

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of February 2021

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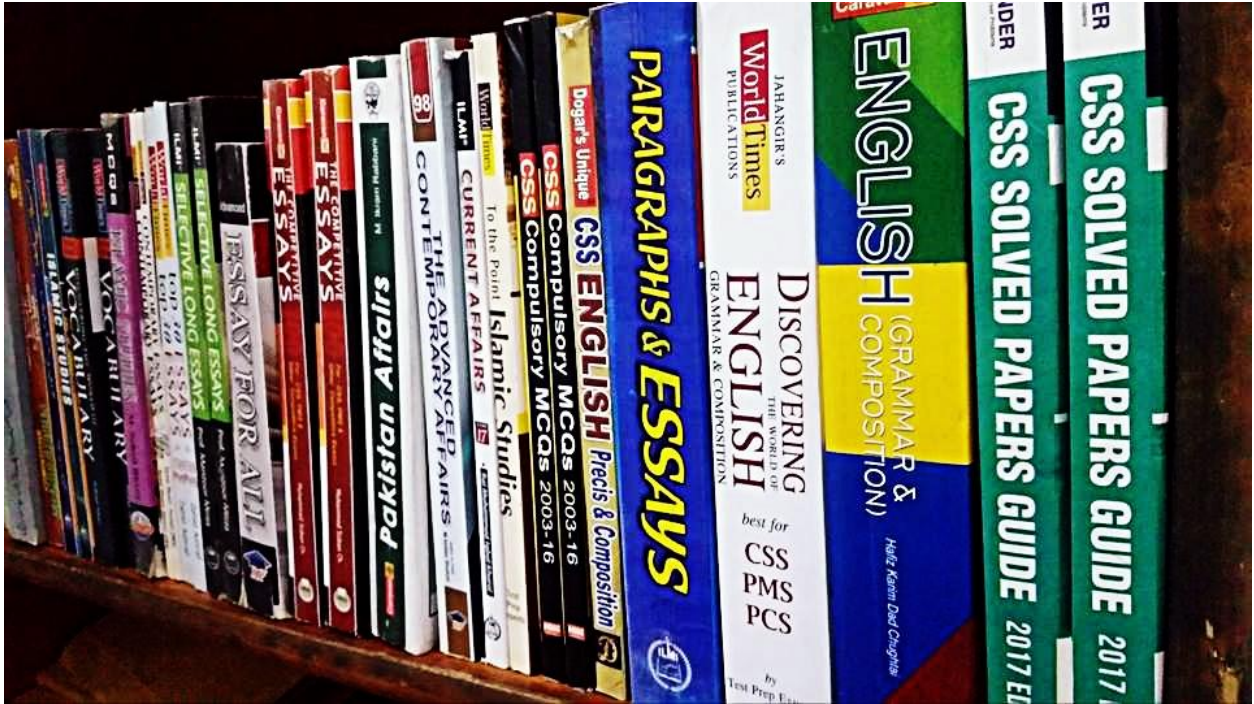
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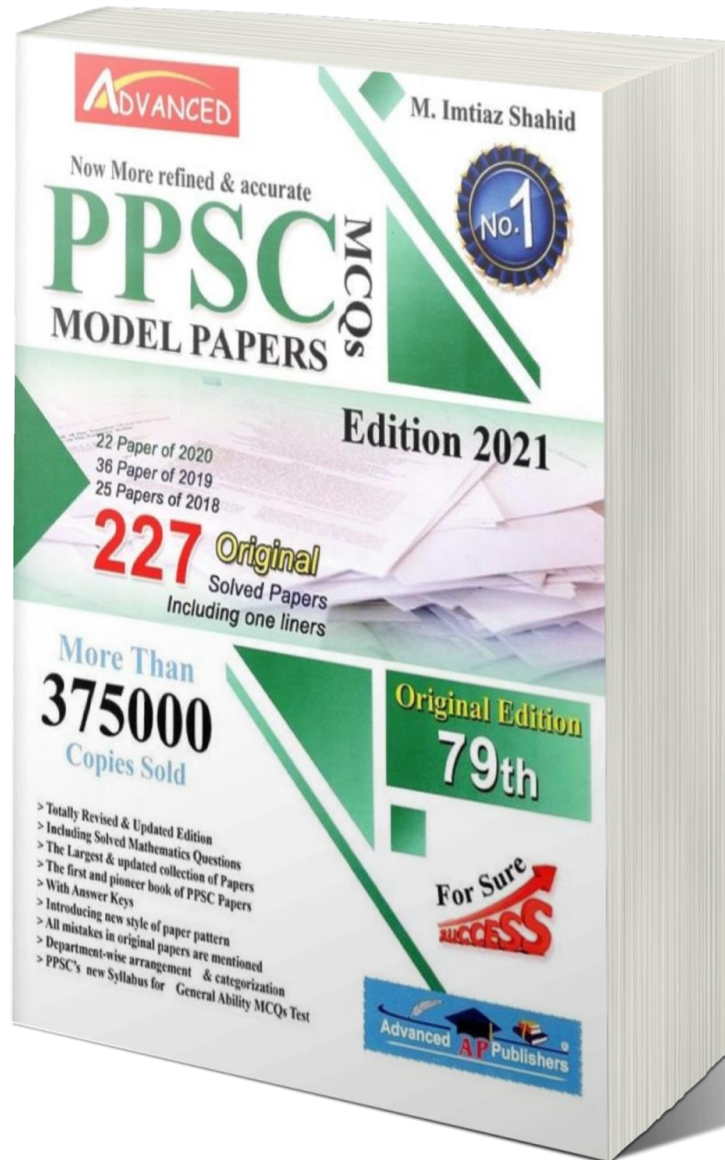
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Kashmir Challenge

IT is hard to disagree with UN Secretary General António Guterres's assertion that Pakistan and India must discuss the Kashmir issue and that any military confrontation between the two South Asian states will result in "a disaster of unmitigated proportions".

Replying to a question during a press conference in New York, the UN chief added that "our good offices are always available" in case the parties wanted to avail the option to discuss the problem. However, the issue here is that Mr Guterres's offer can only bring results when both parties are interested in a negotiated settlement to the dispute. When one side — India — keeps harping on the same tune, insisting Kashmir is an 'internal' matter, there is little that third parties can do.

Without doubt the lack of progress on the Kashmir dispute has poisoned the atmosphere in South Asia since independence. Tensions in the disputed region have resulted in several wars and numerous skirmishes. Pakistan, for its part, has always offered to negotiate a solution that is acceptable to the Kashmiris, but has mostly been rebuffed. The present federal government has also offered to take steps towards peace if India reciprocates, while Islamabad has tried to improve relations through people-to-people contacts.

The opening of the Kartarpur Corridor is a case in point. However, the Indian response, particularly under the BJP's watch, to these overtures has been less than enthusiastic. There have been consistent attacks along the LoC, leading to a high number of civilian casualties, while the Indian misadventure of 2019 in which New Delhi's jets (one of which was shot down) violated Pakistani airspace, is a prime example of the brinkmanship this country's eastern neighbour has indulged in ever since the BJP took the reins of power. And of course, matters in India-held Kashmir have been further complicated after India annulled the occupied region's special constitutional status in August 2019, in effect to crush the Kashmiris' aspirations for freedom and dignity. In such a situation, India has clearly shown that it is not ready for peace.

However, Pakistan should continue its efforts to resolve the issue peacefully because a military confrontation in this region would be devastating, as the UN

chief has observed. But for peace to succeed, the UN as well as global powers must realise that India needs to change its belligerent posture.

It is not only Pakistan that has been having trouble along its border with India; the recent clashes on the India-Chinese frontier show that New Delhi is in an aggressive mood and keeps provoking its neighbours. There is still a chance to bring peace to South Asia if India responds positively to Pakistan's desire for dialogue. However, if the politicians and generals in India keep making warlike noises and threatening this country, they should understand that Pakistan can and will defend itself.

Decision on gas

THE matter seems to have been settled once and for all. The government has rejected the demand of owners of captive power plants (small off-grid generation facilities) to withdraw its decision to discontinue the supply of gas for self-generation to non-export industry from February and export-oriented units from March. The decision has firmly been conveyed to the businessmen in spite of a gloomy scenario painted by them. The industry has been told to fully shift to the national grid before the end of 2021. Nonetheless, according to the government plan, the industrial units using gas for producing steam will continue to receive the fuel for their processes. Besides, the units that cannot immediately shift to the national grid for one reason or the other, or whose sanctioned load is less than their requirement, will also continue to get gas supplies till they are fully connected to the grid.

The decision to disconnect gas supplies for the captive power plants is made with a view to encouraging the consumption of excess power generation developed in the country during the last five years. This is a step in the right direction. The increase in electricity consumption by industry is expected to significantly lessen the pace of growth in the circular debt by reducing the capacity charges paid to power producers without using their capacity. Moreover, it is a fact that most captive power plants are highly inefficient and the diversion of the ever-depleting gas resource to them for self-generation is a big national loss, especially when excess electricity is available in the system. The government had encouraged industry to set up generation for their own use a decade ago after massive power shortages hit the country, damaging industrial

output. The situation has reversed in the last few years and it does not make any sense to keep feeding captive power any longer. The argument that the disconnection of gas to captive power will hit exports doesn't have a leg to stand on. However, it may somewhat reduce the profit margins of exporters and others. It is time for industry to stop seeking rent. But it is also time for the government to reduce electricity costs for the exporters — and other consumers as well. That will not be possible without the authorities concerned making concerted efforts to reduce the distribution losses of electricity distribution companies, check power theft and improve bill recovery from all consumers.

Education emergency

RECENTLY, on the International Day of Education, UN Secretary General António Guterres commended students and teachers for their resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has disrupted education and learning for countless students around the world. However, an estimated 44pc of all Pakistani children between the ages of five and 16 were not even going to school in the first place, and the figure is noticeably higher for girls than boys. On Wednesday, the Aga Khan University's Institute for Educational Development conducted an online discussion on out-of-school children in Pakistan, looking into some of the reasons why such a large percentage of the population has never stepped foot inside a classroom, or has dropped out before completing their studies. Even though Article 25-A of the Constitution directs that the state provide free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of five and 16, an estimated 22.8m children are not in school — the second highest figure in the world for that age bracket, according to Unicef. Furthermore, as noted in the IED discussion, Pakistan's population rate is rising at an alarming rate, and the number of out-of-school children will only grow in the near future, as the distance between demand and supply increases.

The reasons behind low attendance and high dropout rates is manifold, but primarily connected to poverty and accessibility issues. There are simply not enough schools in the country — particularly for secondary and higher studies, and especially in rural areas — and transport expenses remain a major concern for parents, along with all the other expenses. Children have to walk long distances, often with heavy schoolbags, and if there is no one to accompany them, parents may opt to take them out and put them to work — inside the home

or outside. Additionally, if there is a gap in their studies, as there will be with the pandemic, children or their families are often reluctant to return to class. The state must wake up to this aspect of the challenge.

Cost of living

THE prime minister on Sunday spoke about his government's focus on price inflation, saying both headline inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index and core inflation — the change in the costs of goods and services excluding those from the food and energy sectors — had slowed down in January to below the July 2018 level. "More good news on the economic front," read his Twitter account. "CPI and core inflation are both now lower than when our government was formed." This development was then attributed to the economic policies of the current administration as the prime minister stated he had instructed his economic team to remain vigilant and ensure that inflation was under control.

Indeed, the pace of increase in the prices of goods and services has been decelerating for the last four months with CPI and core inflation dropping to their lowest at 5.7pc and 5.4pc in January in more than two years. But it does not mean that the prices of goods and services Pakistanis consumed last month have gone down to below their two-year level. It just means that the prices now appear to be stabilising at a much higher point than the one when the PTI came to power. The overall CPI basket and food prices are estimated by analysts to already have spiked by an average 23pc and 31pc during the last two and a half years. That speaks volumes for the helplessness of the current dispensation in protecting consumers from the impact of rising prices, despite repeated claims to the contrary.

In spite of considerable deceleration in the January inflation rate, CPI has risen by a cumulative 8.3pc in the first seven months of the present fiscal. Many analysts agree that the present trend will be short-lived and headline inflation is likely to begin its upward journey in a month or two under the impact of the recent 17pc increase in the electricity tariffs and petrol prices. The weak response to the unchecked rise in food prices, especially of wheat flour, sugar and vegetables, has compounded the misery of the low-middle-income households that were already facing financial hardship and job losses owing to harsh economic policies

and the Covid-19 impact. With food prices going through the roof, housing becoming unaffordable and indirect taxes and energy bills ballooning, a vast majority of households are left with little to pay for their education and healthcare bills. From the moment the government began implementing its economic stabilisation policies, the people knew that improvement would come at a substantial cost to them. But few had imagined they would also have to pay a steep price for poor governance and an ineffectual policy response to inflation. For now the rising prices are testing the economic pain threshold of ordinary people. Soon these might be testing the commitment of the rulers' vote bank.

Myanmar coup

ONCE more, the generals have struck in Myanmar, sending the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy packing. Reports emerging from the country have said that Ms Suu Kyi — the de facto leader of Myanmar — as well as the president are in detention, while the armed forces have declared a year-long state of emergency.

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, had emerged from decades of military rule in 2011 and was being run under a hybrid system where the generals dominated the state's affairs, and allowed limited democratic activity. For example, around a quarter of the seats in parliament were reserved for uniformed lawmakers nominated by the military's top brass, giving them effective 'check' over civilian MPs. However, despite controlling the levers of state, it seems the generals were uneasy with growing civilian power, as the NLD performed well in November's elections. The country's top general claimed there were "huge irregularities" in the polls, though the Myanmar election commission said it had no evidence of fraud.

Unfortunately, the situation Myanmar faces is a familiar one for many developing states, including Pakistan, where democratic experiments are too often interrupted by unconstitutional interventions, retarding the political growth of states. Ms Suu Kyi was not an ideal leader. For example, while she had struggled for years to establish democracy and fight for human rights in her homeland, upon gaining power she ignored the plight of the Muslim Rohingya, who were systemically butchered in Rakhine state. However, there is no justification for the military coup and power must be handed back to the civilians.

