fuss and decide to de-escalate instead?

There have been some rumblings about the impatience of influential quarters to see a political compromise being worked out. One can only hope the political class has realised it has been skating on thin ice. Civilians are, after all, civilians — quickly swept aside once they have served their purpose. It would be prudent, in such circumstances, for them to band together. Perhaps they should make a greater effort to come to a mutual understanding.

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Silent threat

PAKISTAN'S struggle with diabetes, predominantly the type 2 variety, has reached alarming levels. Experts warn that over 3.4m people here live with diabetic foot — a condition that can lead to severe ulcers or amputations — while millions more face the disease's far-reaching consequences: heart attacks, strokes, kidney failure, blindness and disability. The International Diabetes Federation reports that even after adjusting for age differences across countries, Pakistani adults face the highest diabetes rates in the world. This makes it nothing short of a national emergency. The opening of a multidisciplinary facility at Karachi's Baqai Institute of Diabetology and Endocrinology offers a glimpse of what comprehensive care should look like: cardiac, neurology, nephrology and ophthalmology clinics working in sync to treat both the disease and its complications. Such centres, however, remain rare in a country where many patients struggle to access even basic screening.

Diabetes may be relentless, but it is not inevitable. Prevention is key and must begin at home and in our daily routines: choosing balanced meals over sugary indulgences, making space for physical activity and refusing to ignore early symptoms. Small, consistent habits can delay or even prevent the onset of the disease. Beyond our homes, healthier living must be encouraged in schools, workplaces and public spaces. Children should grow up seeing playgrounds in use, not locked up; office culture should make room for movement; and shop shelves should carry clear, honest food labelling. Countries that normalise wellness make it harder for disease to gain

ground. Of course, no grassroots effort can succeed without the state's steadying hand. Pakistan needs a national diabetes control plan that funds preventive screening, trains healthcare providers to catch the disease early and reins in the sugar industry through taxation and labelling laws. Unchecked, diabetes will continue to claim lives and drain resources. Confronted head-on, it can be managed — and many of its worst consequences prevented. The choice is ours.

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Israeli rapacity

IN the midst of the Gaza genocide, Israel has announced plans to build more illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, a move that would effectively seal the fate of the already moribund two-state solution.

The Zionist state's finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich — one of the most extreme anti-Palestine voices in the ruling set-up — announced on Thursday that the Israeli regime planned to go ahead with the so-called E1 scheme in the West Bank. He added that the plan would “bury the idea of a Palestinian state”, observing that it was “Zionism at its best”.

Perhaps it is because many of Israel's Western friends have, in reaction to the Gaza holocaust, said they would recognise a Palestinian state, that Tel Aviv has taken the extreme move. A UN official has termed the settlement plan a potential war crime. But at least Mr Smotrich should be ‘credited’ with dropping the pretence and describing Tel Aviv's actual plans: the full occupation of Palestinian land, and obliteration of the Palestinian identity.

It is moves like these that have fuelled Palestinian resistance over the past several decades. Hamas' Oct 7 operation — though the targeting of non-combatants is unacceptable — was, in fact, a Palestinian ghetto uprising against the chokehold of Zionist rule. It is wrong to assume that the people of Palestine are fighting their occupiers due to some inbuilt hatred of Jews; the fact is that Jews had been living in the holy land for centuries with Muslims.

The Palestinians resist because since the Nakba, they have watched their land devoured by foreign settlers, their children slaughtered, their men and women humiliated. Plans such as the two-state solution have failed as there has been no real desire on the Israeli side to create a viable Palestinian state. Tel Aviv has always sought to maintain its colonial rule over the Palestinians, while giving them minimal powers and moth-eaten territory. Gaza is already burning; the West Bank may explode in rebellion next if the settlement plan goes ahead. Little can be expected of the international community, which has shamefully watched mass murder and starvation unfold in Gaza. Mr Smotrich said that his sinister scheme has the backing of Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump. This is the crux of the problem, as Israel's crimes cannot be stopped as long as Tel Aviv has America's blessings to wreak havoc.

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Unprepared nation

WEEKS of monsoon rains since late June have culminated in catastrophe.

In just two days, torrential downpours and cloudbursts unleashed flash floods across KP, killing more than 300 people. Entire villages have been erased from the map. A provincial rescue helicopter crashed in Mohmand during operations, claiming the lives of five crew members.

In Azad Kashmir, mudslides buried whole families, while in Gilgit-Baltistan glacier-fed torrents destroyed homes, bridges and farmland. Nationwide, the National Disaster Management Authority has reported at least 645 deaths and 905 injured since the start of the season, with KP bearing the brunt. With fresh rains forecast, the full scale of devastation is yet to be counted.

This is not some freak weather event. Pakistan is enduring the second massive flooding crisis in just three years. The 2022 floods, caused by record monsoon rains, submerged one-third of the country, killed 1,700 people and displaced 33m.

Those floods were described as a “climate catastrophe”, drawing global attention to Pakistan’s vulnerability. Today, the scenes from Buner and Ghizer echo that same nightmare — except the destruction is concentrated in the north, where steep terrain turns cloudbursts into deadly torrents. Could this scale of loss have been prevented? Scientists have long warned that climate change is making Pakistan’s monsoons more erratic, cloudbursts more violent, and glacier melt more destructive.

While no state can stop the rain, much of the tragedy stems from human failure. The Met Department’s Aug 12 advisory did warn of heavy rain in KP, AJK and GB but it was scant on details for preparedness. Then there is the lack of land-use planning and weak enforcement of building restrictions in flood-prone areas. And our disaster response mechanisms leave much to be desired.

With more rain on the way, immediate measures are essential. Relief corridors must be cleared, with the army’s engineering units building temporary bridges and restoring communication lines. Schools and mosques should be converted into evacuation centres, stocked with dry food and medicines. Wireless radios should be distributed where towers are down.

In the longer term, adaptation must be treated as a survival priority, not an afterthought. The state must invest in a national observatory app, providing instant alerts and safety tips. With mobile penetration above 80pc, even simple voice-based or pictorial warnings could save lives. Alongside this, the Met Department must be upgraded with real-time monitoring capacity.

Local governments need to build resilient housing, enforce safe construction zones, and strengthen embankments. Disaster insurance and relocation options for high-risk settlements are also overdue. The floods of 2010, 2022 and now 2025 mark an unbroken chain of escalating

disasters. If Pakistan is to break this cycle, adaptation must move from rhetoric to reality. Lives depend on it.

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Auto committee

ON the face of it, the commerce ministry's decision to constitute a 'dedicated' committee to address the critical challenges facing Pakistan's struggling car industry is a welcome step. An official statement said that the body, set up after the commerce minister's meeting with industry representatives, will consist of officials from the commerce and industries ministries and FBR. Though it remains unclear whether the government has notified the committee members, the commerce minister has already 'tasked' it with crafting a strategy that protects domestic car assemblers from a potential influx of imported used cars — in case the government allows their commercial import — encourages exports and aligns the industry with national industrial aims. Given the limited autonomy enjoyed by the ministries in a highly centralised governance system in Pakistan, the industry rightly believes that the new body is unlikely to help the local assemblers address their issues.

The commerce minister's plan to add cars to the country's list of auto exports, alongside motorcycles and tractors, is ambitious at best and unrealistic at worst owing to the government's own policy inconsistencies and contradictions. Rhetoric aside, Budget 2026 has already made imported luxury vehicles a lot cheaper, and pushed up the prices of locally assembled cars. Similarly, the planned withdrawal of tariff protections for local carmakers — although a welcome move — risks tilting the playing field against local assemblers because of the very high cost of doing business, driven primarily by government taxes and energy prices. Unless the taxes on locally assembled cars are significantly slashed and the costs of doing business are brought down, the market will be swarming with imported cars, both old and new. It will not matter whether the protections are phased out or dismantled at once. The car industry's journey through the last four decades underlines the reasons — policy uncertainty, high production costs, tariff and policy protections to powerful lobbies, etc — why Pakistan has failed to industrialise itself, spur market competition, encourage innovation and provide consumers with greater choices. No wonder that few think that the formation of yet another committee can help tackle the structural weaknesses that continue to hobble the auto industry. Without credible long-term policies that reduce crippling production costs and prioritise competitiveness over protectionism, the auto sector will continue to proceed at a sluggish pace.

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Relentless bigotry

THE dream of transforming Pakistan into a just and progressive nation will remain unfulfilled unless the prevailing extremism is checked. Moreover, no nation can prosper when its minorities live in fear of persecution and violence. In this regard, the Ahmadi community has been facing a sustained campaign of intimidation by violent bigots in Punjab as well as Sindh. The latest in a shameful series of events have been attacks on Ahmadi places of worship and homes in Faisalabad. Under the guise of Independence Day celebrations, a mob, reportedly led by a TLP leader, attacked and set ablaze two worship places of the minority group, while also beating up community members. Nearby homes belonging to Ahmadis were also attacked. Cases have been filed and some suspects detained. But it remains to be seen if those responsible for this outrage will actually be punished.

It is all the more shocking that these condemnable attacks occurred at a time when the nation was celebrating its freedom, and shortly after Pakistan had observed National Minorities Day to mark the Quaid's Aug 11 speech. The rulers never tire of brandishing their patriotic credentials. Yet it is unfortunate that they forget what the father of the nation said on Aug 11, 1947: "that the first duty of a Government" is to protect "the life, property and religious beliefs of its subjects". In the same epic speech, Mr Jinnah observed that citizens of Pakistan are free to go to their temples, mosques "or to any other places of worship". Sadly, the state has forgotten this sage advice, and has given violent extremists the space to do as they please — letting them attack and rob Pakistan's non-Muslims of their rights and dignity. The federal and Punjab governments must put a stop to these violent attacks and protect the lives and properties of minority citizens. Left unchecked, the ogre of extremism will tear society apart.

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No easy path

IN recent months, the economy has offered some welcome signs of stability: inflation has slowed sharply, reserves have climbed above \$14bn, the current account is in surplus, and the fiscal deficit has been reined in.

These improvements — achieved mainly through IMF-prescribed austerity policies — have prompted global rating agencies to lift Pakistan's sovereign rating, hinting at a restoration of market confidence in its economy. But the weaknesses are still obvious. Large-scale manufacturing shrank by 0.74pc last year, missing even the government's modest growth target of 3.5pc.

This is not an isolated setback. Big industry has been stuck in a cycle of low growth or contraction for three years on the trot. That LSM, which contributes around 8pc to GDP, has failed to achieve sustainable momentum for three years running should set off alarm bells for policymakers as it is

yet another reminder of the structural weaknesses weighing on the fragile national recovery. The year-on-year growth of 4.14pc in LSM output in June — the fourth straight month of positive numbers — offers hope.

Yet, the simultaneous month-on-month decline of 3.67pc underscores the brittleness of this recovery. This volatility indicates deeper, unresolved issues: higher than regional energy prices, weak investment on elevated borrowing costs, high tax burden on the corporate sector, policy unpredictability and 'informal' curbs on imports, including raw materials, due to a dollar liquidity crunch. The recent positive spurts in big industry output, therefore, should not be mistaken for a turnaround. The slower growth in LSM output mirrors the overall low growth of GDP, which expanded by just 2.7pc last year after swinging between contraction and modest growth in the previous two fiscal years.