Myanmar suffers from ethnic and religious strife, and the only way to end these various conflicts is through the democratic process, ensuring that people of all religious persuasions and ethnic backgrounds are given equal rights. Things may deteriorate further under the generals' watch, as the military is known to support a xenophobic extremist Buddhist nationalist narrative. There has been condemnation from all right-thinking governments around the world, and the matter is due to be taken up at the UN. The international community must make it clear that the coup is unacceptable and will have consequences unless power is handed back to the elected government. Myanmar's democracy was anything but perfect. But allowing an imperfect democracy to grow and evolve is preferable to allowing unelected adventurers to toy with a nation's future.

Karachi development

AGGRAVATING the turf war between the centre and Sindh over Karachi, Planning Minister Asad Umar recently complained that the provincial government was creating hurdles in the implementation of development projects in the city. Mr Umar went on to criticise the dysfunctional local bodies for violating the spirit of the Constitution, indicating that this was the reason for Karachi's administrative failures. The minister's acerbic remarks are in stark contrast to the ones he uttered merely two weeks ago when, together with the province's top leadership, he stated that the centre and Sindh had decided to put aside their differences and work jointly towards the welfare of Karachi. But, given his markedly different tone now, it appears that the political consensus has proved to be short-lived. This was only reconfirmed when Mr Umar held another press conference on Monday in Shikarpur during which he blasted the PPP government yet again.

If the federal cabinet has reservations over how development projects introduced by the centre are being handled, these should be discussed with the coordination committee set up to oversee schemes under the Rs1.1tr Karachi Transformation Package that was introduced soon after the urban infrastructure was left in ruins after heavy monsoon rains lashed the city last year. There is no doubt that Mr Umar is correct about the political and administrative vacuum that has been created due to the absence of a working local government system. It is also true that the responsibility for the urban dereliction of many years now lies squarely with the Sindh government which has done little to promote the grassroots empowerment needed to solve civic problems. However, political wrangling

between the federal and provincial governments over development in the country's economic hub will only worsen matters for Karachi that is already seen as an 'orphan city'. The time for blame games is long past. The authorities at all levels need to get their act together and focus on improving Karachi before the public's patience runs out.

PDM adrift

THE Jan 31 'deadline' that the Pakistan Democratic Movement had set for the prime minister to resign has come and gone, and the PTI government is looking more confident than ever. Recent meetings between Prime Minister Imran Khan, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa and DG ISI Lt Gen Faiz Hameed — the latest on Monday was the fourth in a mere 40 days — have reinforced the impression of institutional harmony and, thereby, smooth sailing for the current dispensation.

The PDM's vessel on the other hand, while not exactly leaking, seems to be somewhat rudderless and adrift. PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari tweeted: "The selected PM has failed to resign by the deadline set by the PDM for this illegitimate regime and missed the opportunity to step aside in a respectable manner...." He added that a long march plan and no-confidence motion would "hopefully" be discussed in the PDM meeting reportedly scheduled for tomorrow in Islamabad.

At this point, the PDM campaign was supposed to have been snowballing towards the desired 'denouement'. Its fire and brimstone rollout in September rattled the PTI government, but then it made a series of miscalculations. And Islamabad dug in its heels, betting on the PDM partners' divergent political circumstances and agendas to weaken the alliance's initial unity. So it has proven. The first real signs of cracks beneath the façade came in December on the issue of mass resignations from the national and provincial assemblies, and whether to do so before or after the Senate elections.

That step for the PML-N and the JUI-F was never as politically significant as for the PPP that governs Sindh and whose stakes are therefore much higher. The result is that the PPP's stance is very different from what it was earlier; it recently came out with the proposal of bringing a no-confidence vote against the prime minister. Having been burned by their failure to oust Senate Chairman Sadiq

Sanjrani through a no-confidence motion in July 2019, the PML-N considers the idea too risky.

The confusion has enabled the PTI government to paint the PDM as a spent force that promised too much and failed to deliver because of its inherent contradictions. Certainly, the alliance, that started with the MPC document spelling out targets, priorities and sequence of events, fell short on working out the 'how' of achieving specific outcomes. Critically, they also misread the relationship between the establishment and the PTI. The dominos did not fall the way the PDM leaders assumed they would.

Smuggled oil

THERE has been an interesting twist in the situation as the government moves to shut retail outlets selling petrol and diesel smuggled from Iran. In a hearing before the Senate Standing Committee on Petroleum on Monday, some important voices from Balochistan, which is the main conduit for the smuggling, said that 2.2m people in the province derive their livelihoods from the oil-smuggling racket, and if the government moves to shut it down it is duty-bound to provide an alternative source of income to these individuals. They recommended that the proceeds the government aims to collect from shutting down this racket, and which is estimated by Customs to be in the vicinity of Rs150bn, should be used for this purpose. The argument is unlikely to get much traction, but the point raised should give us all some pause. The drive against smuggled oil must obviously not be halted; however, the number of people whose livelihoods will be impacted is very large — assuming that the figure is not being massively overstated — and it shows how deeply entrenched the economy of Balochistan has come to be in the cross-border rackets that thrive in that province.

It was in early January that the government announced a crackdown on illegal retail outlets selling smuggled oil, claiming more than 2,000 such outlets had sprung up across the country. This was to be the first phase of the crackdown, with action against cross-border movement to follow. It is not clear why this action needs to be phased in such a way. Why can the authorities not move simultaneously at the border as well as against illegal pumps selling smuggled fuel? Everybody already knows that the cross-border movement of tankers carrying the smuggled product happens under the nose of the authorities at the

border. Perhaps the crackdown is phased in a manner so as to catch the low-hanging fruit first, which would be those pumps that have been geotagged by Customs as unlicensed and involved in the sale of smuggled fuel. All over Balochistan, it is common knowledge that LPG as well as petrol and diesel are smuggled from across the border, which not only means that large numbers of people will be deprived of a livelihood, but also that the province could face fuel shortages as a result. Shutting down this racket is important, but it is equally important to manage the aftermath.

Pensioners' verification

THE grant of pensions to senior citizens should be a straightforward process with minimal hassle to those of advanced age. However, this is not always the case in Pakistan. The State Bank has announced a new policy in this regard which aims to smoothen the process, and minimise chances of fraud. As per a circular issued on Monday, the central bank announced that pensioners would no longer require 'life certificates', and instead, would be required to undergo biometric verification twice a year at any branch of the bank where their pension account is maintained. The move has been made to eliminate fraud, particularly the phenomenon of 'ghost pensioners', where pensions end up in the pockets of fraudsters. In these days of financial turbulence such a move is a rational one, as leaks need to be plugged and wastage of public funds eliminated.

Doing away with the need to obtain a 'life certificate' (a document verified by a gazetted officer and indicating the pensioner is alive) twice a year may indeed be a welcome move. Run-ins with the bureaucracy for the common Pakistani are not usually pleasant experiences, more so if one is of advanced age. However, it should also be remembered that many genuine pensioners may be too old or infirm to make two yearly trips to the bank for verification. While ensuring that pensions are ending up in the accounts of genuine recipients is important, perhaps the authorities can adopt effective methods to ensure both transparency and the comfort of senior citizens. For example, for those seniors suffering from ill health, the authorities can arrange home visits where verification can be done with mobile gadgets. Moreover, for those who can make the trip to the bank, it should be ensured that seniors do not have to wait long periods. If such methods are adopted officials can ensure that only genuine pensioners are receiving

benefits, while senior citizens will be saved the hassle of standing in line waiting to be verified.

The RDA investment

OVERSEAS Pakistanis are responding generously to the new initiative, Roshan Digital Accounts, launched by the State Bank in September in order to attract the diaspora to invest their savings in their country's development. According to the State Bank, some 80,000 non-resident Pakistanis have already opened accounts, transferring their savings of approximately \$400m from their respective countries of residence to the country of their origin. Their numbers continue to grow. Many may attribute the initial success of the initiative to the lucrative returns being offered to non-resident Pakistanis on their RDA deposits compared to the nearly zero per cent return they are getting in the host countries. Indeed, the rewarding returns must have played a major role in convincing the diaspora to open these accounts. But that is only one factor.

The entire RDA regime has been designed intelligently, keeping in view the needs of Pakistanis working abroad. These accounts, for example, allow their owners freedom to move their savings in and out of Pakistan — effortlessly — by clicking on their mobile devices from anywhere in the world. The account holders can also easily invest their money in real estate, stock market and government papers through the Central Depository Company. Moreover, the ease of opening these accounts in both Islamic and conventional banks within 48 hours in Pakistani and other eligible international currencies is an added incentive. Non-resident citizens of China and India have played a crucial role in the economic progress of their home country in recent decades. Overseas Pakistanis too have been contributing a great deal to the stability of the nation's external account by sending home large remittances equal to our annual exports. Nonetheless, the bulk of the money sent back by them has gone into consumption or speculative investments with no channel available for them to bring home their savings owing to the unavailability of an official mechanism to repatriate their money when needed. The RDA initiative has provided them with that channel and they are responding to it as expected.

Vaccination begins

THE next phase in Pakistan's fightback against the novel coronavirus has begun with appropriate fanfare. On Tuesday at the PM Office, in the presence of Prime Minister Imran Khan, anaesthetist and critical care specialist Prof Rana Imran Sikander became the first person in the country to be vaccinated against the disease.

The first batch of Covid-19 vaccines, totalling half a million doses manufactured by Sinopharm, had arrived in Islamabad from Beijing on Monday, and the federal government dispatched the provinces their share from it the next day. Inoculation drives on a provincial level began yesterday. The National Command and Operation Centre deserves plaudits for the smooth start to the mammoth countrywide campaign. Judging by the detailed plan it has drawn up, considerable effort is being expended to ensure that vaccine procurement keeps up with the pace of inoculation, and a report in this paper yesterday quoted SAPM on Health Dr Faisal Sultan as saying he does not believe the supply side will pose a problem.

"We are more concerned about the demand side," he said. The fear is that of the 70m of the adult population who should be vaccinated to achieve herd immunity, as per health experts' view, a considerable number — up to 30m — may refuse it or opt out for one reason or another.

That is among several concerns in a situation where, at least to some extent, the authorities are flying blind. The novel coronavirus has been around for a little over a year. It is only recently that health professionals have got a handle on managing severe cases of Covid-19 to a certain extent, while the long-term and sometimes devastating implications of the disease are still being observed and understood.

Decision on BRT

THE Supreme Court decision to set aside a Peshawar High Court judgement ordering a NAB investigation into the Peshawar BRT scheme must have come as a relief to a provincial government dogged by the controversy generated by its flagship project. The move to stop the NAB probe comes in response to an

appeal filed by the KP government. In July 2018, the Peshawar High Court had directed NAB to investigate the incessant delays and irregularities in the award of contracts and the project's cost. In a separate case in 2019, the high court had asked the FIA to investigate any potential wrongdoing related to the project. This was also challenged by the KP government in the Supreme Court which has granted a month-long extension to its stay order on the FIA probe. The highly publicised, multibillion-rupee Bus Rapid Transit project had sparked concerns due to the long delays in completing it and the mismanagement during its construction. The KP government's own investigation team had raised serious questions over the feasibility of the project, especially as the cost went from Rs49bn to over Rs68bn. In April 2019, the team in a 27-page report had highlighted a number of issues with the BRT project. The report had brought to light challenges pertaining to the mismanagement of development funds, political hubris and improper design and planning by the authorities, along with mass-scale public inconvenience to the residents of Peshawar. In fact, it indicated the project had misused public money through negligence in the execution of the construction.

The BRT project was announced by the KP government just months before the 2018 general elections, and there were rash promises that it would be completed within six months. Several deadlines, design changes and tens of billions of rupees later, the project was finally opened for the public in August 2020. However, soon after, the mass transit system witnessed more problems as a few buses caught fire and operations were hampered. The question that then arises is this: if the government's own inspection team recommended a probe into the construction of the BRT, why did the provincial administration think it necessary to challenge the high court's decision? Would it not have been better to investigate the concerns raised and find solutions that could have put to rest the misgivings? After all, transparency in public works underpins a people's trust in their government.

Kashmir Day

THE people of Pakistan and those of the liberated part of what is one of the world's most enchanting lands are observing Kashmir Day today. Indeed, it goes far beyond an annual ritual; it is aimed at drawing the world's attention to the worsening human rights situation in the illegally occupied territory and the danger

inherent in India's intransigence. As Pakistan has repeatedly pointed out, Kashmir is not a piece of real estate about which there is an ownership dispute, but an issue of self-determination — the right of a people to shape their own destiny. Unfortunately, mentioning the very word 'Kashmir' to India is like showing the proverbial red rag to the bull, even though it was India which had taken the issue to the UN as a complainant. Yet it is astonishing that the aggrieved party doesn't want justice done and blocks every move to have the issue settled. Ironically, India is on record as having accepted various Security Council resolutions calling for a plebiscite in Kashmir and having told the world that it would accept the Kashmiri people's verdict. Those who gave these solemn pledges to the British prime minister of the day, to the UN, and to the people of Kashmir were those who mattered, including India's first governor general, Lord Mountbatten, and its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Yet, subsequently India had no qualms about repudiating those pledges and using every trick in the book to try and gobble up the disputed territory.

The assumption of power by Narendra Modi with his Hindutva ideology has turned India-held Kashmir into a tinderbox that can explode any time. His government's most perverse action was on Aug 5, 2019, when it abolished the occupied territory's special status, took a leaf out of Israel's book and changed the nationality law allowing non-Kashmiris to settle in the territory in a criminal bid to alter the valley's demographic character. This was followed by the brutal repression of protests by the justifiably angered Kashmiri people and the gross human rights violations which have drawn world censure. India should realise a people cannot be kept in bondage forever and that the unsolved Kashmir issue can push South Asia into a devastating war. This day should also make Pakistani politicians wake up to the overriding need for unity by keeping political differences between the opposition and government within the limits of decency and democratic ethics.

Solar health units

IN a laudable decision, the Punjab government has decided to run all Basic Health Units on solar energy. At a signing ceremony in Lahore, the provincial government's health minister, Dr Yasmin Rashid, told reporters that BHUs in Sargodha, Jhelum and Mandi Bahauddin would be converted to solar to eventually be followed up by all other BHUs around the province. The project will

not only save money in the long run for the health department by reducing their power bills, but also aid in providing continuous power to the BHUs. But more importantly, it is a step in the right direction to catalyse the solar revolution in Pakistan that is still slow in taking off compared to the rest of the world.

Government departments can play a critical role in pushing the solar revolution along by shifting their own consumption to renewable, point-of-consumption sources. This will not only create more demand for solar technology in the country, but also provide an impetus to others to follow. Every new solar installation, especially in a location where it enjoys high public visibility, has a demonstration effect and plays a role in helping to mainstream solar power in the eyes of the public. Other government departments in Punjab, as well as the other provinces, should follow suit and shift more and more of their premises towards solar technology like the health department in Punjab has done. Eventually, the provincial assemblies can also be shifted to solar, and provincial regulations could be designed to encourage fuel pumps to introduce the technology on their premises too. These kinds of initiatives will help power the solar revolution in critical ways. Since many of these departments work mostly during daylight hours it makes their transition to solar more viable. Commercial and government establishments have to lead the way in pushing this revolution along in Pakistan, and the Punjab government has shown the way forward with this initiative.

Senate polls

THE government has tabled a bill in the National Assembly to change the voting mechanism in the Senate elections from secret to open balloting but the opposition has blocked voting on the bill in this session. The government on Wednesday presented the 26th Constitutional Amendment Bill which also seeks to give dual nationals the right to contest elections.

The bill elicited a strong reaction from the opposition benches and the proceedings of the Assembly on Wednesday and Thursday were marred by fracas, sloganeering and pandemonium. Prime Minister Imran Khan has stated in the past also that Senate elections should have open voting so that corruption is eliminated from the process. One example of senators voting against their parties was witnessed in the no-confidence vote against Senate Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani. The vote was defeated even though the opposition had a clear majority.

It is an open secret that candidates for the upper house have to spend huge amounts of money to buy votes from members of the provincial assemblies who constitute their electoral college.

It is the responsibility of all political parties to bring about reforms that can eliminate this practice of vote buying in the Senate. However, the way that the government has gone about doing this is unfortunate. It has launched parallel initiatives in the Supreme Court as well as parliament to change the system of voting without making a substantive effort to build a consensus on this reform. The Supreme Court is hearing the case and has yet to issue a verdict. It is strange that without waiting for the court to announce a judgement, the government tried to get a vote in the National Assembly. In addition, the government knew fully well that it did not have the numbers to push through a constitutional amendment.

This is why this entire exercise appears geared towards gaining political mileage by pointing out that the opposition does not want to legislate on reform which, the government feels, can eliminate corruption in the Senate electoral process. By needlessly politicising the issue, the government has wasted an opportunity to bring about legislation through a detailed process of debate, discussion and consensus. Whenever optics take the place of genuine objectives, the outcome is always disappointing.

KP health coverage

Recently, KP became the first province to offer universal health coverage to its 40m residents. Going by the disaster that the healthcare system in this country is, this can be seen as a revolutionary move. The Sehat Sahulat Programme was first piloted by the KP government in four districts in 2015 but covered only 3pc of the population. In 2016, it was extended to cover 51pc of the population, 69pc by 2017 and finally the entire province in 2020. Under the programme, around 6.7m families in the province can avail hospitalised treatment worth Rs1m every year at 400 public-sector and private hospitals across the province. If all goes as planned, this scheme could prove to be a game changer for public healthcare. A large percentage of the population lives below the poverty line in the country where access to adequate healthcare is difficult. Government spending in the sector remains below 3pc of GDP, resulting in understaffed, underfunded and

overcrowded public-sector hospitals where the poor run from pillar to post to seek treatment for themselves or their loved ones. In such circumstances, access to healthcare for women becomes doubly difficult due to patriarchal mores that hinder movement and prevent women from making health-related choices. Free access to proper medical care will lower the levels of neonatal and maternal deaths in the country. Indeed, hospital admission for women needing treatment might also change social taboos, allowing women greater mobility in the long run.

So far the response to free healthcare in the province has been positive, although with hospital admissions tripling, efforts may be needed to expand health facilities and services. A rickety healthcare infrastructure of decades will surely be subjected to even greater pressure as more people avail of the benefits of the health coverage plan and free up their income to spend on other essentials of life. If the months ahead prove that the scheme is implemented successfully, other provinces too can learn from KP's example.

Chaos in parliament

THE scenes of chaos in the National Assembly this week have been a pitiful yet pertinent symbol of the reality of politics in the country today. An enraged opposition and a bullish ruling party locked horns during Thursday's session, escalating already simmering tensions and confirming once again that civility and dialogue are unthinkable for both sides.

Sloganeering, desk-thumping and shouting are hardly uncommon occurrences during Assembly sessions and have been resorted to by MNAs since the 1990s. This particular session, however, also featured lawmakers abusing each other to a point where a scuffle broke out. At one point, the speaker of the Assembly had to be protected by a ring of sergeants-at-arms as opposition lawmakers gathered before him. Perhaps for the first time in our parliamentary history, treasury members staged a walkout from the house after pointing out lack of quorum to prevent opposition lawmakers from making speeches. As a result, despite a three-hour session, the debate on the bill seeking an open Senate vote remained inconclusive.

The divisions between the PTI and opposition parties are clear as day, but both sides, though cheerleaders of democracy by their own proclamations, indulge in behaviour that hurts the democratic process.

Here, the opposition must reflect on what it will achieve by turning up the political temperature in the Assembly to the extent that no constructive debate is possible. Its announcement of a date for its long march notwithstanding, the PDM needs to be clear on its position. While it has announced that caravans will march to Islamabad on March 26, no details have been shared about the alliance's strategy.

The PPP's desire to move a no-confidence motion against the prime minister is clearly not popular with the other party leaders and remains an unresolved sticking point. Yet the alliance is sticking together and ostensibly forging ahead with its plans. What is their end goal, and what will the march realistically achieve is anyone's guess.

The government is as much to blame for the hysteria not only in the Assembly but also in talk shows and on social media. It has constantly goaded the opposition and shown high-handedness and aggression towards it at every forum. Its failure to reach out to the opposition for its key responsibility of legislative business is also hurting the system.

Unfortunately, it appears as though this behaviour is encouraged in the party and opposition-bashing is the ready response to every situation. Sanity must prevail, for this bitterness is giving no relief to the public.

There are a few seasoned politicians in government ranks who have the experience of dealing with such situations, and, for the sake of pragmatism, they need to come forward to help bring down the temperature. Sadly, going by the tone of Shah Mehmood Qureshi's speech in the Assembly this week, such engagement is a distant dream.

Grassroots power

THE rollback of local democracy is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan. All political parties have an unenviable record when it comes to the execution of the constitutional provision concerning local governments and the sharing of power with local representatives. The PTI administration is no exception. It is

unfortunate to see a party that promised to strengthen local democracy dragging its feet on its commitment since coming into power and delaying the holding of elections. Its reticence has also been criticised by the ECP. On Thursday, two Supreme Court judges hearing the LG poll case made similarly pertinent observations concerning the premature dissolution of local governments in Punjab by the PTI government and the inordinate delay in holding new polls as required by the Constitution. According to Justice Qazi Faez Isa, such an act is tantamount to “killing democracy”. “This is unconstitutional and worse than dictatorship,” he remarked, wondering “Would you throw away entire local government system if you don’t get favourable results tomorrow and an opposition party sweeps the elections?” Giving his observations on the issue, Justice Maqbool Baqar pointed out that the government was “at war with its people”.

The remarks of the learned judges underscore the gross violation of Article 140-A of the Constitution that binds provinces to establish LG systems and devolve political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority to the elected representatives of the local bodies. The judges through their observations also gave voice to the frustration of the people with the excuses of the ruling party and its allies for the last two years for delaying local elections in Punjab, KP and Balochistan. When the PTI dissolved the PML-N-dominated local governments in Punjab in 2019, for example, it introduced a new local body law, which, its authors claimed, aimed at ensuring meaningful devolution of political, administrative and financial authority down to the grassroots level. Unfortunately, the new law was used only to roll back local democracy in the province instead of transferring the promised powers to people elected at the lowest tier of government. This disregard for grassroots democracy must be censured. With the popularity of the PTI having suffered significantly because of poor governance and its bad performance on the economic front, its reluctance to hold local body polls is understandable. This observation also holds true for the PPP provincial authorities in Sindh that are averse to devolving power. But the question is: how long can they avoid the voters?

Vaccine awareness

WITH Pakistan having begun its first stage of Covid-19 vaccinations, a mass awareness programme about the need, efficacy and safety of the vaccines is

critical. Even in these early days, there has been some confusion about whether the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine is safe for those over 60. The Ministry of Health, however, has clarified that the vaccine is not being administered to doctors above 60 as the data for Sinopharm is not available for trial candidates in that age bracket. While these are important clarifications, the government must put careful thought and resources into a public-awareness drive. Across the world, vaccine scepticism has been a huge challenge even prior to Covid-19. A December 2020 survey conducted jointly by data-gathering company Ipsos and the World Economic Forum revealed that the country most suspicious of the Covid-19 vaccine is France, which has been a vaccine-sceptical nation even before the coronavirus struck. The survey, which was taken by 13,500 people in 15 countries, revealed that only 40pc of adults in France intended to get the vaccine. The greatest number of people intending to be inoculated against the virus was seen in China, where 80pc agreed that they would get the vaccine if it was available. One of the main reasons behind vaccine refusal, the survey revealed, was the fear of side effects, followed by doubts about its efficacy. Some respondents said they would refuse as they felt they were not at risk of contracting the virus, while a lower percentage said they are against vaccines in general.

Pakistan is no exception when it comes to vaccine scepticism. The polio vaccination programme for years has been marred by refusals and even violence due to misguided beliefs about polio drops. As a result, Pakistan remains one of the last two countries left where the virus has not been eradicated. The government ought to consider these realities and address not just the sceptics but also those who do not have access to information about the global vaccination drive. An effective awareness programme can be implemented by engaging health experts, public figures and community leaders. Here, the ministries of information and public health can play a pivotal role in addressing concerns about efficacy, side effects, the age factor and other vulnerabilities. The idea should be to share information with the public in a convincing, transparent and accessible manner, so that citizens can make an informed decision about the Covid-19 vaccine.

Senate poll ordinance

PRESIDENT Arif Alvi has issued an ordinance for holding the upcoming Senate elections through an open vote by amending the Election Act 2017. The ordinance says: “Provided that in case the Supreme Court ... gives an opinion ... that elections for members of Senate do not fall within the purview of Article 226 of the Constitution, the poll for elections for members of the Senate ... shall be conducted ... through open and identifiable ballot.”

The government took the decision to issue an ordinance after the opposition blocked a bill tabled in the National Assembly to amend the Constitution and change the existing mode of secret balloting in the election for the upper house. Legal experts will have to determine if the change in this act would suffice for open balloting to take place or whether a constitutional amendment will actually be needed for the purpose.

Linked to all those is a larger question about why the government has been insistent on bulldozing through such a change in the mode of voting for elections that are just weeks away. There is no arguing that the menace of vote-purchasing in the Senate elections must be done away with. The government has framed its initiative in a way that suggests that the only reason the opposition is not agreeing to such a change in the voting method at this time is because it wants corruption to flourish in these elections. Such a line of reasoning may make sense to the PTI base but it excludes the larger argument.

Any constitutional amendment aimed at fixing existing problems in the system, or improving processes that in turn strengthen democracy, must be discussed and debated at length with the aim of reaching a consensus. The government has done no such thing. Instead, it has painted the issue in partisan colours with the obvious aim of discrediting the opposition. Either this, or the government is concerned that it may lose some of its own members' votes in the secret ballot for the Senate elections. Both reasons fall far short of the moral high ground that the government is attempting to gain on this issue.

A better way would be to make this change part of a larger set of electoral reforms that are in any case overdue and required. It is high time that the government and the opposition agreed to start processing such reform work in the house committees with the intention of drafting a comprehensive bill that fixes

all weaknesses in the electoral system. All stakeholders should be taken on board and the bill passed through a consensus so that everyone takes ownership of it and ensures that it is implemented in letter and spirit for the next general elections. By making it a political dispute, the government is needlessly complicating an issue that requires utmost seriousness of purpose. It should reconsider its position.

Cotton crisis

QUIETLY and under the radar of the government, a crisis in the cotton sector is brewing that increasingly calls for urgent attention from policymakers. The cotton crop this year has plummeted, due to various factors. The expectation was production of slightly more than 10m bales this year, down from the norm of 12m bales. But now that the harvest is done, less than 6m bales have come through. This means Pakistan's imports of cotton are rising sharply, coming in above \$1bn in the first half of this ongoing fiscal year, up from \$543m in the same period last year, and among stakeholders the expectation seems to be that this figure could climb to \$3bn by June.

This does not seem to be a one-off event. The country's cotton harvest has suffered setbacks in the previous two years at least, but the scale of the declines is accelerating. Importing cotton is one stopgap solution, but if the diminishing harvests become the new normal, it will have a very damaging effect on the external account. Pakistan's textile exports already use large amounts of imported raw materials, as evidenced by the rising import bill along with rising exports. If cotton is also added to the list of imported raw materials, it will mean even greater loss of competitiveness by the textile sector, which is already struggling to compete with its counterparts in Bangladesh and Vietnam. There are two problems that need to be tackled simultaneously. First the immediate situation that has arisen from the collapse of the cotton harvest, that is leading to rising prices, which could prompt exporters to demand even greater concessions from the government to maintain the momentum behind exports. The second is the longer-term stagnation and erosion of the country's cotton output. The latter will require a deeper look, more coordination with provincial authorities and industry players. The government would be well advised to take the emerging situation more seriously than it is at present.

Bonded labour

LAST week, Islamabad High Court Chief Justice Athar Minallah called attention to the evil of debt bondage in brick kilns — which is also prevalent in agriculture and the tanning and carpet-making industries. This scourge traps scores of workers and their families in a cycle of debt. The small loans taken by labourers are deceptively charged interest upon interest, and the curse outlives them, as future generations are forced to pick up the burden. At a hearing on juvenile brick-kiln workers, Chief Justice Minallah reiterated that nobody could force brick kiln labourers to work against their will, and underscored the illegality of employing anyone under the age of 16 years. Meanwhile, a report submitted to the high court by a commission tasked to look into the issue outlined the exploitation that labourers faced at the hands of land and factory owners, which is akin to slavery. It noted that the practice was in complete violation of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992.