In its last monetary policy statement, the State Bank rightly underlined the need for steadily executing structural reforms to consolidate recovery, deepen macroeconomic stability and achieve sustainable growth. The recent macro improvements — reflected in lower inflation thanks to a global drop in oil and commodity prices, reduced fiscal deficit achieved largely through curtailed development spending and austerity measures and a build-up of foreign exchange reserves supported by debt rollovers by friendly countries, modest multilateral inflows, rising remittances and strict import controls — are fragile at best.

These improvements depend on external and temporary support, such as debt rollbacks, limited multilateral financing, remittances, etc, rather than durable fiscal and productivity reforms, leaving the economy only a small shock away from crisis. That Pakistan's rating remains in speculative territory despite the upgrade from rating agencies is a reminder that markets still view the risks as high.

The question is: can policymakers use this breathing space to push through reforms that improve productivity, cut energy costs and attract investment? Without this, the economy will remain where it has been for years: underperforming, vulnerable and dangerously reliant on stopgap measures.

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National drift

WE have drifted quite a way from Mohammad Ali Jinnah's vision for Pakistan; there has been no shortage of commentary reminding us of this over the past many years. Yet just how far we have moved from the Quaid himself only became clear this Independence Day, when, in the enthusiasm to celebrate the occasion as a military victory parade, the government 'forgot' to picture Mr Jinnah and other national leaders on an official advertisement issued to commemorate the event. The law minister, who said he had been 'heart-afflicted' by the oversight, was himself unaware of the omission until the opposition raised the matter in the Senate on Friday. Had the omission of the nation's founding father from an Independence Day communication been so inconspicuous? The

government, together with various state institutions, should introspect. Cities nationwide were plastered with banners and posters honouring and congratulating the present-day leadership on the occasion. The politicians could have done much more to highlight the contributions of the founders of the nation.

Independence Day was traditionally an occasion to celebrate the country and its freedom, and its spirit should remain dedicated to the country's founding vision, and to the people whose sacrifices made Pakistan possible. Our armed forces did indeed achieve commendable results in the recent conflict with the country's eastern neighbour. However, a celebration of these should perhaps have been left to the upcoming Defence Day, which would have offered a much more suitable occasion. One is also compelled to comment on some of the national awards and accolades that were conferred on Independence Day. Is it suitable that, year after year, exclusive honours are distributed freely among political loyalists rather than genuine achievers? According to the law minister, the prime minister's entire war cabinet received awards because they 'spent many sleepless nights to remain available for emergency decisions'. Eight more allied lawmakers, also from the ruling parties' camp, received awards for travelling around the world as part of a post-hostilities diplomatic offensive. It is a mercy that the prime minister turned down an award for himself. One wonders what need there was to celebrate politicians in this manner. This Independence Day might have been remembered as a moment to reaffirm Mr Jinnah's vision. Instead, it became an occasion for the powerful to honour themselves.

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Hockey's woes

THE national sport continues to suffer. Years of mismanagement have plunged Pakistan hockey into a state of disrepair that has seen not only players go unpaid but the national team unable to fund its participation in international tournaments. Those tournaments do not surpass the FIH Pro League — the competition where the game's elite feature, a place where Pakistan have long aspired to be. Once the undisputed kings of world hockey, they are now unable to dine with the world's best. Sporting reasons aside, they do not have the finances to do that. And while the cash-strapped Pakistan Hockey Federation is asking for funding to the tune of Rs350m, the government seems to have lost faith in it. The lack of trust has not come overnight. The Pakistan Sports Board, the national regulatory body for sports, has repeatedly asked the PHF to submit statements of all its bank accounts and to show where previous grants from the PSB were spent. It is a condition for the disbursement of further funding, which the PHF should meet.

Pakistan did not qualify for the Pro League on the field. Instead, they were only extended the invitation by international hockey's governing body after New Zealand, which won the second-tier FIH Nations Cup after beating Pakistan in the final, withdrew due to the high cost of participation. The PSB and the government are now mulling over the PHF's demand to ensure Pakistan's presence at the Pro League. It is a double-edged sword: on one end is the PHF's chequered

history, on the other a chance for the team to play consistently against top-ranked sides. From a purely sporting perspective, the government should support the team — the move could potentially revive Pakistan hockey — but it should make it binding on the PHF to improve its governance and show financial accountability. It should also ensure that the PHF immediately clears the dues of the players who participated in the Nations Cup.

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Rebutting rumours

WHEN rumours first began circulating that a change was being considered in the top tier of the civilian component of the ruling set-up, both Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and military spokesman Lt-Gen Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry had issued statements rubbishing them.

That ought to have put such idle talk to rest, but it seems that neither Mr Naqvi nor the DG ISPR was to be believed on the matter. Chief of Army Staff Field Marshal Asim Munir was expected to address the same question during his recent sojourn in Brussels, both during a public interaction and in an interview with a senior journalist.

Like the others, he, too, dismissed talk that the prime minister and president would be replaced as “completely false”. When told that “both civil and military agencies” had been sharing this ‘news’, the chief dismissed it as “not possible”, expressing suspicion that this may be the work of those who “oppose both the government and the authorities and wish to create political anarchy”.

It is hoped that the government at least is resting a little easier. It is unfortunate that the army chief himself was expected to step into this conversation, considering that he has far more important things to take care of.

It is also concerning that there are mischief-makers around who are trying to drive a wedge between the authorities and the government. The country has experienced enough political anarchy over the last few years, and the ruling arrangement formalised after the Feb 8, 2024, general election was expected to be the counterweight to it.

Whether these rumours started because of the civilian leaders’ inability, perceived or otherwise, to deliver on this ‘mandate’ or something completely different has been difficult to pin down, mainly because the alliance between the government and the ‘authorities’ has otherwise proved to be a match made in heaven.

Now that the army chief himself has made it clear that he is interested in nothing more than serving as Pakistan’s ‘protector’, perhaps the political leadership should shift its focus back to its job.

The country has been experiencing a rare period of stability, but what it will make of it remains a big question. Despite repeated promises that an economic breakthrough is just around the corner, Pakistan's teeming millions have yet to see any significant improvement in their personal lives.

Prices may have largely stabilised, but the public will soon start asking why the benefits of the 'economic turnaround' that the government keeps talking about are not visible in their own lives as well.

It is these expectations that are, in fact, the government's biggest challenge. It must find it within itself to inspire and lead the public and guide it to a more prosperous future.

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Essential transition

THE government's push to fast-track the transition to a cashless economy could be Pakistan's dream leap into the future. At a meeting on his cashless economy initiative, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was briefed on plans to expand Raast services nationwide to facilitate the creation of a single digital financial identity for every citizen by integrating their national identity, biometrics and mobile numbers. Ambitious targets have been set to accelerate mobile banking and fintech adoption under the initiative: raising the number of active digital merchants to 2m by June, increasing mobile/internet banking users from 95m to 120m, routing all remittances through the formal channels and doubling annual digital transactions to 15bn. These goals are ambitious but achievable. With more than 143m broadband users and nearly 40m monthly active mobile wallet users — now outnumbering traditional bank account holders — Pakistan is ready to embark on its shift to a cashless economy. An early transition to digital transactions offers wide-ranging benefits, including efficiency, transparency and reduced corruption. For individuals and small businesses, digital finance offers access to loans, savings, insurance services and social protection transfers. For low-income groups and women, it opens the door to financial inclusion. For overseas Pakistanis, it ensures safer, cheaper and transparent remittances. And for the broader economy, it enhances documentation, widens the tax net and curbs leakages.

Yet scaling up the cashless economy faces several challenges. Digital literacy is low, particularly in the rural areas. Public trust in digital platforms is fragile because of real and perceived fraud risk. Most businesses still prefer cash to avoid tax payments. Patchy internet coverage and limited access to the digital infrastructure outside big cities coupled with frequent internet outages make cash a necessity for many. Therefore, the latest push towards a cashless future for the country is an important and forward-looking step to align Pakistan's economy with global trends. If the effort bears fruit, it will prove to be one of the country's most transformative reforms and hopefully put the economy on the global map. But the successful execution of this initiative demands more than everyday rhetoric. Much depends on the steady and consistent implementation of the goals set under it to strengthen public confidence in the digital payment system and tax reductions on digital transactions, besides other incentives for those who avail of it.

Treaty impasse

RECENT efforts in Geneva by some 183 countries on a global plastics treaty ended in stalemate. There were deep divisions between nations pushing for production caps and those prioritising recycling and waste management. Now, without any consensus, the world remains without a binding agreement to curb the worsening crisis of plastic pollution, which has left not only our oceans and soil contaminated, but also our bloodstreams. Pakistan's delegation at the conference took a strong line, highlighting equity and justice concerns. Climate Minister Musadik Malik highlighted how it is developing nations that suffer disproportionately from plastic pollution while wealthier states — often the largest producers and consumers — benefit most from green financing. Pakistan pressed for fair access to funds, technology transfer and capacity-building, and even floated the idea of a plastic credits market to support recycling and the livelihoods of waste workers. Furthermore, by seeking to build alliances across the Global South, Islamabad pointed out that poorer countries cannot shoulder the burden of transition without adequate support.

However, Pakistan's advocacy on the global stage must be matched by discipline at home. While all the provinces have issued decrees banning single-use plastic bags, the flimsy carriers still change hands in bazaars from Karachi to Peshawar. Our understanding of and emphasis on recycling is rudimentary, waste is rarely segregated and collection has become the burden of poorly paid, unprotected waste pickers. The state must prove it means business: enforce provincial bans, punish violators and back the spread of biodegradable packaging. Changing entrenched consumer habits needs sustained awareness drives, while investment in proper garbage collection and waste segregation is essential to stem the tide of plastic litter. Policymakers must encourage innovation in packaging, nurture a viable recycling industry and bring the informal army of waste pickers into the formal economy with protections and pay. Calls for fairness abroad will carry more weight if they are backed by action at home.

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Industrial policy

FOR some months now, the government has been working on a new industrial policy that, according to Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, will encourage pro-business conditions in order to boost the pace of industrialisation.

Speaking at a workshop organised by the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan and the Pakistan Banks Association in Karachi recently, Mr Aurangzeb said the policy would soon be presented to the federal cabinet for approval. The reasons driving the government to frame an industrial policy framework are understandable: after years of painful macroeconomic adjustments that have seen industrial output shrink, factories close down, jobs lost and growth stagnate, the economy is showing tentative signs of stability.

Inflation has slowed, reserves have risen amid a stable exchange rate and an improved balance-of-payments position, interest rates are down even if they remain elevated and the fiscal deficit is narrowing under austere fiscal policies. Pakistan's credit rating — though still in the speculative-grade category — has improved, while the bulls continue to lift the stock market. The hard-won economic recovery — even if fragile — has given the government confidence that the economy is poised to transition to the next phase of sustained growth. That is exactly why it wants to accelerate industrialisation and growth through business-friendly incentives.

Indeed, such strategies are important tools to attract fresh investments in priority industrial sectors. Global experience shows that fiscal, regulatory and other economic incentives and a positive business environment can foster industrial competitiveness, boost factory output and increase exports. Unfortunately, our own experience with previous industrial and export development policies has not been enviable.