Besides local legislation, Pakistan is signatory to several international agreements, including ILO Convention 29 on bonded labour. And yet millions remain trapped in this form of modern-day slavery, since their servitude benefits those in power. Women and children informally work alongside the men in their families. Of the over 4m workers in brick kilns across the country, many belong to already marginalised religious minority communities. Under the scorching sun and unforgiving conditions, the labourers make brick after brick for what may feel like an eternity. They have no social security net, are vulnerable to ‘accidents’ and illnesses, and their numbers include small children. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reports that children working in brick kilns have a higher rate of mortality, while one in 20 children loses his eyesight. And yet brick-kiln workers cannot escape their life of bondage, as the threat of violence and intimidation constantly hovers above them. The recommendations made by the commission must be implemented, which include ensuring the execution of employment contracts for those who can legally work.

Course correction

A FEW weeks after taking office, Joe Biden has made a welcome pronouncement where the brutal war in Yemen is concerned. The US president

has said “this war has to end” while observing that Washington was ending support for “offensive operations”. The US has been a key supporter of the Saudi-led coalition battling the Iran-allied Houthis over control of the impoverished Arab nation ever since Riyadh launched the war in 2015 in support of the Yemeni government, after the Houthis took Sana’a.

In fact, if the Americans were to fully pull back their support for the Saudis, many feel this war — described as a human catastrophe by the UN — would be over very soon. All sides involved in the conflict have welcomed Mr Biden’s decision; the Yemeni government has called for “diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis” while the Houthis have said that “real proof” would come with “an end to aggression and a lifting of the blockade”. Indeed, the US president’s words will have to be backed by solid actions. His declared intention to reverse the ‘terrorist’ tag the Houthis have been slapped with by the Trump administration is a good first step. Moreover, all sides must cease fire and support the political process to ensure all tribes and sects in Yemen are heard.

Beyond Yemen, Mr Biden can also review US policy in other parts of the Middle East, particularly after the adventurism his predecessor indulged in. Amongst the major conflicts in the region that springs to mind is the Arab-Israeli dispute. While the US leader has said he will not reverse Donald Trump’s controversial step of shifting the American embassy to the disputed city of Jerusalem, Joe Biden can definitely call out Israel for its atrocious behaviour towards the Palestinians, especially under Benjamin Netanyahu’s rule. Expecting the Americans to give the Palestinians a fair hearing is naive, considering the power the pro-Israel lobby wields over Washington’s political players of all persuasions. However, the least Mr Biden can do is prevent Israel from launching more murderous forays into Palestinian areas, and stop Tel Aviv from devouring more and more Arab land.

Another hotspot in the region is Iran. While Donald Trump brought the US and Iran to war due to his reckless policies, President Biden has indicated that he wants to return to the nuclear deal, which his predecessor pulled America out of. If he were to succeed in doing this, it would be a major diplomatic achievement and would bring down temperatures in the Middle East. Again powerful actors — Israel, some in the Gulf — will not be too happy about this; yet the new American administration must work to re-engage with Tehran if it is serious about regional peace. Joe Biden seems to have many good intentions for the Middle East. The months ahead will reveal if he has the determination to transform intentions into actions.

Petroleum levy

WHEN in opposition, Prime Minister Imran Khan would often censure the government for burdening fuel consumers with heavy taxation on petroleum products. The party leadership often spoke about how damaging it was to use the petroleum levy for revenue to make up for the tax shortfall. So when the PTI came to power, many thought it would do away with the levy to provide relief to consumers stricken by elevated price inflation. Instead, the rates were raised to get more revenue as plans to fix the corrupt and inefficient tax system fell apart. The revenues generated by the government in the first half of the present fiscal from petroleum levy have spiked by 3.4 times to Rs275.3bn from Rs81.9bn two years ago and almost doubled from Rs137.95bn a year ago. The collection accounts for a little over 61pc of the budget projection of Rs450bn for the entire fiscal under this head.

Successive governments have used this levy to increase revenues in the face of their failings to widen the tax net and boost collection to meet their ever-increasing expenditure. Under the previous PML-N administration, which amended the Petroleum Products (Petroleum Levy) Ordinance, 1961, through the Finance Act, 2018, in order to secure parliamentary approval for increasing the levy by up to Rs30 a litre, the six-month collection had peaked to Rs93.84bn although it never charged more than Rs6-Rs14 per litre on different products. Experts argue that a non-tax levy cannot be imposed or its rate increased through a money bill. The PTI government had indicated previously that the amendment would be withdrawn. But now it is uncertain whether it will do so. With petroleum levy becoming the single largest non-tax revenue source for the finance ministry after the profit of Rs375.50bn shown by the State Bank, it's hard to imagine the cash-strapped administration slashing its rate let alone withdrawing it. The levy not only allows the centre to recoup the massive losses in tax collection but also to retain the entire collection for its own use to the chagrin of the provinces because it does not form part of the divisible pool under the NFC award. The fuel levy may have become an important source of revenue for the government but it is a big burden on people and adversely impacts economic growth. Stronger revenue collection should come from an efficient tax system, which creates incentives for the growth drivers, rather than from non-tax levies.

Improving water use

PAKISTAN is facing a serious threat to its food security and rural livelihoods because of escalating water shortages. In Punjab alone, more than half of the province's share of water in agriculture is lost in canals and watercourses, while inefficient conventional irrigation method of flooding the fields also result in wastage. The water scarcity for agriculture is projected to increase manifold in the years to come as droughts become a norm in different regions — especially Balochistan — because of the changing climate, which calls for the adoption of efficient irrigation systems and better farm technology to reduce water losses and enhance water productivity for improved crop quality and higher yields. This is exactly the area where the World Bank has been supporting the Punjab government since 2013 to provide farmers with high-efficiency irrigation systems, including drip irrigation and sprinkler systems, and improving watercourses. Besides, it is helping the government in laser land levelling for minimising crop losses because of uneven fields and creating jobs in villages.

The project, for which the World Bank has so far provided \$380m, has surpassed its original targets with almost a year still to go. The only area where progress is lagging is the provision of high-efficiency irrigation systems to growers, mostly owing to technical factors such as the unavailability of clean water to prevent clogging. The interventions have restored 4maf water ensuring that farmers at the tail-end also received their share, enhanced crop yields in the range of 20-100pc, reduced farm labour costs and the use of fertilisers, and created over 15,000 jobs. The adoption of new irrigation practices for improving water productivity can do wonders, allowing farmers to harvest multiple and off-season crops. The adoption of new technologies also encourages farmers to shift to high-value crops — fruit and vegetables — as climate-smart agriculture can help cut rural poverty. Therefore, the scope of this kind of intervention needs to be expanded to the rest of the country for both reducing wasteful water use and maximising its productivity in drought-hit regions.

Kashmir independence

ON the occasion of Kashmir Solidarity Day, Prime Minister Imran Khan made a statement that has created a stir and prompted his political rivals to accuse him

of violating Pakistan's long-standing position on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. In his speech, the prime minister, while addressing the people of Kashmir, said that once they had acceded to Pakistan through a UN plebiscite, they could, if they wanted, opt for an independent state.

Critics say that by mentioning the so-called 'third option' of independence, the prime minister has strayed away from the two United Nations resolutions on the dispute that say the people of Jammu and Kashmir will have two options: join Pakistan or join India. The controversy got fanned when the Foreign Office issued a clarification saying there was no change in Pakistan's position and it remained anchored in the UN resolutions.

The Foreign Office should have known better. This clarification was not required. By issuing it, the Foreign Office only added to the perception that the prime minister's statement required to be clarified, which insinuated that perhaps there was something not right with the statement. In fact, the prime minister said nothing wrong. Article 257 of the Constitution of Pakistan states: "When the people of the State of Jammu and Kashmir decide to accede to Pakistan, the relationship between Pakistan and that State shall be determined in accordance with the wishes of the people of that State."

There is no difference between what the Constitution states and what the prime minister said. If the relevant officials of the Foreign Office had paid greater attention to this article of the Constitution they would not have had to issue a statement and needlessly stir a controversy. One expects better judgement on such sensitive matters from the Foreign Office.

In fact, the prime minister's statement is very meaningful and appears to have been issued after deep consideration. The statement will appeal to all those people in Jammu and Kashmir who prefer the option of independence. The prime minister has very intelligently communicated to them that once they accede to Pakistan, they can exercise the option of independence if, course, a majority of the people of the state opt for it. By saying this, the prime minister has also very correctly reminded the world that the issue of Jammu and Kashmir is primarily linked to the right of self-determination and is not about a disputed piece of land between two neighbours.

This is what our official position has always maintained, but by elaborating it in such terms, the prime minister has wisely reconciled the UN resolutions with the

larger issue of the right of self-determination. The international community should welcome the prime minister's statement and the people of Jammu and Kashmir should rest assured their right to choose will be respected by Pakistan once they accede to us.

Militancy threat

THE ungoverned spaces of Afghanistan have long posed a threat to that country's security as well as regional peace, and Pakistan has been saying all along that more needs to be done to address this issue. Now, as per a recent UN report, this country's stance has been vindicated, as the global body has said that the presence of the banned TTP in eastern Afghanistan has led to an uptick in attacks. As per the 27th report of the UN Analytical and Monitoring Team, the TTP has gained strength after a number of militant groups united under its umbrella, which has "resulted in a sharp increase in attacks in the region", including "more than 100 cross-border attacks [into Pakistan]". Moreover, an American report has said that the ranks of the militant Islamic State group's Khorasan 'chapter' were beefed up by TTP fighters, amongst others. Not too long ago, the TTP had unleashed a reign of terror inside Pakistan before military operations dealt it a strong blow. However, the fragile security situation within Afghanistan has allowed the outfit to regroup in that country, giving it the space to plan and execute further havoc across the region.

To ensure the security of Pakistan as well as Afghanistan's internal stability, it is essential that this threat to regional peace be neutralised effectively. The TTP has shown that it poses a threat to both states, which means that a combined effort is required to eliminate it. Furthermore, its contacts with IS present a fresh challenge, considering the latter outfit's ferocity and ruthlessness, as witnessed in Iraq and Syria. Therefore, instead of trading blame, Kabul and Islamabad must formulate a coordinated policy to tackle the TTP and its sub-groups. For its part, the world community needs to take note of Indian support to the TTP, as this country had pointed out last year when Pakistan had handed over a dossier to the UN secretary general regarding this nexus. As the Foreign Office has rightly pointed out, international forces in Afghanistan and the Afghan security forces must do their bit to eliminate the safe havens of the TTP in that country, especially since the Western forces have the firepower and technological expertise to flush out the militants. Pakistan, as the FO reiterated, "stands firm" in

its decision to root out the menace of terrorism, and others will find this country ready to aid similar efforts.

Test series win

THE Pakistan cricket team's 2-0 triumph in the Test series against South Africa has hopefully restored much of the confidence that the players had lost after a disastrous tour of New Zealand last December. The hosts were clearly the dominant side in the series which showcased some stellar performances, especially from fast bowler Hasan Ali, debut-making spinner Nauman Ali, batsmen Fawad Alam and Mohammad Rizwan and all-rounder Faheem Ashraf. The South Africans, on the other hand, maintained their poor record on Asian wickets, which has seen them losing nine Test matches on the trot since 2015 in this region. With reluctant skipper Quinton De Cock not leading the team from the front, the visiting side put up a lacklustre show in the series with only opener Aiden Markram, fast bowler Anrich Norté and George Linde turning in some notable performances. Having said that, the home side, though ostensibly in command during the series, can do much more to improve both batting and bowling which have hurt them on tours. The top order was virtually nonexistent and heavily burdened the middle and lower order that were required to put up a decent score on the board for the bowlers to defend.

The opening pair of Abid Ali and newcomer Imran Butt struggled throughout, while seasoned Azhar Ali now seriously must ponder retirement plans. Veteran spinner Yasir Shah, despite having captured seven wickets in the Karachi Test, failed to impress in Rawalpindi and should be asked to rediscover his Midas touch. A fair share of the credit for Pakistan's victory must also go to newly appointed chief selector Mohammad Wasim who inducted a majority of leading domestic cricket performers into the Pakistan side, both in the Tests and for the upcoming T20 games. Indeed, it is the need of the hour to groom worthy replacements of veterans such as Azhar, Asad Shafiq, Yasir, Mohammad Abbas and others who could bring back the zest and spirit required to beat the best in the world of cricket.

Agreement with IPPs

THE 46-odd IPPs have inched closer to signing new 'binding' agreements with the government. This will lessen the burden of capacity payments or fixed costs the government pays to them under their 'take or pay' power purchasing agreements after approval from the cabinet of a two-step schedule for settlement of their outstanding bills of Rs403bn. The IPPs will receive their dues in two instalments. Over Rs161bn or 40pc of the total amount will be disbursed to them upfront once the agreements are signed and the remainder will be paid in six months. The concessions that the IPPs set up between 1990 and 2013 have agreed to give the government in their renegotiated PPAs are projected to save the national exchequer Rs800bn in capacity payments over the next 30 years. What sweetens the deal for the government is the mode of payment as only a third of the outstanding bills will be paid in cash. The remaining amount will be paid in 10-year bonds and five-year Sukkuk. Moreover, the termination of the PPA with Hubco's least efficient base plant will save the government Rs240bn over the next seven years. Hubco will get a compensation of Rs65bn for agreeing to the premature termination of the agreement. The agreements with the seven remaining IPPs and eight wind power projects will be finalised soon.

The revised agreements, we are told, are part of the strategy to first slow down the pace of growth in the circular debt of over Rs2.3tr through a reduction in the huge fixed costs being paid to the IPPs and, ultimately, fully liquidate it. Indeed, the settlement of the dues and reduction in future capacity payments will prepare the ground for a temporary decline in the circular debt. But, as power-sector experts have pointed it out, it is not enough to stop the debt build-up in future let alone clear up the existing stock. For that, the government will need to renegotiate PPA terms with power projects established after 2015 under CPEC to secure similar concessions from them. If it succeeds, the savings will be tremendous. Beyond that, it will also have to implement actions to massively cut the huge distribution losses, check power theft and recover bills from powerful defaulters in full, as well as significantly increase power consumption for maximum utilisation of the idle capacity. Unless it can fix the structural issues plaguing the power sector, it should forget about liquidation of the circular debt stock.

Lawyers run amok

THUGGISH lawyers, acting on their worst impulses, have time and again brought collective shame upon their fraternity in this country. On Monday, they plumbed a new low. Enraged by the demolition of their chambers by the civic authorities in the nation's capital, a mob of black coats — an expression that should ordinarily be a contradiction in terms — stormed the Islamabad High Court.

Shouting slogans and throwing stones, they broke the building's windows and then proceeded to lay siege to the courtroom and the chamber of IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah, rendering him virtually hostage for nearly three hours. Following the incident, the high court ordered suspension of all legal proceedings at the court, while the lawyers' bodies announced a strike against the tearing down of the chambers.

The temerity of the rampaging black coats is astounding. The chambers in question were constructed illegally on a football ground, which was the justification for their being razed; the hooliganism in response was further violation of the law. And the fact that the lawyers' associations, instead of condemning the violence by their colleagues and the aggression against the IHC chief justice, are choosing instead to focus on the demolition is evidence of a moral crisis within the members of the bar.

This situation can be seen as an unfortunate fallout of the lawyers' movement from 2007 till 2009 which led the way in standing up to a military dictator's illegal suspension of the then chief justice and ultimately succeeded in having him restored. That achievement, ironically a triumph of civil resistance, appears to have given rise to a certain hubris among sections of the fraternity in which there is no space for dissent nor respect for the law.

There have been umpteen incidents since then where members of the bar have demonstrated an utter lack of restraint and decency. Judges have been abused in court, threatened with physical violence and locked inside their chambers by advocates at odds with their rulings. Just a few days ago, a judge in Lahore was set upon by lawyers and appallingly humiliated in his courtroom. In December 2019, hundreds of lawyers attacked the Punjab Institute of Cardiology after videos emerged on social media showing some medics from the hospital mocking the black coats over a dispute between the two sides.

Earlier, in August 2017, several young lawyers barged into the courtroom of no less than the Lahore High Court chief justice where a five-judge bench was hearing a case against a group of advocates for ransacking a judges' court. The intruders created a commotion and raised slogans against the judges present. It is high time the bar councils discipline their lawbreaking colleagues instead of condoning their actions on one pretext or another. Otherwise they will be equally responsible for the legal fraternity's drift towards increasingly confrontational behaviour, and the deadly consequences that can ensue.

IS attacks

A SERIES of recent deadly attacks linked to the militant Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq point to the disturbing fact that the feared terrorist outfit is far from vanquished. Reports emerging from Syria have said that at least 26 fighters allied with Damascus were killed by IS elements in the eastern part of the country. Moreover, a gruesome blast in a Baghdad market last month — in which over 30 people were killed — was also traced back to the self-styled 'caliphate'. In addition, according to media reports, IS has launched scores of attacks in eastern Syria over the last month, essentially creating a reign of terror in a largely lawless region. It should be remembered that IS sprang from and was nourished in such chaotic conditions — an enfeebled government in Iraq and a Syrian regime facing a civil war were unable to secure their respective territories, giving the shock troops of the 'caliphate' plenty of room to manoeuvre. Now, despite the efforts of the Western-led coalition as well as the Syrian government, backed by Russia and Iran, to pursue the outfit, it has managed to regroup and replenish its militant arsenal perhaps in preparation for an attempt at recreating itself.

At its height, IS was knocking at the doors of Baghdad and Damascus while also inspiring the formulation of 'chapters' around the world. While the fanatical outfit has been weakened, it is certainly not a spent force, which means that the states most affected by it — Syria and Iraq — must be supported by regional and international powers to completely wipe out the group's presence. The Syrian civil war is in a low phase, with Bashar al-Assad's forces having the upper hand, while levels of violence in Iraq are also down considerably. Therefore, both states must receive all possible help from the international community, for if the IS terrorists are allowed to spread their tentacles across the region once again, the

entire Middle East region will suffer the consequences of ignoring this grave threat.

Votes for sale?

RIGHT on cue, a video has emerged purporting to show what happens in a corrupt political culture where votes can be bought for a price. The clip shows a group of KP MPAs receiving wads of money, ostensibly as a bribe in exchange for their votes before the 2018 Senate elections. It is the latest twist in the government-opposition tussle over whether the forthcoming Senate elections should be held through a secret ballot as the Election Act 2017 stipulates, or through a show of hands.

Seen in the video are the PPP's Mohammed Ali Shah Bacha, some PTI legislators and two Qaumi Watan Party MPAs. The group includes Sultan Mohammed Khan, who went on to join the PTI before the general elections in 2018, and became provincial law minister. The immediate fallout of the video has claimed Mr Khan's scalp, forcing him to resign. Meanwhile, former PTI MPA Ubaid Ullah Mayar, one of 20 lawmakers expelled from the party for allegedly selling their votes in the 2018 Senate elections, has claimed the video actually shows the legislators being given money for joining the PTI before the general elections that year. It seems safe to say there are still many questions pertaining to the circumstances in which the recording was made.

What is, however, clear is that the video buttresses the argument for holding the election through a show of hands — especially important at a time when the Supreme Court is deliberating on President Alvi's reference filed on Dec 23, 2020, in which he has sought its opinion on the matter. The PTI government has approached the issue in various, concurrent ways. It tabled a constitutional amendment bill seeking open ballot in the Senate election. When that move came to naught after the opposition blocked the bill, it promulgated an ordinance amending the Election Act 2017 to provide for a secret ballot. And all this while the apex court has yet to give a decision on the reference.

Such a multipronged strategy inevitably raises the question, why now? A proposal was floated in mid-2020 to end the secret ballot in the upper house elections, but with the government and the opposition at perpetual loggerheads, neither that nor a wider set of electoral reforms has materialised. Of course, the

government does have a point when it says that a secret ballot encourages horse-trading, although it did not appear to have been troubled by the practice on earlier occasions when it was a beneficiary.

On the other hand, the sanctity of the vote is a fundamental democratic principle premised on free choice rather than the dictates of one's party. Regardless of the merits of both arguments, the issue must be deliberated upon by parliament and a decision arrived at through consensus. Without buy-in from the electoral college as a whole, the government's move will lack the stamp of legitimacy.

A charter of economy

THE only thing there seems to be a consensus on at the moment is that there is a dire need for a consensus on the economy. Various governments have floated the proposal over the years for a 'charter of economy' type of document that encapsulates the major parties' views and provides a minimum common agenda for all. In the past, the PML-N floated the idea while it was in power, then the PTI raised the matter again after it won the elections, and now the Senate deputy chairman, Saleem Mandviwalla of the PPP, has again suggested the need for such an understanding while delivering a talk at the Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry. There are good reasons to support the proposal, especially given how policy reversals by successive governments have marred Pakistan's economic management over the years. Most damaging perhaps are those policies that everyone has opposed while out of power but found themselves constrained to follow once in government, such as entering into IMF programmes.

The understanding to be reached need not be worked out in minute detail. It is enough for the parties to get together in a closed room, leaving the din of politics aside for a moment, and agree on what is to be done regarding the state-owned enterprises, the rigid revenue base of the government, broadening of the export base and exchange rate management. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list, but it is enough at this point in time for agreement on a common direction. Perhaps, the parties could agree that they will not oppose privatisation plans in principle, provided these are executed with enough safeguards for workers' rights, to take one example. They might also agree on the outlines of autonomy for the regulators, particularly the State Bank, which must be allowed to mediate

between the markets and the government in curating its exchange rate regime and setting interest rates without political interference. Such a consensus is necessary if Pakistan is ever to embark on a course of deep-rooted reforms that lead to greater documentation of the economy and harness the productive potential of the country's economy. But crafting such a consensus will take political skill, and perhaps put some limits on the divisive rhetoric that so poisons our politics these days. A little maturity and true leadership from the top will be required to make this happen.

Rebuilding heritage

THE militant Islamic State group left a bloody trail of destruction in its wake before it was uprooted from large parts of Syria and Iraq after its nearly three-year reign of terror. The human toll was considerable and the terrorist outfit, operating from ungoverned spaces within Syria and Iraq, still manages to draw blood. Along with its murderous purges, IS also wreaked havoc across the Fertile Crescent by attacking priceless cultural spaces and artefacts that are the common heritage of humanity. In particular, the northern Iraqi city of Mosul — which at one time served as the 'capital' of IS — from where its late so-called 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi held forth, suffered particular damage as the militants rampaged through the ancient settlement. However, there is a positive development on this front, as Unesco has undertaken a project called Revive the Spirit of Mosul which aims to rebuild the destroyed heritage of the city. Work is already underway to reconstruct mosques and churches that were desecrated by IS, including the iconic centuries-old Al Nuri mosque. To heal the rifts created by the fanatical outfit, Muslims are helping rebuild churches, while Christians are doing their bit to restore mosques.

Of course, Mosul was not the only ancient site vandalised by IS. The Roman oasis of Palmyra in Syria; the ancient town of Nineveh in Iraq as well as a number of other mosques, churches and monasteries were attacked by the outfit in an orgy of hate and violence. Efforts such as the Unesco programme must be undertaken to restore other ancient treasures damaged by IS. True, the security situation in parts of Syria and Iraq is still fragile, but where circumstances allow, work must be started to rebuild what the terrorist group sought to destroy. It was in this part of the world that some of the earliest civilisations on earth started to

take shape. Therefore, humanity has a common duty to restore the ancient heritage for the benefit of future generations.

A historic ruling

“CARRYING out the death sentence will not meet the ends of justice” — so ruled a five-member bench of the Supreme Court on Wednesday on the question of whether mentally ill prisoners who cannot understand the rationale and reason behind their punishment should be executed. In doing so, the bench has commuted the sentences of two prisoners and ordered that a fresh mercy plea, including complete medical records, be filed for the third prisoner, Ghulam Abbas, included in the petition. The judgement also noted systemic criminal justice failures — from investigation, to trial and appeal processes — effectively undermining the rights of some of Pakistan’s poorest and most vulnerable citizens. Moreover, the apex court issued detailed instructions to review and harmonise existing laws and rules, and to build the system’s capacity to recognise, assess and treat mental illness among the incarcerated population.

Kanizan Bibi and Imdad Ali — who have cumulatively endured half a century on death row — will now be shifted to a mental health facility to receive dignified care. Unfortunately, it is too late for others like Khizar Hayat, who spent 16 years on death row, mostly isolated, before he died chained to a prison hospital bed in 2019. With around 4,000 prisoners awaiting execution, Pakistan has arguably the highest death row population in the world. Since the moratorium on the death penalty was lifted, over 500 people have been executed. These include Ghulam Sarwar and Ghulam Qadir, two brothers who were hanged before being exonerated by the apex court in 2016. Then there are those like Muhammad Iqbal, who was released last year after 21 years on death row, sentenced to be executed at the age of 17 years for a murder he confessed to under torture.

This judgement — the culmination of a decade of campaigning by lawyers, human rights groups and mental health practitioners, and a reaffirmation of our commitment to local safeguards and international law — is truly historic. But there is still so much work to be done. For example, a commission on prison reforms set up by the Islamabad High Court in 2019 reported last year that the Ministry of Human Rights had standardised and streamlined the process for mercy petitions. Unfortunately, since 2014, neither the PML-N nor PTI

government has exercised the power of the presidency to grant clemency to people who should not in good conscience be on death row. We may never know the full scale of the miscarriages of justice — and the lives, families and communities shattered by them — that have occurred under this broken system. But the effective ban on executions of prisoners with mental illness can represent a monumental first step in reviewing the entire system of capital punishment. There can only be one logical, just end to a retributive act that has no deterrent effect and risks doing so much harm: the abolition of capital punishment in its entirety.

Use of force

THE federal government has negotiated a settlement with the protesting government employees to give them increments but it has paid a price for mishandling the issue. The employees had been protesting for many months and demanding that their salaries be increased in the face of the rising cost of living.

However, it was only when they gathered in large numbers to protest against the indifference of the government that the relevant officials woke up to the crisis. The situation took an unfortunate turn when the government decided to use force to disperse the protesters instead of engaging them in talks which it ultimately had to the next day. The scenes in Islamabad's Red Zone on Wednesday were worrisome. The police unleashed tear gas and batons on the men and women gathered on Constitution Avenue, leaving scores injured. This display of state power against hapless citizens should have been avoided.

The sad part is that such force against demonstrators has become a routine in Pakistan. Governments habitually order the police to rough up citizens and arrest them for exercising their constitutional right to protest. No one was a greater proponent of allowing people to protest than the prime minister himself. While in opposition, he would say repeatedly — and especially during his dharna in Islamabad — that citizens must use this right to express their disenchantment with a government.

On numerous occasions, he had warned the police not to stop the citizens from protesting and even said that if the police did try to apprehend protesters, they should not be deterred. For his government to use the police against peaceful citizens in such a harsh manner is indeed ironic. The excessive use of tear gas

and the ensuing violence were a reminder that regardless of who is in power, the state continues to behave in a colonial manner.

This is not confined to the federal government. For instance, in Sindh, the government routinely uses water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets to break up demonstrations. The people making these decisions have little idea that such brutal use of state power is normally the last resort. If the demonstrators are peaceful, there is no justification for using force. The federal ministers who negotiated with the protesting employees in Islamabad have grudgingly acknowledged that state violence should not have happened. However, unless such procedures are reviewed and revised, governments will continue to unleash such force against citizens without much hesitation.

Vaccine hesitancy

THE less-than-enthusiastic response of registered front-line health workers in KP, as well as the reported reluctance shown by medical staff in Islamabad, to be vaccinated against Covid-19 is troubling. According to a report, the KP health department chalked out a plan to vaccinate 30,000 health workers, but many were hesitant. Earlier in the week, the department had managed to inoculate only a handful of healthcare workers, prompting the authorities to consider vaccinating hospital staff who have not been registered as well as second-tier medical personnel. True, there have also been administrative drawbacks. But the main reason behind the low numbers is that healthcare workers want to see how the vaccine has affected others, while some are waiting for the Oxford vaccine AstraZeneca to become available in Pakistan. At present, hospital workers in Pakistan are being administered the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine. Similar concerns have also been witnessed among healthcare workers in other countries, including the US, with reports that nursing home staff in Ohio and California have refused inoculation. Refusal and scepticism by healthcare workers do not bode well for the confidence of the general public. Besides remaining exposed to Covid-19, doctors and other medical staff are unwittingly sowing the seeds of doubt in the minds of the people who would be hesitant to get the shot refused by those who are supposed to address their health needs.