We have seen successive governments formulate several ambitious policies, only to see them fail due to poor execution and an unreformed economic ecosystem. These strategies have mostly ended up rewarding inefficiencies in the economy through protectionism, subsidies and regulatory perks. Such 'quick fixes' have contributed more to the erosion of our economic competitiveness than to boosting resilience, and have prevented Pakistan from becoming part of global supply chains.

A new industrial policy isolated from complementary frameworks for the development of agriculture and services will not change anything. Besides, no strategy to grow the economy or industrialise the country can deliver results unless long-standing structural impediments like high energy costs and shortages, distortive taxation, low domestic savings, climate change challenges, and other factors are tackled alongside.

Without reforms in the entire ecosystem, even a well-drafted industrial policy will end up gathering dust. In the absence of complementary ecosystem reforms across industry, agriculture and services to create conditions conducive to competition, investment and innovation, even a meticulously prepared industrial policy will be doomed.

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Recurring cases

TWENTY-ONE children have been paralysed by polio in Pakistan this year, the latest two in Kohistan and Badin. Each new case is a painful reminder that we remain one of only two countries where the virus still spreads. That a disease wiped out in most of the world still stalks our children is not just a health failure, it is a governance crisis. Billions of dollars have been invested in our eradication programme over three decades. Thousands of vaccinators have risked their lives to reach children in remote and conflict-affected areas. Yet security threats, poor coordination, weak accountability and misinformation have left gaping holes in coverage. The National Institute of Health has acknowledged that despite progress, children remain at risk in areas where vaccine acceptance is low. Recent environmental surveillance showing poliovirus in over a third of districts underscores how fragile progress is.

Campaigns cannot succeed if the same shortcomings crop up in every round. The latest is due from Sept 1 to 7, targeting over 28m children under five in 99 districts, with southern KP to be covered from Sept 15. But unless coverage gaps are plugged, the exercise risks delivering few results. Parents in many areas still distrust the drops, swayed by rumours that the vaccine is unsafe. Workers often inflate coverage data to satisfy superiors. Political leaders make statements but do little to build community support or strengthen health services. Even basics like clean water and waste disposal — essential for breaking faecal-oral transmission — remain neglected. The state must confront these failures honestly. Securing front-line workers, prosecuting attackers, ensuring transparent data and consistently engaging community leaders are vital steps. Linking campaigns with routine immunisation and sanitation would build trust. Pakistan cannot allow another generation to live under the shadow of an incurable but preventable disease. Political will, consistency and accountability are the only way out of this long-running tragedy.

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Ukraine peace push

THERE is renewed momentum to end the Ukraine war — now in its fourth year — with US President Donald Trump pushing all parties involved to reach a deal. The US leader hosted his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House, along with key European leaders, on Monday, just days after Mr Trump and Vladimir Putin had met in Alaska. Mr Zelensky's last visit to Washington in February was a diplomatic disaster, with Donald Trump and the US vice president publicly berating the Ukrainian president. Things went much better this time, as there were smiles all around, and talk of an embryonic peace deal to end the hostilities that have put Ukraine and its Western backers up against Russia. The next step is a proposed summit between Mr Zelensky and Mr Putin which, it is hoped, could lead to a breakthrough and end the fighting that was sparked by Russia's 2022 invasion of its western neighbour.

Perhaps the diplomatic blitz has been fuelled by Donald Trump's desire to be seen as a 'man of peace', worthy of the Nobel Prize. Indeed, if a durable Ukraine peace deal does emerge, it will be a major feather in the Trumpian cap. But there is still a long way to go before the guns in both Kyiv and Moscow fall silent. Several variables remain. Principally, will Moscow give up Ukrainian territory it has seized, including Crimea, which it took in 2014? Will Ukraine drop plans of joining Nato and becoming a forward base for the Western alliance against Russia? Will the Putin-Zelensky summit even materialise? All these are key issues that must be resolved if there is to be a long-term settlement to the Ukraine question. While both sides have built competing narratives, there is no doubt that Russia's invasion of its western neighbour was unacceptable, regardless of its historical claims. Similarly, Moscow's concerns of being surrounded by Nato — with the alliance stationed at its borders — are not without merit. Any peace deal, therefore, must ensure Ukraine's territorial sovereignty, while ending Russia's West-led isolation, particularly dropping economic sanctions. Anything less will fail to bring long-lasting peace. And while Mr Trump is busy trying to end bloodshed in Europe, if he is serious about peacemaking, let him also turn his attention to the killing fields of Gaza and rein in Israel.

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Paralysed city

MONSOON havoc has yet again brought death and suffering to Karachi, with Tuesday's 'unprecedented' downpour paralysing life in this unfortunate city.

Rain-related disasters have been witnessed elsewhere in Pakistan as well, particularly KP and GB, with hundreds of deaths reported in the former. But Karachi's issues of urban flooding are unique in many ways, exacerbated by bad planning and unchecked growth. The mayor has attributed the disaster to 'climate change'.

While the latter phenomenon has indeed contributed to erratic weather patterns, global warming alone is not the key culprit responsible for Karachi's rain-related plight — by now, a grim annual spectacle — as soon as the monsoon clouds arrive.

Flooded streets, people trapped on roads for hours and lack of electricity for long periods during stifling weather conditions were some of the outcomes of Tuesday's wet spell. Indeed, many parts of the city received a high volume of precipitation, but even less intense rain spells have previously brought the wheels of urban life to a grinding halt.

Disturbing visuals of motorists and bikers trapped on thoroughfares resembling raging torrents, and water entering houses and apartment blocks show that something is seriously wrong with Karachi's drainage system. And the fixes applied to the problem do not seem to be working.

For example, a drainage system, reportedly costing hundreds of millions of rupees, was installed in the upmarket DHA area, but failed to stop flooding in the neighbourhood. DHA is controlled by

a cantonment board, beyond the jurisdiction of civilian agencies. People living in low-income, low-lying areas were similarly affected.

From the august Supreme Court and independent urban experts to people venting their rage on social media — all have expressed their dismay over the fact that Karachi lacks a proper drainage system, and that the monsoon-related destruction is repeated year after year.

The fact is that the problem has been decades in the making, and it would be unfair to blame the present government alone. Successive administrations have neglected Karachi or paid lip service to its civic issues, as encroachers and land grabbers have steadily disfigured its face. Karachi's urban issues, including the faulty drainage, are complex, and decades of neglect cannot be undone in weeks or months.

But a start must be made somewhere and the key problems of the city, primarily solid waste disposal, provision of water, a working sewerage system, fair land management, etc, which are all intertwined, must be addressed by the city's managers and independent experts.

Moreover, a better LG system, which responds to local issues promptly and is answerable to the people, is essential to resolve Karachi's civic woes, as multiple agencies controlling land in the city also complicates civic governance.

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Detention law

AS the government benches in the Upper House prepared to push through the problematic Anti-Terrorism Act (Amendment) Bill, 2025, this Tuesday just in time, before the Senate was prorogued, an opposition lawmaker had asked the House: "Will this amendment make Pakistan safer, or will it weaken the constitutional rights we swore an oath to protect?" It was, unfortunately, purely a rhetorical question. The lawmakers behind the legislation could not be convinced to look at it from any angle other than 'security needs'. "The country is burning in the fire of terrorism," Law Minister Azam Tarar was quoted as saying, apparently in an indignant response to criticism from the opposition benches that the ATA amendments were draconian, and that a balance should be sought between the need to improve security and parliament's duty to protect civil rights. The PML-N's Senator Irfan Siddiqui was more direct. Amending the ATA, he argued, would "prevent crime and also curb forced disappearances and arbitrary detentions". In other words, the government was stripping more of the public's rights so that the state could stop the human rights abuses it has historically engaged in. It was a sad irony, no doubt.

So pressing was the need to give the armed forces and civil armed forces the power to take someone even 'reasonably suspected' of wrongdoing in preventive detention for three months or more that the government refused to send the bill to a committee for further consideration. This, despite an opposition lawmaker pointing out that provisions of the bill seemed to be clearly

violative of existing laws and the Constitution. Indeed, the statement of objects and reasons prefacing the bill seemed to make it clear why the government was being so single-minded: “the current security situation requires a robust response that goes beyond the existing legal framework,” it said. In other words, the government was seeking a law to override the existing legal framework. It was previously pointed out through these pages that if the government was finding itself ‘compelled’ by circumstances to place constitutional rights in abeyance, the circumstances were perhaps not the real problem. It is the state of abject disrepair that state institutions have fallen into, which must be addressed instead. Clearly, the government remains intent on fighting the symptoms rather than curing the affliction. It is unlikely to attain its aims if it pursues this path.

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Simplified tax form

THE FBR's initiative to roll out the long-promised simplified electronic income tax return form for individual taxpayers must be commended. The final interactive form is said to have been released after consultation — and the incorporation of public feedback — on its prototype. This implies that the final form is an improved version of the earlier one rolled out last month. The simplified form is expected to facilitate salaried individuals, professionals and small business owners who fall below a prescribed threshold. Taxpayers who exceed that threshold will have to follow the standard filing process. The form incorporates an auto-fill system that integrates data on purchases, assets and tax deductions at source, ultimately generating a single return upon completion. This will facilitate taxpayers, streamline tax payment processes and make the exercise more transparent for both taxpayers and collectors. The simplified filing should address grievances against a tedious, complex process — one reason why many have been deterred from filing their returns. If the new form can remove the barriers for taxpayers, especially the salaried classes and small business owners, it could help improve tax compliance.

That said, simplification and ease of tax payments can do only so much; procedural changes will not remove the shortcomings of the overall tax regime that are at the root of our abysmally low tax-to-GDP ratio of 10pc — one of the lowest not only in the region but also the world. When powerful and cash-rich segments of the economy, such as retail, real estate, agriculture and high net-worth professionals, remain effectively outside the tax net, the burden of financing the state falls disproportionately on compliant taxpayers. This imbalance creates strong incentives for those already paying to find ways to opt out of the system, including through underreporting or short-filing their tax obligations. Ease of tax filing is crucial; but equally important is a fairer and equitable taxation

Lingering issue

A LONG-RUNNING controversy over the legitimacy of the 26th Amendment is back in the spotlight. A letter, authored by two of the senior-most justices serving in the Supreme Court, surfaced on Wednesday and was circulated on various social media forums. Unsurprisingly, it quickly became the topic of heated debates on the 26th Amendment and how a controversial piece of legislation enacted under questionable circumstances was allowed to become a fait accompli by the highest court.

The missive, which its authors said had been prompted by a recent decision to publish the minutes of an Oct 31, 2024, meeting of the court's Practice and Procedure Committee, read like a riposte to two notes recently uploaded to the Supreme Court website and attributed to the chief justice, in which he had explained why challenges to the 26th Amendment were sent to the Constitutional Bench to adjudicate and not presented before a full court.

The controversy is already well known. However, the judges' letter does shed some fresh light on the chief justice's decision to set the petitions challenging the amendment before the Constitutional Bench. The judges point out that the meeting of the Practice and Procedure Committee, which decided to place the petitions before a full court bench, had been called in accordance with the relevant law, and the decision could not be ignored or overruled. This much was previously known. However, they assert that the decision was ignored after the chief justice informally and individually met the other judges of the court without their knowledge or involvement. The chief justice later concluded from these meetings that placing the matter before the full court "could dampen the much-needed spirit of collegiality among the judges and further expose the court to public scrutiny".

That is certainly not a very satisfactory explanation, and the two senior judges appear correct in their indignation over the Committee being overruled. Arbitrary decision-making by past chief justices had been the primary justification for the Supreme Court Practice and Procedure Act, 2023, which subsequently mandated that the Committee decide all crucial issues before the court.

Meanwhile, "The challenges to the 26th Amendment continue to remain pending, and a golden opportunity to decide them [...] before the institution as a whole — ie, the full court as it then stood — has been lost, perhaps irretrievably", the judges regret in the letter. One hopes that this is not so.

The chief justice must reconsider. It has since become clear that this amendment has done substantial harm to both the judiciary and the constitutional order. The Supreme Court must decide this matter as a whole and reaffirm its solidarity in this moment of crisis.

Flood lessons

PRIME MINISTER Shehbaz Sharif's lament in Buner on Wednesday — that Pakistan did not heed any lessons from the 2022 floods — is as apt as it is tragic. His words echo the frustration of a people once again mourning hundreds of lives lost and thousands displaced by rains that have battered KP, Gilgit-Baltistan, Karachi and beyond. However, while Mr Sharif was right to highlight the folly of unchecked construction on floodplains and riverbanks, describing it as a “human blunder”, the crisis runs much deeper. Climate change has been amplifying the destruction that has come from decades of poor governance. Pakistan, unfortunately, sits on the front lines of climate vulnerability. Glaciers in the north are melting in fragile valleys, while unpredictable monsoons unleash heavy rains on already soaked plains. Deforestation, particularly in KP, has stripped hillsides of the natural barriers that once slowed floods and prevented landslides. Trees that could have absorbed water and anchored soil have been felled for timber or cleared for unregulated development. The result is not only devastation in rural areas but also risks for cities, where clogged drains and crumbling infrastructure leave millions exposed to urban flooding.

The government must step up to the task. These are not seasonal aberrations. They are our permanent new reality. We must invest in better early-warning systems, including real-time monitoring of glacial lakes and rainfall patterns, to give vulnerable communities a chance to evacuate. Urban centres are in dire need of investment in drainage, waste management and flood-resilient housing. Rural areas need embankments and restoration of tree cover. Above all, laws must be enforced against hotels, housing and roadside markets on riverbanks, regardless of any clout behind them. The PM's call for a ban on construction in hazardous zones, and for a national movement against deforestation, is welcome. But Pakistan has heard similar promises before. What has been missing so far is the political will to follow through consistently, across provinces and beyond electoral cycles. As Mr Sharif admitted, corruption and influence in building permits remain rampant. Unless these are curbed, no assurance will carry any meaning. Pakistan cannot afford to spend its meagre resources repeatedly rebuilding what could have been protected in the first place. If the state is serious about enforcing the law, then flood resilience must be the first test.

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Battered innocence

SCARRED children represent a sad truth: a nation that fails to guarantee child safety hurtles towards poverty and inequity. The interior ministry has informed the Senate that out of Islamabad's 567 cases of sexual abuse registered between 2021 and June 2025, 200 involved children — 93 of these young victims were boys and 108 were girls. According to the ministry, 222 suspects were arrested but only 12 were convicted; 163 remain under trial and 15 have been acquitted with 26 still at large. Another 266 children were reported missing in the capital from 2022 to 2025 — 153 males and 120 females. The ministry claims that of the 135 accused who were taken into custody, two were sentenced, 21 walked free and 103 await trial.

Children routinely endure exploitation and sexual abuse at the hands of predators who cultivate environments of impunity. Six years after the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Bill, 2019, was passed, followed by other legislation, to expedite investigation and punishment, we have not come very far. Grisly figures — Sahil reported 3,364 child abuse cases in 2024 from across the country — show a deeper malaise that feeds on power. Scores of assault victims are silenced by families for reasons of shame, adding to the problem of underreporting. To stem the rot, the government, along with enforcing the laws, must set up reporting mechanisms in health and education facilities so that professionals report these crimes on behalf of hesitant families. Sufferers and their kin must be assured that identities will be protected as anonymity is central to eradicating this menace. It prevents out-of-court settlements and raises conviction rates. Confronting child abuse requires abandoning violent punishment and adopting rehabilitative justice through understanding criminal psychology, spreading awareness and creating rehabilitation services. The trust deficit created by delayed trials, pending cases and illiteracy must be addressed to boost faith in the judicial system.

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Shared future

AT a time when significant geopolitical shifts are affecting ties between nations, it is reassuring that China has expressed its desire to stand by Pakistan, and further develop their deep, multifaceted relationship.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's recent visit, under the umbrella of the Pakistan-China Strategic Dialogue, reiterated Beijing's commitment to improving bilateral ties. Mr Wang had

earlier travelled to India and Afghanistan, stating that the South Asian states are China's "natural partners".

It is significant that China's top diplomat emphasised that Islamabad was the "most important stop" on the three-nation tour. During his meeting with Pakistan's top civil and military leaders, Wang Yi principally discussed economic and security issues, while observing that Pakistan and China have a "shared future".

The message from China seems clear: Beijing does not want antagonistic relationships with any of its South Asian neighbours, and values a cooperative approach to addressing disputes. For example, Mr Wang reassured his Indian hosts that Beijing is committed to improving ties with New Delhi "despite setbacks". He also told the Taliban-led Afghan regime that it needed to act against terrorist groups, while offering greater economic cooperation, including expanding CPEC to Afghanistan. Islamabad, too, was part of the discussions in Kabul, under the framework of the trilateral Pakistan-Afghanistan-China dialogue.

With the US displaying unpredictable behaviour under President Donald Trump's watch, states around the world are hedging their bets, and updating their foreign policies accordingly. Perhaps this is one of the factors prompting India to improve ties with China, as New Delhi's relations with the US experience turbulence. Regardless of external triggers, an integrated, prosperous and peaceful South Asia is desirable for all, and China could be the main catalyst that brings the region's states closer.

As for bilateral relations, ties between Islamabad and Beijing — covering geopolitics, economics and defence links — should be deepened. China is a time-tested partner and friend of Pakistan, and has stood by it in difficult times, while China has also acknowledged that Pakistan has supported it "at key junctures".

Irritants in the way of greater cooperation must be addressed. For example, Wang Yi publicly noted in Islamabad that Beijing expects Pakistan to protect Chinese citizens and projects in this country. Terrorist groups and hostile actors cannot be allowed to damage bilateral ties by harming Chinese interests in Pakistan.

Also, some states, such as the US, have said openly that they do not view Pakistan-China collaboration positively. This presents a diplomatic quandary for Pakistan, especially in light of its improving ties with the US. Islamabad must balance its ties with both states; better relations with America should not come at the cost of economic and defence cooperation with China.

Damning audit report

THE Auditor General of Pakistan's latest audit report is, in effect, a charge-sheet against the state's weak economic and fiscal governance. The sheer scale of mismanagement and staggering expenditure lapses of Rs375tr flagged in the report are mind-boggling. Procurement-related irregularities alone account for around Rs284tr, topped by huge losses to the exchequer because of delayed civil works, defective contracts and non-recovery of dues at the expense of the public good. The audit shows that the irregularities detected represent a recurring pattern and reflect the systemic rot in governance caused by weak oversight, poor controls and a tendency to bypass parliamentary approval of expenditures through large supplementary grants. Public funds are sought without actually determining actual needs, and allocations are blocked, leaving billions in unspent money — a practice that underscores the bureaucracy's penchant for ticking boxes rather than enforcing financial discipline or delivering the planned outcome. This largely explains our perpetual fiscal and development crisis.

The report draws attention not only to the mismanagement of public expenditure but also to the regulatory lapses and financial misconduct in the affairs of market regulators. For example, it has painted a troubling picture of weak regulatory governance in the telecom industry. This is reflected in the partially privatised PTCL's refusal to permit an audit of its accounts, the detection of financial discrepancies of Rs3.54bn in the purchase of equipment at inflated prices, excessive operational expenditure in the accounts of the state-owned SCO and Jazz's Rs6.58bn consumer overcharging in FY24. Besides, it emphasises the failure of the telecom regulator to resolve the Rs53.54bn Zong spectrum case. While the financial discrepancies found in the SCO accounts are the result of weak corporate governance that has already pushed most SOEs to the brink, the overcharging of consumers by the largest mobile operator reflects poor regulatory oversight and the tendency of regulatory bodies to serve corporate interests instead of consumers. The audit report serves to remind both citizens and rulers of the need to enforce strict financial discipline for better fiscal management to divert scarce funds towards public welfare and improve regulatory governance to protect consumers from the unfair practices of corporations. These objectives can be achieved only if parliament and the judiciary decide to enforce accountability. In the absence of accountability, the AGP's audit reports are little more than an annual ritual.

Game over

THE suspension of bilateral ties between Pakistan and India has now been officially extended beyond cricket to all sports. On Thursday, India's sports ministry issued a new policy that ends bilateral sporting ties with Pakistan, even on neutral venues. However, no stoppage has been announced for engagement at multilateral tournaments, paving the way for the much-anticipated Asia Cup cricket clash between the two rivals next month. The guidelines were sent out in a statement which said that athletes from Pakistan can participate in multilateral events in India, which has set its sights on becoming a sporting destination. India knows welcoming Pakistan is mandatory at such events as it hopes to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games and the 2036 Olympics. The statement, though, did not mention whether Indian athletes would be allowed to take part in multilateral events hosted by Pakistan. As evident at the ICC Champions Trophy this year, this lack of clarity means that India may once again try to sabotage multilateral events in Pakistan. It has already made it clear on several previous occasions that it will not be sending its athletes to Pakistan on security grounds. The new policy indicates that its approach to sports events involving Pakistan reflects India's overall policy regarding the latter.

Pakistan's justifiable tit-for-tat response, then, is not surprising. It made its stance clear by not sending the team for the Asia Cup hockey tournament in India citing security concerns. Last month, the Pakistan Sports Board asked sports federations in the country to seek approval before participating in sporting events held in India. Pakistan had for long advocated against mixing sports with politics, even taking the first step multiple times in this direction. Sadly, India has done the opposite. The onus is on global sports bodies to break the deadlock. But they must also ensure that this time it is India that takes the first step to break the impasse.

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Size of the pie

THE scope of work outlined for the newly constituted 11th National Finance Commission makes it clear that negotiations between the centre and the provinces over tax resource distribution will not be smooth.

The new TORs for the commission signal Islamabad's intent to reclaim the fiscal space ceded to the provinces under the seventh NFC award 15 years ago. The move will be viewed by the provinces as the erosion of their hard-won financial autonomy, and a pushback is inevitable. The new deliverables expect the provinces to shoulder the costs of large

development projects, contribute towards federal expenses in the aftermath of natural disasters and finance federal schemes with a provincial impact.

The centre is also considering firm allocations from the divisible pool for ICT, AJK and GB, which are its responsibility. If agreed, this would effectively allow it to bypass the need to amend the Constitution's Article 160(3A), which safeguards the provincial share of 57.5pc, to boost its own share. Transfers to the provinces under the award rise to about 59pc if special allocations for KP, Balochistan and Sindh are included.