Given this atmosphere of suspicion, the National Command and Operation Centre must give priority to a national awareness campaign. Over a period of

time, willing doctors and public figures should be seen taking the vaccine and dispelling wild conspiracy theories. Here, health experts can explain how vaccines are developed and put to rest fears that their preparation was rushed in any way. Continued and growing refusal from front-line healthcare workers will have a disastrous effect on the programme. The government's work does not stop at procurement; success of the programme will be demonstrated by the number of those who are vaccinated against the virus.

Caving in

FOR those who wondered whether the influence of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan would dwindle after the demise of its leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the religiously inspired group's recent deal with the government is a decisive answer.

In a fresh agreement, the government has agreed to put its key demands — which include the expulsion of the French ambassador and the refusal to appoint a Pakistani ambassador to France — before parliament. A document circulating on social media, which shows the contours of this deal, suggests that it was signed days ahead of a Feb 16 deadline set by the TLP when it called off its anti-blasphemy, anti-France protests in November last year after a round of negotiations with ministers.

Even without Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the group has wielded enough clout and popularity through its slogans to make far-fetched demands that are not just entertained by the government but also given credence through an expected parliamentary debate. Prime Minister Imran Khan and the Foreign Office are on record criticising the French president for his comments on multiple occasions. In fact, Mr Khan has even raised the issue of blasphemy and religious sensitivities at international forums. Therefore, the government's position — one shared by a large number of Muslims in Pakistan and elsewhere — is clear. So why is it pandering to a group that has glorified murder and not too long ago levelled heinous allegations against the judiciary and members of the security establishment?

It is one of the country's biggest misfortunes that groups with similar proclivities have been nurtured, fed and encouraged by successive governments and security officials. Not only have they been allowed a free hand to propagate their campaign, which often justifies murder, they have also been garlanded, handed

cheques and indulged when they've besieged the capital and threatened the highest office holders. Ironically, Mr Khan and his party appear submissive instead of calling out their threats. But when it comes to the opposition parties, or even government employees protesting in the capital for wages, they employ heavy-handed tactics and wax lyrical about a zero-tolerance policy.

History will remember the role the PTI, and those before it, played in enabling such groups to spread their tentacles. To be prepared to make a major decision such as severing diplomatic ties with a country because of the pressure of an extremist group is absurd. The optics and consequences are terrible. Not only will the world see the government's weakness in handling this situation, such a move would be an open invitation for anyone in the country with dangerous ideations to flourish. There is a need to send a strong message to all such groups that they cannot blackmail the state. Unless the authorities question the TLP's demands, the days ahead will be dark and the country steeped further in religious intolerance and bigotry.

US on IHK

WHERE the Biden administration's stance on the Kashmir dispute is concerned, up till now it has veered between ambiguity and the status quo. While the State Department published a tweet calling the held region "India's Jammu & Kashmir", its spokesperson later said Washington's position on the dispute has not changed. However, the tweet was not corrected. Considering this ambiguous stance, the foreign minister has rightly asked the US not to overlook the ground realities in the held region. "I expect the new Biden administration ... to stop ignoring the ground realities in held Kashmir" Shah Mahmood Qureshi said on Thursday. Indeed it is a pity that the Biden White House — which has touted respect for human rights as a key pillar of its foreign policy — has so far failed to take up the abysmal human rights situation in India-held Kashmir with New Delhi. Like many previous US administrations, it looks like Joe Biden might reserve opprobrium for geopolitical opponents perceived to be violating human rights, while allies and trading partners will be treated with kid gloves. This is an indefensible position for any government claiming to respect and protect human rights.

The fact is that India has come down hard on Kashmiris, particularly during the Modi regime, reversing the limited autonomy the region had in the Indian constitution before these rights were scrapped in August 2019. Though some of the restrictions have reportedly been lifted — such as provision of 4G mobile internet service — things remain far from normal in the occupied region. Earlier this week, shutdowns were observed to mark the death anniversaries of Kashmiri activists Afzal Guru and Maqbool Bhat on separate days. The fact is that despite Indian attempts to paint a picture of normalcy in Kashmir, the situation remains tense as the people of the region suffocate under New Delhi's brutal rule. If the US is sincere in its commitment to human rights, it must raise the Kashmir situation with India. If this is not done, it will be fair to assume that the rights of the Kashmiris have been sacrificed at the altar of expediency. Elsewhere too, for example within the OIC, the plight of the Kashmiris is not being heard, as pointed out by Mr Qureshi. Pakistan must continue its efforts to raise the Kashmir issue at all world forums and let the region's people know that this country stands with them during these dark times.

Senate nominations

ALL major parties including the PTI, PML-N and PPP have announced their candidates for the Senate elections scheduled for March 3. Many of the names in the final list are expected ones. The PTI has nominated finance adviser Hafeez Sheikh because he needs to be elected in order to run the ministry with full powers and also preside over the National Finance Commission. Dr Sania Nishtar's nomination was also to be expected. Prime Minister Imran Khan has praised her work as head of the government's flagship Ehsaas programme. The PML-N has fielded senior people like Pervaiz Rashid and Mushahidullah Khan though the party's chairman Raja Zafarul Haq will be retiring and not returning to the upper house. The PPP has also chosen to give tickets to key members like Sherry Rehman and Farhatullah Babar. Prominent among those from the PTI who have not got a Senate ticket are parliamentary affairs' adviser Babar Awan, commerce adviser Razzaq Dawood and accountability adviser Shahzad Akbar. Given the respective party strengths within the Senate electoral college, and if people vote along party lines, the PTI is expected to emerge as the largest party in the house, followed by PPP and then the PML-N.

The surprise nomination is that of federal minister Faisal Vawda. He won his seat for the National Assembly from Karachi in the 2018 elections but of late has been embroiled in a controversy that threatens to disqualify him. He is accused of not declaring his dual nationality on the day of filing of nomination papers. The Election Commission of Pakistan is hearing the case and Mr Vawda has refused to attend the hearing despite being formally summoned. The fact that the PTI has awarded him a Senate ticket may mean the party is expecting him to be found guilty and de-seated from the National Assembly. In other words, is Mr Vawda possibly being rewarded for deliberately providing wrong information to the ECP? Another surprise was the reward of a PTI ticket in Balochistan to Abdul Qadir who was not even a party member, but an outcry from within the party appears to have forced the leadership to take the ticket back. However, it goes to show that in these elections, all remain willing for compromises.

The Supreme Court is hearing a case on whether the mode of voting in these elections is mandated by the Election Act 2017 or by the Constitution. The decision will determine how the election is held. The opposition believes many PTI legislators will not vote for party candidates in a secret battle and there could be some surprises in store. This may explain why former prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has been fielded as a joint candidate of the PDM. He is a strong candidate and his victory or defeat would have significant symbolic and substantive political value.

Women's cricket challenge

PAKISTAN'S women cricketers fell short of expectations on their recent tour of South Africa, losing the closely fought ODI series 0-3 and going down 1-2 in the T20 contests. Though there were some fine individual performances, especially from captain Javeria Khan, Nida Dar, all-rounder Aliya Riaz and right-arm pacer Diana Baig, the team's inability to get their act together at crucial stages saw them go down by narrow margins to a buoyant home side. To be fair, the African safari was the team's first tour in the Covid-19 era and the players have blamed their rusty performance on the lack of tours and activity at home during the past year. Their argument did seem to carry weight as towards the end of the South Africa tour, the players managed to win the last T20 on the basis of the Duckworth-Lewis method. The team carried their good form on the subsequent

tour of Zimbabwe where they beat the hosts by a huge margin of 178 runs in the first ODI before the tour was abruptly abandoned due to travel chaos.

Having said that, the critics and ex-coaches of the team insist the players need to work on their mental toughness to hold their nerve in order to convert close games into victories. The team's new coach David Hemp is a professional and is optimistic the team can become a competitive outfit. But the fact remains that during the past three to four years, the plummeting graph of women's teams such as Pakistan, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Ireland makes it clear that their respective boards ought to prioritise and invest in women's cricket to make an impact at the world level. It is hard to remain oblivious to the lack of resources and support for women players as compared to men's teams. In order to give the players more exposure and prepare them for bigger challenges, a dedicated women's cricket league on the lines of the PSL could be one solution.

Close Guantanamo

FOR nearly two decades, the American gulag at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, has been synonymous with egregious abuse of power and open disregard for fundamental rights. Put into use after the 9/11 events to house so-called high-value prisoners and circumvent the safeguards of the American legal system, Guantanamo has delivered anything but justice, instead becoming a grim symbol of the extralegal methods even established democracies can resort to. While Barack Obama during his time in the White House did make efforts to shut down the facility, Donald Trump reversed these small gains and kept the penitentiary open. Now, as Joe Biden settles into Washington, there are voices from within his administration saying that the new leader is reviewing efforts to close down the detention centre. Of course these efforts will meet stiff resistance by the Republicans, as was the case during the Obama presidency. But if President Biden is serious about upholding the human rights agenda, he needs to shut down Guantanamo without delay.

The fact is that some inmates have been held in the facility without conviction or charge for nearly 20 years. This is an affront to the basic demands of justice. Take septuagenarian prisoner Saifullah Paracha, who says he was abducted by the CIA in Bangkok. He claims he was implicated on the basis of testimony extracted after torture. On the other hand, Ahmed Rabbani, who says he was

captured from Karachi, was reportedly tortured for 540 days in Afghanistan before being shifted to Guantanamo, where he has been held without charge. These are only a few stories; a number of horrific tales of torture and violence have been documented from this notorious facility. While the US promises 'liberty and justice for all', clearly, the detainees of Guantanamo are excluded. No legal system on earth can justify keeping people in detention for decades without framing charges. Therefore, it is time Mr Biden did the right thing and closed Guantanamo. 'Black sites', gulags and torture used as an instrument of policy are some of the unsavoury by-products of the 'war on terror', and America needs to come to terms with this dark chapter of its recent past. Governments all across the world — democratic as well as authoritarian — have used these brutal methods to forward their aims. However, those that claim to be the champions of human rights, should either abandon such methods, or stop making such claims.

Planting trees

PAKISTAN is staring climate change in the face, and mitigating its fallout is arguably an even more urgent battle than winning the fight against corruption. As per the most recent rankings on the Climate Global Risk Index, Pakistan comes in eighth among the countries most impacted by climate change between 2000 and 2019.

On Friday, Prime Minister Imran Khan launched the spring plantation 2021 campaign that covers 51 Miyawaki urban forest sites in Lahore, with the first such forest being planted in Jilani park. On the occasion, Mr Khan exhorted his fellow Pakistanis to join his government's countrywide 10 Billion Tree Tsunami Programme to help cut down smog and reverse environmental pollution. Speaking of Lahore, the premier said that one consequence of the city's expansion in all directions was that it had lost 70pc of its forest cover. The urban forest campaign's slogan — "Plant before it's too late" — captures the urgency of the situation.

The loss of forest cover exacerbates the effects of climate change, opening the door to flash floods and soil erosion, thereby lowering crop yields, destroying local economies and disrupting food supply patterns on a wider scale. Pakistan has only 5.7pc forest cover as opposed to the recommended 25pc. At between 0.2 and 0.5pc, this country has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world

and the second highest in the region after Afghanistan. Expanding urbanisation, industrialisation, an increasing population and a powerful, politically well-connected timber mafia form a lethal combination that is stripping the land of its precious forest cover.

The PTI launched the Billion Tree Tsunami project in response to global warming soon after coming to power in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2013. That green initiative, which the government claimed in 2019 had led to a 6.3pc increase in the country's forest cover, was followed by the even more ambitious 10 Billion Tree Tsunami Programme. These efforts have brought into sharp focus environmental concerns that were earlier largely ignored by political parties in this country. The recalibration of priorities was sorely needed and has been widely appreciated in a world racing to meet the challenge posed by climate change. Other leaders have started similar campaigns and the World Economic Forum has launched the One Trillion Trees Initiative.

The massive scale of the tree plantation project has, perhaps inevitably, given rise to questions as to its effectiveness and viability. Last year, NAB approved four investigations into the provincial-level Billion Tree Tsunami project on allegations of misuse of authority, lack of survival of plants, embezzlement of funds, etc. Critics also point out that the timber mafia has managed to continue its illegal work unhindered because the implementation of the law is lax and the lobbies linked with the racket are extremely powerful. Without plugging this gap, tree plantation drives — however important in their own right — are unlikely to achieve their full potential.

Punjab's LG crisis

YET another twist has been given to the prevailing debate on the local government elections in Punjab, spawning serious doubts about the provincial administration's plans to organise the promised polls any time soon. The government's decision to issue an ordinance repealing the Punjab Village Panchayats and Neighbourhood Councils Act, 2019, caught the Election Commission of Pakistan as well as the public by surprise. The Punjab Local Government (Amendment) Ordinance, 2021, reduces the number of village panchayats and neighbourhood councils from 25,238 to 8,000. Consequently, the ECP was forced to withdraw its Feb 4 notification about the timeliness of

different activities for the delimitation of villages and neighbourhoods in Punjab. The notification was issued by the ECP after a clear undertaking by the government that it wanted LG elections by September in phases. The amendment ordinance has changed the shape of the LG system, rendering all delimitations and arrangements done so far ineffective. The ECP had filed a reply with the Supreme Court earlier this month, saying the LG elections in Punjab will be held in three phases in June, July and August. The schedule now appears difficult to follow. According to a report that quotes anonymous ECP officials, the Election Commission may challenge the Punjab government's amendment ordinance in court, which would be unprecedented.

Chances are that the provincial government has amended the act to reduce the number of village and neighbourhood councils in order to make the entire exercise of conducting elections less cumbersome. Yet the secrecy with which the ordinance was issued just days after the government agreed to the ECP plan for holding elections before September is sufficient to raise doubts regarding its strategy for the restoration of local democracy in Punjab in the near future. It is a fact that the ruling PTI, which had promised to give the province a strong LG system to strengthen democracy at the lowest tier, has consistently delayed elections ever since it rolled back the previously PML-N-dominated local institutions. To counter criticism, the administration has come up with weak arguments, sometimes blaming the ECP for the delay. But people are aware that the PTI's falling popularity graph — a result of the poor performance of the provincial administration that hasn't delivered on electoral promises, internal rifts, and fears of the opposition PML-N emerging victorious — may be holding it back from going ahead with local elections. The question is: for how long can it drag its feet?