The new commission has been constituted at a time when the chorus for rebalancing the resource distribution formula under the seventh award is getting louder, with the establishment, finance ministry and IMF supporting a considerable raise in the federal share.

With discussions under the defunct ninth and 10th commissions having collapsed, Islamabad has significantly reversed the balance in its favour by imposing a petroleum development levy and securing cash balances from the provinces in recent years. The provinces did not actively oppose these steps but are not in the mood to give up their share under the award.

There are reasons for the centre's frustration with the present resource distribution arrangement. Not only does it bear the cost of debt payments, defence and trans-provincial infrastructure, the provinces expect it to help them during natural disasters and finance social protection. Its depleted purse cannot foot the bill. Provinces, on the other hand, resent the centre's attempts to shift its inefficiencies — ranging from a bloated bureaucracy to fiscal mismanagement — to them, thus undoing their financial autonomy.

The solution to the centre's financial woes does not lie in reclaiming a greater share of resources but raising the tax-to-GDP ratio to increase the size of the pie, and halting wasteful expenditure. That said, the provinces also need to transfer fiscal resources to the local governments and increase their tax revenues.

The discussions for a new award should not end in a showdown between the centre and the provinces. It should be used as an opportunity to find a solution to Pakistan's myriad economic and fiscal challenges.

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Full disclosure

TRANSPARENCY and financial propriety of public servants and lawmakers are essential for a healthy democracy. These requirements are all the more necessary in a developing democracy such as ours, where government servants and elected representatives have in the past been linked to financial impropriety. Therefore, attempts to amend the Elections Act to make full disclosure more difficult need to be reconsidered. The proposed amendments to Section 138 of the Act recently came under discussion in the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Parliamentary Affairs. The changes to the law have been proposed by two PPP members, while MNAs belonging to the PML-N and PTI have argued that the law should not be tinkered with. Currently, members of the NA, Senate and provincial assemblies must file yearly statements of their assets and liabilities, while as per Section 138 these details are to be published by the ECP. The PPP's proposed changes call for a "balance between public interest for good governance and an individual's privacy and security", and the extent of the details to be made public will be determined by the Speaker of the respective assembly, or the Senate chairman.

Experts say that if the proposed amendments were to become law, it would have negative implications for Pakistan's democratic evolution, and would reverse the gains made to ensure open governance. Those who join public service and electoral politics must be ready to face scrutiny of their financial dealings. Those uncomfortable with attention to their financial details are welcome to remain private citizens. Transparent disclosure of assets and liabilities is essential to prevent conflict of interest, financial corruption and other unethical practices. The current law is sufficient, and the proposed amendments are not required. After all, our chequered political history contains many incidents where public servants have been involved in financial irregularities. To promote a culture of financial propriety and ethical leadership, all public servants, including members of the civilian and military bureaucracies, must be transparent about their assets. Elected representatives should be leading by example, instead of trying to keep their financial dealings secret. The examples of how established democracies have promoted greater transparency and ethical behaviour in public service need to be studied by our institutions. Public office is a trust, and officials need to be answerable to the taxpayer and voter.

Defying reason

WHICHEVER way one looks at it, the recent arrest of two of former prime minister Imran Khan's nephews defies reason. Why them, and why now? As the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has pointed out, "The fact that the arrests were made 27 months after the incident is difficult to understand for any independent observer, having occurred at a time when the trials of other accused persons have long been underway or already concluded". At least one of the nephews was, as his family pointed out, nowhere near the violence that unfolded at Jinnah House in Lahore on May 9, 2023. In fact, his family has attempted to prove with pictures that he was vacationing in Chitral. The manner of his arrest also raised questions. Lahore police had initially been unaware he was picked up. It was hours later that the country was told he had been a wanted man since 2023.

A day later, his brother faced the same ordeal. He was swept up from outside his home in Lahore, and later declared to have been arrested in a May 9 violence case. The prosecution's argument, while seeking remand for the latter, was that he had "been seen" in a video of the protests. The timing of these arrests also complicates the picture: the first nephew was picked up hours after the Supreme Court granted bail to Mr Khan in eight cases pertaining to the May 9 riots; the second, shortly after the first had been dispatched to police remand. Some say the purpose of these arrests may be to demonstrate that the state's position on May 9 remains unchanged. If so, this is a counterproductive way to make the point. High-handedness usually signals desperation rather than control; it also pushes public sympathy towards the victims. If the state wishes to 'make an example' of the May 9 protests, it should rely on evidence and sound legal arguments, not brute force.

Gaza famine

DENIALS and spin cannot alter the ugly fact that Gaza is now in the midst of a manmade famine.

The UN's Integrated Food Security Phase Classification panel announced this grim 'milestone' on Friday, confirming what many had already known, thanks to the harrowing images coming out of the besieged Palestinian territory. But Israel, which is responsible for this crime, and the US, Tel Aviv's principal foreign backer, refuse to believe this inconvenient truth, despite the fact that there is widespread consensus on who caused the Gaza famine.

The findings say that half a million people face "catastrophic hunger" in Gaza City, while famine conditions are likely to spread to other parts of the Strip. Reacting to UN officials'

statement that the famine is the result of “systemic obstruction” by Israel, the Zionist state’s prime minister has dismissed the findings as an “outright lie”. The US State Department, meanwhile, has also cast doubts over the UN body’s findings, saying that Hamas was promoting a “false narrative” regarding mass starvation in Gaza.

Although many of their elders were murdered and starved by Nazi Germany, Israel’s current rulers seem intent on replicating the repulsive tactics of the Third Reich. After all, Gaza has been transformed into a modern concentration camp, with tens of thousands of Palestinians — including innocent children — murdered by Israeli forces in much the same fashion as Hitler’s troops butchered European Jews.

Moreover, the heart-wrenching images coming out of Gaza, particularly of starving, lifeless youngsters and babies, bear a striking resemblance to the gaunt, ghostly pictures of the victims of the Holocaust. Along with imitating Nazi tactics in the form of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and manufacturing a famine in the occupied territory by severely restricting the entry of food and water, Tel Aviv and its American supporters have also seemingly mastered the Nazis’ dark art of propaganda. Denying that there is a famine when all credible international institutions say Gaza is being purposely starved is a clear example of this.

There is little doubt that genocide and starvation in Gaza are a stain on humanity’s conscience. Many states and institutions have expressed their shock over the UN panel’s findings regarding famine. However, empty rhetoric and ‘thoughts and prayers’ will not ease the Palestinians’ plight. If the international community is serious about ending Israeli crimes in Gaza, then there must be solid action.

Until Tel Aviv declares an unconditional ceasefire and lifts the Gaza siege by allowing in food, water, fuel and medicine, all UN member states should impose a trade and weapons embargo on Israel. The Arab and Muslim states must lead the way. It cannot be business as usual with Israel as long as it starves and slaughters innocent people.

Safety app

THE FIA has decided to battle the menace of human smuggling with an AI-based app to reduce human sale and ease immigration. A pilot project of the freshly minted app will be launched at the Islamabad airport. The initiative is a welcome step in modernising the agency. In developed countries, AI tools are considered revolutionary in the context of deterrence as they are crucial to the identification of victims and traffickers, exploitative online content, detecting signs of trafficking as well as helping law enforcement prioritise cases according to risk assessment. For Pakistan, the danger of excessive reliance on the mechanism runs high due to limited training, poor documentation, malpractices, lack of

educated police officers and more. A more prudent route to take would be using it to streamline due process through efficient investigation and speedy prosecution. This technology, however, can uncover the secret patterns of trafficking mafias.

Shorter queues cannot alleviate the root causes pushing people out of their homeland. The first goal should be to improve lives. Unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, negligible opportunities and crime force people to risk their lives for greener pastures. Among the primary drivers of illegal migration, aside from uncertainty and dispossession, is the absence of faith in those tasked with keeping them safe. The FIA, for instance, is bound by law to crack down on perpetrators and guard potential victims in human trade hubs. Unfortunately, it often finds itself mired in allegations of collusion. Such accusations, and the fact that human smuggling is a transnational business of immense magnitude and money, often lead to claims that the illegal practice has the patronage of influential quarters and the authorities' sanction in return for handsome commissions. Corruption in law enforcement hinders progress. What worsens matters is that most countries where human smuggling rings flourish are cursed with the same dilemma.

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Citizen defenders

DISASTER struck again, this time in Gilgit-Baltistan's Ghizer Valley. A glacial lake outburst flood devastated villages and farmland, destroying homes, schools and bridges. Over 300 households were affected, but thanks to the quick thinking of a shepherd, Wasiyat Khan, who raised the alarm in time, lives were saved. His heroic intervention, along with the efforts of local volunteers, ensured residents could evacuate before the waters came crashing down. This story also lays bare a sad truth: time and again, it is ordinary citizens — not the state — who shoulder the burden of rescue and survival. Earlier this month, residents of Danyor, GB, paid with their lives while attempting to restore a water pipeline that the government had repeatedly promised to fix. In Karachi too, during the recent heavy rains, stranded citizens had to rely on one another while official rescue efforts appeared woefully absent. In Ghizer, even as the army was called in for helicopter rescues, villagers had already completed the task themselves, proving how communities are forced into self-reliance in moments of peril.

Should citizens, then, lose faith in the state's ability to protect them? It is a dangerous question, but one the government cannot afford to ignore. Communities in climate-vulnerable regions are showing remarkable resilience, but it is unconscionable that they are

left to fend for themselves against forces of nature that grow more destructive by the year. Nowhere is this clearer than in the increasing frequency of GLOFs, which triggered by rapid glacier melt and rising temperatures, are occurring with alarming regularity across GB. Without effective early-warning systems, disaster-resilient infrastructure and pre-planned evacuation mechanisms, each burst becomes a roll of the dice with people's lives. The state must prioritise investment in real-time monitoring of glaciers, community-based rescue training, reinforced roads and bridges and reliable water and power systems that can withstand floods. These are not luxuries but necessities in a climate-stressed Pakistan. The costs of such preparedness may be high, but the costs of inaction are far greater and already visible. Heroism should not be the only shield citizens have against tragedy. Pakistan cannot continue to outsource disaster management to shepherds, volunteers and grieving families. The state must honour its duty: to protect its citizens through foresight, investment and action. Anything less is abandonment.

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Ties that bind

RELATIONS between Pakistan and Bangladesh, which had hit a low point during Sheikh Hasina Wajed's rule, are on the mend under the interim administration in Dhaka.

Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar recently wrapped up a trip to Bangladesh — the first time a Pakistani foreign minister has visited Dhaka in 13 years. He received a warm reception, with six “instruments” signed to bolster ties in various sectors, while Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus and Bangladesh's adviser on foreign affairs both expressed a wish to deepen relations. There was also talk of reviving Saarc, though both states differed on how to approach the tragic events of 1971.

Dhaka insists on an apology for the violent upheaval that led to the break-up of united Pakistan as well as reparations, while Islamabad feels these questions have already been settled.

Sheikh Hasina's regime used the 1971 war to justify its hostile attitude towards Pakistan and warm ties with India. But there have been changes in Bangladesh since then.

For example, after the ouster of the Awami League government last year, there have been violent attacks on statues and institutions linked to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — once virtually deified as ‘Bangabandhu’ — and the interim set-up has removed his visage from Bangladeshi currency.

These reactions have occurred largely because Sheikh Hasina's government had promoted a personality cult around Sheikh Mujib, and unleashed a ruthless crackdown on all opposition forces. Therefore, while both Islamabad and Dhaka should continue their discussions on how to approach the 1971 events, this issue should not become an obstacle to better ties, as both capitals have common grounds for friendship.

In this context, there is merit in the Pakistani state's argument that differences over the separation of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh have been addressed by Pakistan's 1974 recognition of Bangladesh, and Gen Pervez Musharraf's expression of "regret" during his 2002 visit for the excesses of 1971.

There is indeed a need for all sides to come to terms with the tragedy of 1971, but this does not mean that Islamabad-Dhaka ties should remain forever hostile.

Meanwhile, while the suggestion to revive Saarc may be well-intentioned it is impractical at this point because of India's intransigence — even if it is worth a try. There is already a trilateral cooperation mechanism involving China, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

This forum can be further explored to deepen ties between the three states, and other regional countries who wish to work together for progress can be invited to join. Pakistan and Bangladesh share a common history and culture, and despite the painful events of 1971, they can become partners in regional progress through trade and people-to-people ties. It is hoped that the next elected government in Dhaka will also work to improve ties.

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Hedging risks

FINANCE Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb's concerns regarding crypto assets and blockchain technology are quite discernible and not at all misplaced. It seems that, like a responsible steward, he wishes to make sure that the country's banking and financial sectors have sufficient safety nets installed before Pakistan steps into the age of digital alchemy. Mr Aurangzeb's cautious approach will invariably place him at odds with younger champions of cryptocurrencies and related technologies, many of whom would like to see the country 'seize the moment' without further ado. Nevertheless, it would be wise to act with restraint. Speaking at the 'Leadership Summit on Blockchain and Digital Assets: Technology and Innovation', Mr Aurangzeb expressed optimism about the promise of crypto technologies and their potential to improve lives. He noted that embracing blockchain could drive innovation, inclusion and transparency in the financial sector. At the same time, he underscored the importance of ensuring that any initiatives undertaken remain within a defined regulatory framework. He seemed particularly concerned about the potential risks

from crypto adoption pertaining to know-your-customer and anti-money laundering regulations, sanctions and monitoring, which may reverse Pakistan's progress on the FATF front.

There is no doubt that interest exists in how Pakistan will decide to engage with crypto assets and related technologies. The interest is not only from Pakistanis, but also from powerful players among the global elite. It is, therefore, encouraging to note that there are mature voices keeping an eye on the country's interests while this topic is being discussed at the highest levels of decision-making. For others advising the government on crypto, the correct approach would be to follow the finance minister's lead. It is concerning that Bilal Bin Saqib, the youthful special assistant to the prime minister on blockchain and cryptocurrency, chose to skip the summit the finance minister had seen fit to attend in person. More so because he is expected to lead the conversation on crypto adoption. It is hoped that, in general, those appointed to assist the government in crypto-related matters are taking their assignments seriously. The involvement of powerful actors should not be a reason for them to take due diligence lightly. As Mr Aurangzeb pointed out, there is much at stake, and it is, therefore, necessary to proceed with utmost care and responsibility.

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Squandered riches

PAKISTAN's cultural wealth represents the country's huge untapped potential for tourism and diplomacy. An exhibition themed 'Respecting Diverse Civilisations, Pursuing Common Development', aligned with the upcoming summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, is set to open in Beijing. As one of the nine member states of the SCO, Pakistan has sent 10 artefacts spanning a range of historical eras — from Mehrgarh to Mohenjodaro and more. The objects include a female terracotta figurine from 3500-3000 BCE, a 2800-2700 BCE painted pot, a 1800-1600 BCE horse statue, a Buddha head, and a Jain ritual tank from 600-200 BCE. While the 5000 BCE steatite Indus seal is the most ancient relic, the third-fourth century BCE Apalala Jataka stone panel, with the Buddha ordering Naga Apalala to halt the overflowing Swat river, is perhaps the pièce de résistance.

Unfortunately, the idea of economic diversification by capitalising on a unique inheritance eludes Pakistan. Vast reserves of cultural assets have, over the years, been lost to smuggling, theft and the elements. Experts claim that the pillage can be attributed to a strong nexus between smuggling networks and influential quarters, ignorance among rural communities and tribal hostilities. Even museums in urban centres are in a shambles. It is time the ruling

elite woke up to the gains from unlocking heritage and culture tourism through preservation, infrastructural investment — transport, tour guides, security, accommodation and other tourism services —marketing, security and international partnerships. This will inspire local communities, generate employment, help boost a sinking economy and open new diplomatic channels. We must not lose sight of the lethal consequences of unguarded, undocumented and underdeveloped vestiges — smuggling, which not only benefits racketeers but also funds terror outfits. The power of heritage and customs changes narratives, transforms society and promotes diversity and unity.

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Tug of war

THE back-and-forth continues within the PTI. To resign or not to resign. To contest or not to contest by-elections. A majority decision was taken by the party's political committee on Monday that it would contest polls for seats that have fallen vacant due to the disqualification of its lawmakers.

However, this had immediately invited the ire of Imran Khan's sisters, who saw it as a betrayal of the PTI founder's express instructions not to. But on Tuesday, when the decision was placed before Mr Khan for ratification, he merely returned it for further consideration.

The PTI's political committee was directed to hold another debate on Tuesday evening on participation in by-elections. There was also the matter of the party's secretary general Salman Akram Raja's surprise resignation, the reason for which was never fully given. That, too, was presented to Mr Khan, but he asked Mr Raja to continue as usual.

The political committee had not taken another decision when these words were being written, but that does not matter as Mr Khan still has the final say on the matter. One thing that Mr Khan seems particularly keen on is to see the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party chief, Mahmood Achakzai, as the National Assembly opposition leader. He was reported to have underlined this again on Tuesday. Apparently, some within the PTI leadership have had reservations regarding this choice.

It is speculated that this may have had something to do with Mr Achakzai having been traditionally antagonistic to powerful quarters. The only consolation offered by Mr Khan to this camp is that the recently disqualified PTI leaders of the opposition will continue to take all measures to challenge their disqualification; failing which, Mr Achakzai will be nominated for the role. Perhaps Mr Khan wants the establishment, too, to choose from these options.

A senior journalist suggested in a recent column that Mr Khan should take one of his famous U-turns and reach a settlement with his opponents. Yet, even though it seems that his party is on crutches, he is adamant about having his way. It is dizzying how many representatives the party appears to have accumulated, each of whom claims to be the ‘true spokesperson’ for Mr Khan.

On top of that, there are many factions within the party, and their ideas are often diametrically opposed to each other. It is amidst this chaos that the PTI still, somehow, manages to survive. It is a wonder that it does; a bigger wonder still that it remains unwilling to change despite all the trouble such chaos causes.

Can sheer willpower bring Mr Khan and his party out of their present predicament, though? It seems unlikely. And while unlikely does not mean impossible, it is certainly a very difficult path to tread.

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Manifest unconcern

AS Israel’s atrocities in the occupied Gaza Strip continue unabated, the OIC has issued another statement condemning Tel Aviv’s brutality. While meeting in Jeddah on Monday, foreign ministers of the Muslim bloc issued a verbose 38-point resolution highlighting their outrage. The document is full of noble intentions and calls for action, but contains little else. Meanwhile, Palestinian men, women and children continue to starve to death, if they are lucky enough to survive Israel’s barbaric attacks. Tel Aviv again targeted the Nasser Hospital mowing down multiple Palestinian journalists, including those working for Western news agencies. Yet there is little evidence that the Zionist state will be made to pay for this or its other crimes. For Israel, there is unlimited impunity; for other states there is the law. Reflecting the OIC’s condemnation, the resolution “calls upon all states to take all-possible legal and effective measures” to stop Israeli crimes. The suggested steps include “imposing sanctions [and] suspending the supply ... of weapons” to the Zionist entity. But the million-dollar question is: why don’t the states of the OIC and Arab League lead the way by implementing trade and arms embargoes against Israel? What are the kings and rulers of Muslim states waiting for? In fact, many of the states that have endorsed this resolution continue to maintain relations with Tel Aviv. Perhaps knowing that there are wide contradictions between what Muslim states say and do, Israel’s rulers slaughter Palestinians mercilessly, knowing they will not be held accountable.

But once Israel is ‘done’ with the Palestinians — presumably after they are ethnically cleansed or shipped off to other territories — Tel Aviv will set its sights on other regional

states. This is not the stuff of conspiracy theories; the OIC resolution also condemned the Israeli prime minister's 'Greater Israel' vision, which Benjamin Netanyahu recently reaffirmed his commitment to. Arab and Muslim states should realise that as per the Zionist vision, 'Greater Israel' stretches from "the brook of Egypt to the Euphrates". A good atlas will reveal what countries are covered in this terrifying vision. And as the Israeli occupation of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese land has shown, the Zionists very much intend to deliver on their promise of 'Greater Israel'. Therefore, unless the slaughter of Palestinians is stopped immediately, large swathes of the region may soon be devoured by the Zionists.

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Cotton malaise

THE crackdown by the Pakistan Cotton Ginners Association against those of its members engaged in the reprehensible act of adulterating premium quality cotton with inferior grade fibre is welcome, though long overdue. This practice allows ginner to undercut prices to make a quick buck, while imposing additional costs on textile producers. More critically, it has undermined global confidence in Pakistan's capacity as a supplier of quality cotton-based textiles and apparel — our key foreign exchange earner. Larger exporters have mostly switched to imported cotton or synthetic fibres to meet international standards and protect their overseas sales. That said, adulteration at the ginning stage has thrived because of the contamination of domestically produced cotton at the farm gate.

Pakistan has long suffered the reputation of being a producer of highly contaminated cotton. Though contamination can occur at every step — from farm-picking to ginning — the manual harvesting of cotton bolls by women remains the single biggest cause. Trash, dust, leaves, flowers, sticks, weeds and plastic are among the major contaminants at the time of harvest. But the quality of cotton should no longer be our policymakers' only concern. The use of substandard seed varieties, outdated farming practices, recurring disease and worsening climate stress have together slashed the annual crop output to nearly half of the average production of 10m bales a year — another reason for the rising cotton and yarn imports. The same factors are exacerbating the problem of contamination. It should, therefore, be stressed that while clamping down on the ginner's malpractices is necessary, it cannot revive the cotton economy. For this, the entire domestic cotton supply chain would have to be reformed — from the provision of technical and financial aid for growers to encouraging modern techniques in order to improve output and quality. Without such support, the cotton crop will remain vulnerable. And so will our textile exports.

Kiln slavery

It is nothing short of modern-day slavery. A study by the National Commission for Human Rights offers a glimpse into how little has changed for Pakistan's brick kiln workers who continually undergo exploitation, debt bondage and gender-based violence. Conducted in Faisalabad and Kasur, the investigation exposes some chilling facts. Ninety-seven per cent of workers had entered kilns because of urgent loans, while 90pc had no written contracts, making them invisible to labour protections. Children, too, are forced into gruelling work, deprived of education and condemned to repeat the same cycle of poverty, their futures foreclosed before they even begin. Families toil in suffocating conditions, often for wages far below the legal minimum. More than 70pc of households survive in cramped single rooms. Nearly every worker surveyed reported verbal abuse; many described beatings, torture, abductions and even murder. Women were found to be especially vulnerable, facing rampant sexual harassment and forced marriages.