Yemen's starving children

THE six-year conflict in Yemen has led to a serious humanitarian crisis for its people, but the most unfortunate victims of the war without doubt are its innocent and vulnerable children. The findings of four United Nations agencies this week that more than 2m Yemeni children less than five years old are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition this year should be a wake-up call for all stakeholders. There are also fears that 1.2m pregnant or breastfeeding women in the country will face acute malnourishment in the months ahead, a reality that underscores

that for every starving child there is an entire family at risk. The fresh alarm follows repeated warnings about a famine in Yemen and the looming deaths of children. Save the Children estimates that between 2015 and 2018 alone, around 85,000 children have died as a result of malnutrition. The new finding predicts greater suffering, economic strife and death for an already crushed population.

This is yet another heartbreaking reminder that this war — which Saudi officials in 2015 said would last a few weeks — must come to an end. If anything can prick the conscience of the warring sides, the plight of Yemeni children should be it. This war has brought the poorest Arab country to the brink of famine due to the Saudi-imposed blockade. There is some hope on the horizon with the Biden administration's pronouncement that the war must end, but America's role in the conflict as a key ally of the Saudi-led coalition battling the Iran-allied Houthis makes this a complicated foreign policy matter which will not be resolved overnight. Meanwhile, innocent Yemeni citizens have no say in the future of their country; they are dying either as a direct result of the conflict or due to the ensuing humanitarian crisis. All stakeholders must wake up to the plight of the Yemeni people, for it is unconscionable that they must suffer more death, disease and starvation than they have endured already in the conflict

Bureaucrats under fire

THE Prime Minister's Office has issued show-cause notices to bureaucrats in Punjab who have been judged as underperforming in their official duties. These have originated from their apparently lacklustre response or inaction towards public complaints registered on the Pakistan Citizen's Portal. This is aimed at improving service delivery by public officials and ensuring accountability for those who are less responsive in their performance.

The spirit of the action by the Prime Minister's Office may be justified but the methodology leaves a lot to be desired. There are deep-seated reasons for the bureaucracy's shoddy performance and the government must take a comprehensive view of this problem instead of superficial steps like issuing show-cause notices.

The reform programme of the bureaucracy has produced little of substance so far. It is common knowledge that the accountability process unleashed on the bureaucracy by NAB has had a debilitating impact on how bureaucrats are now

approaching their assignments. Everyone is fearful of the consequences of official actions, and no one is willing to take decisions that can lead to NAB investigations. Recent events have shown that NAB has opened cases against bureaucrats on matters that were once considered routine. Incarceration of officials, including retired bureaucrats, by NAB has sent a wave of fear through officialdom and the bureaucracy is now averse to showing any initiative.

The government needs to address this problem before it can start demanding a higher level of performance from the bureaucracy. In Punjab, the problem is even more acute because the political leadership has not been able to provide the vision and supervision that can channelise the bureaucracy to produce results. An added problem has been the fact that Punjab is perceived to be heavily influenced by Islamabad in its decision-making.

One example of this is that the show-cause letters have emanated from the Prime Minister's Office instead of the Punjab Chief Minister's Office. Such a situation has complicated matters for the bureaucracy because they know that while they report to the chief minister, their decision-maker sits in Islamabad. This sends a wrong signal to officialdom, and therefore bureaucrats look towards Islamabad instead of Lahore. Such a mode of governance under the PTI government has not produced the desired results in Punjab.

While it is important that the Prime Minister's Office also keep a check on the performance of the civil servants, it would be far more advisable for the centre to empower the Punjab government in order for it to get the bureaucrats to perform at the desired level. Governance has to coalesce around defined and identifiable targets that are achieved through focused implementation driven by close supervision. In the present situation, such governance does not seem to be visible in Punjab. The prime minister should focus on the root causes of the bureaucracy's lack of performance.

A city adrift

IT is difficult to disagree with Planning Minister Asad Umar's criticism of the Sindh government's neglect of Karachi, particularly the emaciated state of the megalopolis's local bodies system. Speaking in the Sindh capital on Sunday, Mr Umar said Karachi "has not been given its rights", adding that despite the port city's hefty contribution to the national exchequer, its infrastructure, such as the

firefighting system, was in tatters. Of course, Karachi's destruction has been several years in the making, and the slow decline has only accelerated during the PPP's over decade-long rule in Sindh. It should be noted that the MQM, which at one time ruled urban Sindh with an iron fist, also did little to permanently address the problems of the metropolis while the PTI, which won the most National Assembly seats from the city during the last general elections, has also done little for Karachi, other than issue statements. The fact is that the political class as a whole has been guilty of neglecting Karachi while using the megacity to grab votes and sit comfortably in the national and provincial assemblies, even as the city's infrastructure crumbles.

When the MQM was in control, it stuffed loyalists in the water board and other local government bodies, with the result that today these institutions are close to collapse. Moreover, the dark art of 'china cutting' — as grabbing amenity plots and divvying them up for huge profits is colloquially known — was mastered under the Muttahida's watch. Of course, neglect of the city under PPP rule has hit a new nadir, with the provincial government hogging nearly all municipal powers that should rightfully belong to the KMC and the elected mayor. But it is not just Karachi; Hyderabad, Larkana and Sukkur too are facing similar crises where urban decay is concerned, though the PPP insists it has worked wonders in Sindh. The fact is that Karachi — and the rest of urban Sindh — cannot prosper until elected LG systems are put in place, answerable to voters at the local level. Launching new projects such as expressways and bridges in Karachi and labelling this progress, as the PPP is prone to doing, will not work unless the city has a workable solid waste disposal system along with an undisrupted water supply and a working sewage disposal system, as well as functioning public transport. Instead of playing politics, all parties must work on new legislation that can empower Sindh's local bodies.

Sketchy T20 victory

PAKISTAN'S sketchy 2-1 victory in the T20 series against South Africa has not given the home side too much to celebrate, especially with the T20 World Cup in India now less than eight months away. The hosts, while achieving the distinction of being the first cricketing side to register 100 international wins in the shortest form of the game, appeared to be an unsettled bunch in the three-match series played in Lahore. The South Africans, who lost the first match by just three runs,

roared back to level the series with a comprehensive win in the second match. In the decider on Sunday, too, the visitors came back from the verge of disaster to post a competitive total on the board and had the hosts on the ropes before Hasan Ali and Mohammad Nawaz took them home. Pakistan's T20 graph during the past 18 months has shown a downward spiral where they have slipped to fourth spot in ICC rankings, having lost to Australia and New Zealand and barely managing to level the T20 series in England last August. However, playing in their own backyard, they were expected to dominate an inexperienced opposition, but sadly that did not happen. With the exception of the ever-prolific wicketkeeper-batsman Mohammad Rizwan, whose brilliant knocks were the cornerstone of Pakistan's victories, none of the other top and middle order batsmen could make their mark. The repeated failure of young guns such as Hussain Talat, Haider Ali, Asif Ali, Khushdil Shah and a few others — who had hitherto been hailed as key pinch-hitters for Pakistan in T20 games — could prove a major worry in the lead-up to the October World Cup.

Among the bowlers, the encouraging performance of spinners Usman Qadir and Mohammad Nawaz coupled with the dazzling debut of Dadu-born Zahid Mahmood in the last match were the only high points for Pakistan. The time for experimentation has almost run out for Pakistan and they must come up with a strong combination in the months ahead.

Person-specific ordinance

THE PTI government has issued an ordinance to reappoint the prosecutor general of the National Accountability Bureau thereby setting a unique and unenviable precedent of promulgating person-specific ordinances. According to this ordinance promulgated on Feb 9, Syed Asghar Haider, a former judge of the Lahore High Court who was appointed as the prosecutor general in 2018, has now been reappointed for another three years. The ordinance says the president consulted the chairman NAB in reappointing Mr Haider. The PTI government has been issuing ordinances with alarming regularity in what appears to be a convenient bypassing of the regular legislative process because parliament has almost been made dysfunctional as a result of the acute political tension between the government and the opposition since the last elections. However, by issuing an ordinance solely for one person, by name, is by all measures a new low, and one that should have been avoided.

The basic purpose of ordinances has now been thoroughly compromised to attain partisan objectives. A presidential ordinance is meant to substitute for legislation only if there is an urgent requirement and if parliament is not in session. But, not unlike its predecessors, the PTI government has been taking advantage of this instrument to push through laws that it knows it would not be able to legislate through the National Assembly and the Senate. Such resort to presidential ordinances further weakens parliament and dilutes the efficacy of a public debate that forms the basis of regular legislation in democratic states. By using the presidency as a rubber stamp and a post office, the government is perpetuating a terrible practice which will not stop with future governments looking for shortcuts to legislative ambitions. The PTI government's person-specific ordinance is even more inadvisable and debases the very spirit of the legislative system. The opposition is fully justified in raising an alarm over this development and crying foul. The government should reconsider its flawed approach towards legislation.

Increased remittances

PAKISTANIS living abroad are sending far more money back home through banking channels than before. The 24pc growth in home remittances in the first seven months of the ongoing fiscal year to January has defied forecasts to the contrary. The phenomenon has puzzled many because reportedly thousands of workers were forced to return home after losing their jobs amid Covid-19 restrictions imposed to halt the spread of the disease in the host countries.

There are reports that the State Bank is planning to conduct a study to analyse the remittance growth factors. Until we have something solid to explain this trend, some analysts are of the view that it is safe to assume that international travel restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic are a major reason for the increase in home remittances. This is especially true for countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh where a big chunk of non-resident citizens have in the past normally remitted cash through friends or 'informal channels' like hundi and hawala for numerous reasons — the low levels of financial inclusion and literacy among them.

Read: The rise and rise of remittances

The remittance growth rate in Bangladesh is even swifter than in Pakistan, which shows greater use of informal channels and travel by that country's overseas workers' sending money to families at home. Besides, remittances are growing rapidly from the US and Europe where travel restrictions are stricter. Another crucial factor is related to the measures adopted by the government and the central bank to block illegal and informal money transfers into and out of the country to comply with FATF conditions in order to exit the task force's grey list.

Moreover, the State Bank has recently made it much easier for expats to send back money — and more swiftly — through banking channels. Further, the launch of the Roshan Digital Accounts for the diaspora has already attracted more reliable, long-term deposits of almost half a billion dollars in the last few months.

Whatever the factors, the increasing remittances that have averaged \$2.35bn a month this fiscal are helping the economy in many ways and come in handy at a time when the trade deficit has again started to expand as imports grow on the back of slower economic activity on account of Covid-19, failure of the cotton crop, food shortages and rising global oil prices. But the question is: what happens when the world returns to normal and travel curbs are eased once the plague subsides? Will the remittance growth momentum continue?

The answer to these questions lies in the government's ability to enhance customs controls at the ports to discourage currency smuggling, and the success of the central bank's measures to curb illegal channels and encourage commercial banks to make their services accessible to people living in the country's backward and financially unconnected regions. The return to pre-virus business as usual is not an option.

Vaccine concerns

IT is reassuring to see the Covid-19 vaccine recipient pool expanding further. Thus far, around 38,000 healthcare workers have been inoculated against the virus as the first group in order of priority, with individuals 65 years and above to follow in the second phase. The government on Monday opened registration for senior citizens to get in the queue for vaccination which is projected to start in March. It was on Feb 2, after receiving 500,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine the day before, that Prime Minister Imran Khan had launched the countrywide

inoculation drive with the first jabs being administered to health workers in Islamabad. Vaccination campaigns in the provinces had begun immediately after. There have been concerns expressed that the campaign has until now proceeded more slowly than anticipated over misgivings about whether the vaccine was safe, especially for people above 60 years, an age group that was not included in the Sinopharm vaccine trials. In such a situation the government must be proactive in countering misinformation that can spread like wildfire creating unnecessary hurdles in the way of a population acquiring herd immunity. Evidence has begun coming in from some countries showing that vaccinations are already having the desired effect. In the UK, the country that launched the global vaccination drive in December, virus levels have come down to their lowest since last July. Israel has reported a 94pc drop in infections among 600,000 people who received two doses of Pfizer's vaccine.

Aside from misinformation and a general distrust of vaccines in many segments of this country's population, it is important that the vaccination drive not exploit existing income inequalities. The government had declared it would make the vaccine available for free to its population. At the same time it has also allowed the private sector to import the approved vaccines so that more individuals can get inoculated sooner. Fair enough: there is nothing wrong in that per se, but it is a matter of concern that the government has exempted the vaccines to be administered to paying customers from the price cap regime that applies to all drug sales in Pakistan. The absence of such a check would allow companies to make a windfall from this health emergency and drive vaccine prices beyond the reach of all but the most well-heeled individuals. Pelf and privilege would buy them protection while others less fortunate would still be waiting their turn.

Pro-women laws' application

LEGISLATION is only as effective in so far as it is implemented. On that score, women's rights legislation in Pakistan has not fulfilled its potential despite the passage of several years. National Women's Day on Feb 8 saw a number of rights organisations calling for pro-women laws to be implemented in letter and spirit. It is a very pertinent demand, for legislation is but the first step in the long battle for gender equality; without enforcement it merely languishes on the statute books, gathering dust. Take, for example, the sexual harassment law that stipulates the formation of a three-member committee, including one woman, in

public and private organisation to take up complaints falling in this category. Far too often, however, those who encounter unwelcome advances from male colleagues have nowhere to turn because such committees have never been set up by their employers. The women's only options are to either suffer in silence or seek employment elsewhere. The third option, which is to go public, is the most daunting for all but the very resilient.

During the PPP government's tenure at the centre from 2008 till 2013, a slew of pro-women laws were passed. These aimed to address sexual harassment, as well as curb regressive practices such as depriving women of their inheritance, forcing them into marriage to settle disputes, etc. Since then, legislation against domestic violence has also been enacted in many parts of the country, most recently in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The following years saw several laws being improved upon, such as that in 2016 which closed the loophole allowing the families of honour killing victims to 'forgive' the perpetrator who was often one of their own kith and kin. The crime now carries a mandatory prison sentence; forgiveness can only be sought to the extent of a death sentence being set aside. All this is well and good; what is needed now are the mechanisms such as women protection committees, shelter homes, etc to bring the law to life.