It is clear there is a system in place to perpetuate dependence. Kiln owners continue to inflate debts, while weak inspections allow violations to persist unchecked. The very institutions meant to protect workers — local administration, law enforcement and political networks — shield exploiters instead of enforcing the law. That over 2,300 families have been rescued so far is commendable, but it is a drop in the ocean compared to the scale of abuse. Ending bonded labour is not charity, as the NCHR chairperson rightly stressed — it is justice, dignity and the fulfilment of the Constitution's promise. The government must, therefore, move beyond token projects and piecemeal reforms. Stronger enforcement of the Bonded Labour Abolition Act, rehabilitation schemes for freed families, microcredit programmes to end dependence on exploitative loans and protection for women and minors are urgently required. Pakistan cannot claim progress on human rights while tens of thousands remain enslaved in its kilns.

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NEV policy

THERE was a sense of déjà vu when Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Tuesday 'formally' launched Pakistan's New Energy Vehicle Policy 2025-30. The same policy had, after all, been 'officially' launched on June 19, according to a PID press release issued on the same date. Perhaps the government is so enamoured with this achievement that it felt it necessary to talk about it twice. All that seemed different this time was the presence of the prime minister and his gifts. He handed over several electric scooters to high-achieving Intermediate

students, promising more in the years to come. His office insisted that this event formally marked the effective date of the NEV policy. All this is well and good: one hopes that the actual policy will yield its intended benefits. The last attempt to formalise Pakistan's approach to NEVs quickly fell apart. Launched in 2019 by the PTI government, the previous policy was abandoned due to the upheaval caused by Covid-19. Now, the government has reworked it and presented it as a means to save billions annually on petroleum imports and reduce urban air pollution, "which costs us over Rs105bn in healthcare and productivity losses".

These are noble aims, indeed. The NEV policy's ambition also deserves to be applauded: it aims for 30pc of all new vehicle sales to be electric by 2030, and sets an even more enterprising goal of 90pc by 2040. If these benchmarks can be achieved, it would mean this government would have triggered an energy revolution as significant as Pakistan's globally celebrated transition to solar energy. However, many concerns remain about the policy's viability. The key question is whether vehicle manufacturers will pass on real incentives to consumers, or repeat the industry's old practice of maintaining high margins and giving minimal thought to the environmental impact of their activities. Unless the value proposition of NEVs becomes clear to consumers, those targets will prove difficult to attain. A key concern will be the quality of batteries sold in Pakistan, which the government must consider regulating. Charging infrastructure and battery-swapping facilities will also require sustained investment over a long period of time. Therefore, instead of grand events to celebrate NEVs, what Pakistan needs more is commitment and consistency. It has sown the seeds; now it must water the soil and hope it bears fruit.

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Flooding in Punjab

PUNJAB is reeling from massive flooding triggered by a combination of torrential rains and excess water released by India from the Ravi, Chenab and Sutlej rivers.

The three eastern rivers — allocated to India under the Indus Waters Treaty — are now experiencing medium to exceptionally high floods, with forecasts of more rain across several districts of the province, particularly in the catchment zones of the flooded areas.

A major rescue operation has been launched, with over 200,000 people evacuated and relocated to relief camps for medical care, food and other essential services since mid-August. Army troops have been deployed in at least eight districts to assist the civil authorities in moving residents to safety as floodwaters surge downstream, devastating hundreds of villages along the way.

Officials have warned that very high to exceptionally high flooding could hit multiple districts, including Lahore, in the next few days as water levels in the three rivers continue to rise. Besides riverine flooding, major cities such as Sialkot, Gujrat, Rawalpindi and Lahore have been battered by urban flooding caused by intense downpours. The extent of damage to crops, infrastructure, livestock, homes and other assets is yet to be fully assessed. But initial estimates suggest the losses are in billions of rupees.

The devastation of recent days exposes the provincial authorities' weak state of preparedness, despite repeated warnings of unusually heavy rains and excess water releases by India, whose upstream river catchment areas have also received torrential downpours.

The situation exposes the ruling elite's deep indifference towards the flood-vulnerable communities. This was underscored by Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz's decision to visit Japan and Thailand — accompanied by her core team, including senior provincial bureaucrats as well as family members — at such a crucial time, instead of staying back to lead the response and devise a strategy to tackle the emerging crisis.

This attitude has justifiably earned the Punjab government much criticism. That said, the growing severity and frequency of floods with each passing year calls for holistic, integrated planning across governance structures to build resilience and preparedness to proactively mitigate the impact on vulnerable populations.

No doubt, Punjab, like the rest of Pakistan, is trying to deal with the challenge of climate change, the main trigger of extreme weather events across the country. But climate change alone is not responsible. Unplanned urbanisation, deforestation, an inadequate flood-resilient infrastructure, poor river management, etc, have all aggravated the situation.

The lesson is unmistakable: floods can no longer be dismissed as merely a by-product of climate change. Unless Punjab starts investing in climate-resilient infrastructure and adopts effective adaptation strategies, it will not be able to build the capacity it needs to minimise the impact of the devastation.

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Polio epicentre

TWO more children have been paralysed by poliovirus in Tank and North Waziristan, bringing Pakistan's cases this year to 23. Of these, 15 are from KP. This concentration means that the province has become the epicentre of the crisis and that routine responses are failing to turn the tide. With the country in such dire straits, it beggars belief that just a few weeks ago, the federal health minister boasted before international partners of a 99pc decline in cases. This kind of premature celebration shows that the state continues to measure success in tallies and targets, while failing to confront the structural weaknesses that allow polio to persist.

Countering polio's unrelenting grip, especially in KP, is not just a health challenge but a governance one. Decades of neglect, followed by the troubled merger of former Fata, have left communities with a deep mistrust of state institutions. Families who see little evidence of schools, clinics, clean water or sanitation in their daily lives view vaccination drives with suspicion. In their eyes, the state arrives only to deliver polio drops, not to address their broader needs. With the latest drive set to commence on Sept 1, and in southern KP on Sept 15, the government must realise that such a model is no longer sustainable. Polio campaigns must be integrated into a more credible package of primary healthcare. If vaccinators also provide routine immunisation, nutritional supplements or maternal care, families are more likely to open their doors. Linking the effort to clean water projects and basic sanitation would further build confidence. Moreover, campaigns too often rely on outsiders who have little standing in the community. In places like Tank and Waziristan, trusted ulema could make the decisive difference in countering rumours and ensuring acceptance. Front-line workers will continue to risk their lives, but unless governance failures are addressed alongside vaccination, Pakistan may find itself the very last frontier of polio.

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ADB support

PAKISTAN'S quest for deeper collaboration with the Asian Development Bank underscores both its growing appetite for long-term, low-cost development financing and its reliance on multilateral lenders to shore up a frail economy. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb's meeting with ADB president Masato Kanda for greater cooperation across key areas and policy-based lending appears to be as much a pitch for fresh funding from the lender as it is a request for technical support to develop innovative financing instruments to explore international debt markets and raise more funds. The wish-list for financial support from the bank and its collaboration in market-based financing instruments — green bonds, blended finance and debt-for-nature swaps — indicates both ambition and desperation for new

funding avenues amid dwindling bilateral official and private flows. However, the real challenge does not lie in mobilising debt but in a long-term commitment to structural, fiscal and governance reform beyond the present IMF funding programme. The painfully slow progress in critical areas such as energy, taxation and SOEs, however, does not inspire much confidence in the government's commitment to reforms.

That the ADB boss has reaffirmed his support for Pakistan at a time when the two sides are working out details of the 10-year Country Partnership Strategy (2026-35) on the pattern of a similar \$20bn World Bank programme is reassuring. However, while this fact does signal the bank's confidence in Pakistan's medium-term trajectory, it also underlines Pakistan's increasing dependence on its multilateral partners to heavily finance its development and keep the economy afloat. There is no doubt that the ADB has played an important role in Pakistan's economic trajectory over the past decades. But the country's experience with the bank — or, for that matter, with other multilateral agencies — in recent years shows that, without credible reforms and sound management, such a partnership cannot go very far. Mr Aurangzeb is right to stress the recent hard-won macroeconomic stabilisation: inflation is down, the current account has turned around and international rating upgrades are expected to ease borrowing costs. Yet these gains will remain fragile unless the execution of long-standing productivity and governance reforms is expedited. Not just that, Islamabad also stands to lose the international goodwill it has gained in the past couple of years if it fails to show consistent commitment to sound governance and economic management policies.

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Weaponising water

AS the raging floodwaters make their way through Punjab towards Sindh, the nation must confront the fact that other than heavy monsoon rainfall and climate change, India's apparent weaponisation of water has also played a part in the devastation.

Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal, whose constituency, Narowal, which borders India and has been flooded, said on Wednesday that India was playing politics with water. Referring to the Indus Waters Treaty, which India has held 'in abeyance' following the Pahalgam episode in April, Mr Iqbal said that New Delhi did not share timely information regarding the floodwaters headed for Pakistan.

While India did send a 'high flood' warning, this was a general statement delivered through its high commission in Islamabad, and not via the Permanent Indus Commission as mandated by the IWT.

There is mounting evidence that India is indeed politicising the water issue. This includes cutting flows, as it did in the Chenab earlier this year, causing shortages and unleashing huge volumes of water across the border, with little warning and scant details.

Observers add that India's warnings were little more than theatre to show the international community that despite tensions with Pakistan, it sent advance notice out of 'humanitarian concerns'.

If India was really motivated by empathy, it would immediately restore the IWT so that timely and precise data could be shared with Pakistan, and flood-related devastation be minimised. As the upper riparian, India has released water in past years, but after proper coordination with Pakistan.

Under the IWT, both states had shared precise information and minute details about river flows. This allowed the administration to better prepare for the incoming deluge. In the current circumstances, the details shared by New Delhi were overly vague, lacking the technical specifics that were exchanged when the IWT was still being honoured.

The result is that along with the natural intensity of the floods, human malfeasance from the Indian side has compounded the disaster for Pakistan. Sharing of data related to the floodwaters and river flows must be a structured process guided by mutually agreed SOPs.

Guesswork and general warnings cannot replace the specifics. Legally and morally, Pakistan stands on higher ground, as neutral arbiters, such as the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, have ruled that India cannot unilaterally hold the IWT in abeyance.

Whether it is holding back flows, or unleashing floodwater, cooperation on the question of transboundary rivers is essential, and India should not politicise this key issue. On its part, Pakistan should continue its diplomatic efforts bilaterally with India and at international forums to restore the treaty. Meanwhile, we need to improve our flood forecasting methods and preparedness to deal with the waters gushing in from across the border, in case India insists on obduracy.

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War on academia

MUCH of President Donald Trump's voter base is suspicious of the US higher education sector, particularly more liberal colleges. This distrust is beginning to show in official policies. The Trump administration has sought to limit student visas for foreigners to four years. As per the Department of Homeland Security, the steps are being taken to prevent "forever students" from extending their stay in the US. The department claims such students pose safety risks to the US, while burdening the American taxpayer. However, according to the government's own data, foreign students brought in over \$50bn to the economy in 2023. Even before these steps were announced, foreign students were facing increasing curbs. This year, over 6,000 student visas have been revoked, including for "support for terrorism", which in many cases translates to pro-Palestine activism, while the State Department has ordered US missions abroad to increase vetting of applicants for "hostile attitudes".

There are various reasons for the crackdown on foreign students. For one, this administration is ideologically opposed to immigration; Maga supporters see foreign student visas as an easy path to US residency and citizenship, with foreigners 'taking away' American jobs. Moreover, the American far right dislikes higher education. The US vice president, before taking office, referred to universities as "the enemy" while Mr Trump has claimed US colleges are "dominated by Marxist maniacs and lunatics". Considering the prevailing trends, foreign students, including those from Pakistan, seeking to study in the US may want to alter their plans. Though the US indeed boasts a world-class tertiary education sector, getting American visas for foreigners may become even more difficult in the days to come, though in an apparent U-turn, Mr Trump still hopes to welcome Chinese students. Yet America does not have a monopoly on knowledge, and foreign students should explore other, more welcoming options.

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Medicine shortage

THE alarm raised by the Pakistan Medical Association over the ongoing 'unprecedented' nationwide shortage of life-saving medicines should be seen as the making of a grave public health emergency — especially at a time when many parts of the country are in the midst of a natural calamity. The body, representing doctors, says that at least 80 drugs, including life-saving treatments for diabetes, cancer, heart disease and psychiatric disorders, are not available in the market. No substitutes exist for 25 of the drugs. It is a manmade crisis compounded by nature's wrath. There can be no doubt that waterborne diseases are set to rise; the scarcity of essential drugs threatens to turn an already desperate humanitarian

situation into a major public health disaster. The association blames the emergence of a black market in medicines as the main factor behind this state of affairs. With unscrupulous elements exploiting the drug shortages to make a quick buck, most life-saving drugs, such as injectable insulin, have already been pushed beyond the reach of ordinary households. That no action has been taken so far against the black marketeers is a damning indictment of the regulatory authorities.

This is not the first time that the supply of essential drugs has been disrupted, leading to a shortage of medicines. Nor is it the first time such scarcity has overlapped with a natural disaster, multiplying the sufferings of those affected. Indeed, the regulator Drap is mostly to blame for the recurring shortages due to weak regulatory enforcement and delays in decision-making. The regulatory authority has often received well-deserved flak for its inefficiency. However, fingers are also pointed at some in the pharma industry for contributing to the crises in order to pressure the regulatory authorities into conceding to their demands. Not just that, even the PMA's demand — which echoes that of many drug manufacturers — for a 'new, pragmatic pricing policy' for medicines that are currently not available in the market could be taken as echoing the interests of manufacturers, rather than genuine concern for patients. Such a view is hardly surprising, given the perceived closed ties of pharma and the medical profession. Sadly, this is not the first time that patients' interests have been brushed aside. With time running out, the government must act decisively to prevent the current shortages from spiralling into a full-blown health crisis.

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Rebuilding lives

WITH floodwaters surging yet again through Punjab, the country is faced with an all too familiar crisis — rehabilitation.

Officials report nearly 300,000 displaced from the province alone and more than a million affected as the Ravi, Sutlej and Chenab overflowed their banks. This latest emergency comes while the country is still reeling from lethal flash floods in KP and as a 7-km-long lake formed after a landslide blocked a river in Gilgit-Baltistan, forcing precautionary evacuations. It has been a season of peril, from the mountains to the plains.

Following the cataclysmic floods of 2022 that put a third of the country under water, affected 33m and displaced nearly 8m, the government and international donors produced a Post-Disaster Needs Assessment and launched the Resilient Recovery, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Framework (4RF). Donors pledged over \$9bn at Geneva to 'build back better' in housing, livelihoods and public services. The commitments set a bar we have yet to meet.

Progress has been slow and uneven. Rights monitors have flagged gaps in beneficiary lists and basic amenities in government housing schemes. Even this April, tens of thousands of schools in Sindh hit by the 2022 floods were struggling to function. Three years later, the response still leans heavily on evacuation, camps and compensation. While such measures save lives, they do not necessarily restore them.

Punjab's set-up of hundreds of relief and medical sites demonstrates mobilisation capacity, yet there is still no published nationwide rehabilitation blueprint for this year comparable to 4RF: no clear calendar for resilient housing grants, no transparent, countrywide registry of climate-displaced households, no public dashboard tracking delivery by district.

What must be done is no rocket science. The state must treat displacement as a policy priority, not an after-event improvisation. It must legislate a climate-displacement framework that guarantees registration, interim shelter, core-housing grants tied to resilient designs, and portable access to health, education and social protection (through BISP) for uprooted families. Second, set aside and fast-track rehabilitation finance — including Geneva pledges — with independent audits and open data, so money reaches the last mile.

Third, rebuild in ways that can withstand climate risks: multi-purpose elevated shelters across riverine belts; enforceable zoning to keep construction off floodplains; city drainage upgrades; and accelerated glacial-lake early-warning and downstream evacuation routes in the north. Finally, make communities co-designers: women, sharecroppers and landless labourers must be at the centre of relocation and livelihood plans.

The latest devastation in Punjab should not become another chapter in our cycle of disaster, 'relief' and neglect. The state has planned before. It must deliver now so that those repeatedly uprooted by a changing climate can rebuild lives rather than wait for the next siren.

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Equal citizens

PAKISTAN is found wanting when it comes to preserving the constitutional freedoms and dignity of its minority citizens. Reiterating its commitment to an inclusive society, the Parliamentarians Commission for Human Rights recently cited Article 27 of the Constitution — equal access for all citizens to public offices and the civil service irrespective of religion — and Article 36 — the state shall provide special safeguards to minorities and protect their legitimate interests. It urged policymakers and civil society to reclaim the founder's vision of

a country that upholds equal rights for all. Sadly, an indifferent state, along with large sections of society, has, through discriminatory laws, allowed prejudice to persist. Hence, constitutional securities, and the apex court's landmark judgement in 2014, which provided a blueprint for maintaining the freedoms of religious communities, stand virtually abandoned.

The struggle for recognition will not end unless measures are taken to ensure equal participation through education, employment and interfaith harmony. The message to eradicate religious discrimination must come from the pulpit. Educational reforms focused on acceptance are also necessary. As Sindh MPA Mahesh Kumar pointed out, nearly 60pc of minority students reported bias, including refused enrolment, isolation in class and coercion to attend lessons in the majority faith. In Sindh, 44pc of minority children are out of school. Besides, there are other issues — for instance, the 5pc public sector job quota for minorities is mostly unfulfilled; often members of the minority community are relegated to sanitation services or restricted to other inferior positions. This approach is structural and does not bode well for societal health. Racism can only be curtailed if the government resolves to reverse the injustice. Monitoring, media campaigns, security, enforcing legal guarantees, etc, will create inclusivity. The power elite must also pledge to protect the marginalised. Changing mindsets is integral for progress.

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Sost protest

FOR over 40 days, the traders of Sost in Gilgit-Baltistan have been protesting to press the federal government to meet their demands. These largely centre on the imposition of federal taxes on the region, as well as regulation of trade with China. Several parts of GB observed a strike on Friday in solidarity with the traders, reflecting support from across the region for the demands. People of the mountainous region often take to the streets to highlight their issues, and more often than not, these demonstrations are peaceful. In the past, the region has witnessed large protests against excessive load-shedding as well as an increase in the subsidised wheat price. During the ongoing protest, while commercial traffic is blocked, the demonstrators have allowed passengers to travel between Pakistan and China. Unfortunately, in Pakistan peaceful protesters are usually met with indifference by the state, while those who resort to violent tactics are mollified and indulged by the government.

The GB traders want the centre to declare the region a 'non-tariff' area, exempted from federal sales and income tax on goods imported from China. They also want the clearance of goods held up at Sost for months, as well as the withdrawal of cases against traders. The

GB cabinet has endorsed their demands. The issue of federal taxes imposed on GB is not a new one, as there is widespread support across the territory for the 'no taxation without representation' demand. Islamabad, on the other hand, is hesitant to give GB provincial status until the Kashmir dispute with India is settled. The committee recently formed by the prime minister to look into the traders' demands needs to come up with a fair solution in consultation with GB's elected representatives. While the locals' demand not to pay federal taxes without having a voice in national affairs is rational, in these times of economic strain, a just solution should be explored that balances regional demands with the fiscal needs of the state, while also not harming Pakistan's case vis-à-vis the Kashmir dispute. Taxes, if applied, should not be excessive, and the money collected must be spent on the welfare of the region. Agriculture, trade and tourism are the main economic sectors in GB, therefore taxation should be proportionate, while the state must endeavour to create more economic opportunities in the region.

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Agricultural loss

THE current wave of floods has ravaged vast tracts of farmland across the plains of central Punjab.

Hundreds of thousands of mostly smallholders have been displaced, with floodwaters sweeping away their food and other crops.

More agricultural land will be swallowed by the raging waters, surging southwards to converge with the Indus in the coming days. A major economic upheaval is already emerging, along with a humanitarian crisis. Though it is still too early for a full assessment of the damage wreaked on crops and livestock, initial reports suggest that farmers' losses are already running into billions.

The deluge has wiped out standing rice, maize and other crops besides vegetables in more than 2,100 villages located along the Sutlej, Ravi and Chenab. The rushing waters are now expected to inflict further damage on croplands in Punjab's cotton-producing southern districts before cascading into Sindh.

The agricultural losses will weigh heavily on both the economy and people. The destruction of crops and disruption of food supply chains have set the stage for spiralling food inflation. The 2022 floods offer a sobering reminder: food prices surged month after month. But the impact of flooding goes beyond food inflation.

For many of the affected farmers — mostly smallholders — the devastation is total: with crops, livestock, homes and livelihoods all swept away. Left with nothing to live on — let alone invest in the next crop — more people are likely to slip below the poverty line. The increase in the prices of essential foods will disproportionately affect low-income rural and urban households. Beyond the immediate impact, the economic costs are staggering. The agriculture losses will be felt across industries, and reduce automobile and fertiliser sales.

More worrying is the impact on the fragile balance-of-payments situation, with the deluge likely to push up the import bill due to domestic shortages of food items. Exports, on the other hand, may suffer due to production losses in rice and cotton.

Overall, the damage to farm output will keep GDP growth depressed. The farm sector, which forms nearly a quarter of the economy and employs almost 40pc of the labour force, had grown marginally by 0.56pc — the lowest in a decade — last year against a five-year average of 3.38pc. Pakistan has suffered nearly 20 major flood disasters since 1950 — half of them in the last two decades.

Climate change is intensifying their frequency and severity, yet national preparedness remains inadequate. The lesson from the current disaster is clear: floods are no longer freak incidents but recurring economic shocks that depress GDP growth, widen deficits, wash away livelihoods and drag millions deeper into poverty.

Unless we radically overhaul our disaster preparedness and invest in agricultural resilience, each new flood event will drown villages, devastate livelihoods and reduce growth.

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