IMF agreement

WITH a staff-level agreement between the government and the IMF staff, Pakistan is now set to re-enter the programme that was suspended in April because of the coronavirus. Although the Fund statement released at the moment carries only broad pointers of what is to come, one thing is quite clear: it is the poor and the unemployed who will have to bear the brunt of the inevitable adjustment that the government would need to implement. We do not have to see the detailed programme to know this. Our experience from a dozen other IMF programmes over the past three decades tells us that this is how it has always worked.

The re-entry into the programme begs an important question. Since the government has been telling the people for a number of months now that the economy is on the right track and that the foreign exchange reserves are improving and the current account is in surplus, what exactly is the need to re-enter the programme? The IMF should be seen as the ICU of economies, a place

where countries go when they are facing a severe crisis. So the act of re-entering the Fund programme at a time when the government's ministers are regularly reminding us that the economy is improving and growth picking up appears contradictory, and this question needs to be answered by those managing the economy.

Read: Is the economy turning around?

However, the biggest area of concern now is how the poor, the middle classes and the unemployed will fare. Every Fund programme has come with a string of price increases in essential utilities, and the language of the recent Fund statement points in the same direction this time as well. It has become the norm in recent years for IMF statements to include sentences urging greater care for the poor to shield them from the impact of the adjustment, but it has mostly been left up to the government of the day to implement this.

More often than not, governments here have resorted to making rhetorical promises of support for the poor even as they passed through large hikes in power and fuel tariffs, and dropped people into unemployment from government payrolls. The current set-up is keen to be seen as championing the cause of the poor, so it has an added responsibility of ensuring that it actually meets this standard. The statement also says very little about structural reforms, which are the key to sustainable growth. Aside from some changes in the Nepra, Ogra and State Bank Acts, there is no mention of any meaningful reforms to broaden the tax base or improve competitiveness. Adjustment without reform has never worked to the country's advantage, and neither the Fund nor the government should try to put a shine on an agreement that skirts this critical question.

Cautious hope

IT appears that Covid-19 cases in Pakistan are falling after a terrifying winter spike, with the positivity ratio close to 3pc this week as compared to 8pc in December. A year into the pandemic and despite some frightening peak periods, Pakistan's coronavirus trajectory has overall been far less disastrous than the one seen in Europe, the US and even neighbouring India. Although smart lockdowns, a relatively young population, and 'miracle' immunity have been considered by doctors to be factors behind Pakistan's comparatively lower Covid-19 graph, it is important for authorities as well as world health bodies to really

understand why this has been the case. Data-gathering will require resources and a dedicated effort by scientists, policymakers and doctors, but it will be a valuable exercise that can inform future emergency responses both in Pakistan and the rest of the world.

The past year has been difficult for many in Pakistan due to economic hardships, shutdowns and restrictions as well as the burden on the healthcare system. From daily-wage workers to salaried employees, across industries the fear of the virus and intermittent lockdowns have taken a significant toll on both economic well-being and mental health. Children, too, have been affected, with some forever pushed out of the learning net because of the compounding effect of poverty and school closure. After months of gloom, hope is on the horizon as the vaccination programme kicks off to bring relief to healthcare workers and others who are vulnerable. While this is a reason to be optimistic, authorities must know that it does not mean that SOPs and precautions can be abandoned. The vaccine though effective does not guarantee 100pc immunity, and also does not eliminate the risk of an inoculated individual being a carrier. With this in mind, the government should continue to enforce precautions and raise awareness about the risks. As the vaccination programme is rolled out, hospitals must continue to receive support. In Punjab, where 33 Covid-19 fatalities were reported within 24 hours on Wednesday, an official said that a major factor behind the frequent deaths in the province was the delay in taking patients to hospitals after complications set in. This points to a public awareness failure — a critical component of the Covid-19 death mitigation strategy. The government must continue to warn the public about the risks of the virus as well as give guidance on what can be done in the case of contracting it.

LSM estimates

THE new estimates for large-scale manufacturing production published by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics support the government claims that the economy is returning to the path of recovery from the deep impact of the first wave of the Covid-19 health crisis. The data shows LSM grew by 11.4pc month on month in December and 8.16pc year on year in the first half of FY2021 from the same period in FY2020. Analysts expect LSM to expand much faster in the second half of this fiscal because of the lower base effect as industrial output had plummeted massively from March to June 2020 on the back of Covid lockdown restrictions

and the cancellation or deferment of export orders due to closure of international borders. The Quantum Index of the LSM industry, or QIM, had plunged by 25pc during that period because of closure of factories in the country.

The industrial sector may be on its way to recovery compared to last year when millions lost their jobs and were pushed into poverty. But the recent revival of output in the industrial sector remains weak. The QIM at 167.2 in December 2020, for example, has yet to touch the peak of 170.2 reported in January 2018. Moreover, the rise in the QIM in recent months owes much to the lucrative tax amnesty and incentives for real estate investors and the early start of the sugar harvest. The early end of sugar crushing may affect the numbers in March. A look at the new data also shows that LSM recovery is not broad-based as much of the growth in production in recent months has come from sugar, steel, fertilisers, cement, cigarettes, automobiles and pharmaceuticals. The remaining industries have yet to post an increase in output, which is crucial to sustainable growth.

A cursory glance at PBS data for the last two years would show that the manufacturing output had started to contract long before the global pandemic hit the country last year. The QIM consistently plummeted till June 2020 from the January 2018 peak. Covid-19 infections only exacerbated the losses inflicted by harsh economic stabilisation policies that saw interest rates rise to 13.25pc and currency depreciate in a very short time. Reversal of these policies has been a major reason for the recent revival of the industrial sector as well as exports recovery in the current fiscal. However, the present recovery remains fragile and continues to be in need of policy support from the government as well as the State Bank. With the government all set to revive the suspended \$6bn loan programme with the IMF, many fear that pressure from the lender may force it to scrap most of the business-friendly actions it has taken over the last several months. Does the government have a plan in place to counter the ensuing negative effects?

Election antics

THE Senate elections have been embroiled in a bigger controversy than was required. At multiple levels there are complications unfolding on a daily basis that reflect badly on the system as a whole. While the ruling PTI has aggressively

propagated an open ballot for the Senate elections, its subsequent actions have raised questions that go beyond the specifically legal ones. The awarding of tickets, and the disputes arising from this process, are a manifestation of the politics that underlie these Senate elections. In Balochistan for instance, the PTI announced a ticket for a person who was not even a member of the party. When questioned, party people tried to justify this decision by saying that he was a joint candidate for the PTI and its coalition partner BAP. However, after an outcry from the local rank and file of the party in the province, the PTI took back the ticket from him. He then decided to contest as an independent after which the BAP adopted him as a candidate, which essentially means that if he wins, he will still be allied with the PTI. The machinations involved in electoral calculations leave little space for attaining and sustaining the moral high ground.

The legal ground also seems fairly shaky. The Supreme Court is hearing the case regarding the mode of balloting for the Senate elections even though the Election Commission has stated categorically that it believes only a constitutional amendment can change the process to an open ballot election. However, during the hearing some honourable judges in their comments remarked that seats in the Senate for a party should proportionally align with the total strength of the party in the assemblies. In such a case would there be any need to hold elections? All parties could be allocated seats as per their strength in the electoral college and that would settle the issue. The whole purpose of holding an election, even an indirect one, is to enable the people's representatives to use their judgement to make a choice that is not chained to their party position. These aspects of the issue would have come up in a debate if the matter had been processed through parliament. It may be prudent for all stakeholders to not rush to judgement on a matter that calls for deeper thinking and broader input. Democracy requires patience and due diligence to deliver even if urgency appears of utmost importance

RIP Ali Sadpara

IT is with a heavy heart and profound grief that this country bids farewell to one of its finest sons, Ali Sadpara, who along with his two companions was officially declared dead after hectic search operations failed to locate the men on the treacherous slopes of K2, the world's second highest peak.

Perhaps there is some comfort in the fact that his final resting place will be on the very mountains he loved so much. Ali Sadpara may not have succeeded in his mission to summit K2 in winter without oxygen support, but he reached another summit few have managed to scale. He succeeded in bringing out the best in all of us who followed the epic rescue efforts mounted in the aftermath of his disappearance. For those few days, as we all held our collective breath in desperate anticipation of good news, he united us in our grief and gave us a legend to collectively own and honour.

Muhammad Ali Sadpara: Porter, family man and tough as nails mountaineer

The army mounted a heroic rescue attempt, going to unprecedented lengths to locate the three mountaineers, and people across the country prayed for his safety during those days. This man of steel, who brought joy wherever he went with his happy demeanour and endearing smile, will live forever in the hearts of all Pakistanis. Perhaps his loved ones can derive a little comfort from this fact. Sadpara scaled more than 10 of the highest peaks in the world during his mountaineering career, with multiple summits of Nanga Parbat as well as a successful one of K2 in 2018.

He came from a life of poverty, but did not let that stop him from reaching for the stars to build a career that has untold numbers of admirers in the global community of mountaineers. But the most impressive summit that he scaled with his undying spirit was the one within. Today with sadness and pride, we admit his memory into the pantheon of legends that this country has produced.

PSL begins

THE Pakistan Super League cricket carnival is all set to kick off today at Karachi's National Stadium with the launch of its sixth season. Six star-studded teams will be battling it out for supremacy and the bumper winner's purse of a quarter of a million dollars. Karachi Kings, boasting an impressive line-up of players, will be defending their title in the month-long extravaganza which will see 34 matches played in Karachi and Lahore. But the champions will face stiff competition, especially from Quetta Gladiators and Multan Sultans who have beefed up their respective squads this season. Last year's finalists Lahore Qalandars, too, are ready to clinch their maiden PSL title, while Islamabad United, the only team to win the title twice, and 2017 winners Peshawar Zalmi

are keen to win more laurels. The cash-rich PSL, which is the Pakistan Cricket Board's flagship

event, has made great strides since its inception in 2016 and is ranked only behind the Indian Premier League in terms of popularity and magnitude among the many T20 leagues being staged around the world.

With every season, the league has become bigger and better, attracting leading players from hosts Pakistan, West Indies, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, England, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and other nations, besides luring in top sponsors, broadcasters and, most important, the fans. In a major development last year, PSL was entirely relocated to Pakistan after its first four seasons were partly held in the UAE. That further boosted its viewership which soared to nearly 120m around the world in 2020. However, in season six the PSL, like other cricketing leagues around the world, will be confronted with the Covid-19 challenge. Amid strict safety protocols, only 20pc of fans will be allowed per match as opposed to the jam-packed arenas in the previous editions which had become the norm in the league games. Besides, the pandemic has once again forced the PCB and concerned authorities to limit PSL matches to Karachi and Lahore, whereas last year Multan and Rawalpindi also staged some games.

Afghanistan peace?

THOUGH the situation on the ground in Afghanistan is far from ideal, should the parallel peace processes collapse — between the Afghan Taliban and the US/Nato alliance and between the Taliban and the government in Kabul — the situation will degenerate further. After the Biden administration's arrival in Washington many questions hang in the air about the fate of the Trump-era US-Taliban peace deal. After all, the White House has said it will "review" the deal while Nato officials have recently said they have deferred a decision on troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Foreign troops are due to exit the country by May 1, as per the US-Taliban deal. It is in this atmosphere of uncertainty that Prime Minister Imran Khan's plea for all Afghan actors to seize the opportunity for peace makes sense. He reiterated this point during a meeting with an Afghan delegation in Islamabad on Thursday.

The fact is that the air of confusion is having an impact on the peace process. For example, talks between Kabul and the Taliban in Doha are frozen, while the

Taliban have issued a dire warning to Nato vis-à-vis troop pullout deferment. The fact is that all sides — foreign forces, the Taliban as well as the Afghan government — need to do more to revive the faltering peace process. The Taliban shoulder a fair share of the blame, as they have continued to stick to the battlefield while talking peace. This hardly creates a conducive atmosphere for dialogue. In fact, a recent US report has said the Taliban are not honouring their part of the deal. However, the dilemma here is that foreign forces cannot stay in Afghanistan indefinitely. In reality, it is the meddling of foreigners — the Soviets and later the Americans — that played a major factor in destabilising Afghanistan over the last few decades, along with the endless lust for power of Afghan strongmen and warlords.

As we have written in these columns before, the very brief window for a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan is closing fast. Should the Taliban abandon the peace process, it will be back to square one. The Taliban themselves need to show more commitment to the peace process by reducing violence. The US, on the other hand, needs to send a clear message that it intends to stick to dialogue. Ultimately, it is down to the two major Afghan players in this geopolitical game — the government in Kabul and the Taliban — to decide on the future of their country. If they are unable to reach a modus vivendi, then outsiders will continue to interfere in Afghanistan. Several generations in Afghanistan have seen nothing but war; it is time those that wield power in that country took bold decisions and put an end to this long nightmare of the Afghan people.

Missing relatives

THE family members of ‘missing’ persons from Balochistan are staging a sit-in in the capital to protest the enforced disappearances of their loved ones — a sight that has tragically become all too familiar in the country. These men, women and children have been in Islamabad for a week, holding placards and posters emblazoned with the faces of their relatives in the hope that the authorities will provide the answers as to their whereabouts. Their stories are harrowing.

According to a report in this newspaper, one participant said her father had been missing for 12 years. Others have similar accounts; in fact, each member of the beleaguered community has a hair-raising story of the suffering they endure as they search for their son, brother, father or fiancé. The chairperson of the

Defence of Human Rights Amna Janjua — whose husband has been missing for years — noted that while it was encouraging that representatives of political parties made appearances to show solidarity with these families, the lack of political will persists.

The words of Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid that the government was “taking the issue seriously” and would “adopt all possible measures for their recovery” would perhaps have inspired more hope in a newcomer; for the families that have faced the apathy of the authorities for over a decade, they ring hollow. Even the statement of PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz, who urged the military and intelligence chiefs to help in giving these families closure, is diluted by the reality of how her party failed to provide relief when in power.

There was hope after the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, but that too seems to have dissipated for powerless families facing a mighty state apparatus. Some are driven to the point where they just want the truth for the sake of closure, whereas others want answers and accountability. Their distress is heartbreaking, and these protests are only the visible manifestations of their grief.

Even those fortunate few whose missing relatives have returned, are not given the facts. Verbal assurances from the interior minister mean little; previously, the government resisted a bill on enforced disappearances in parliament even if the prime minister reportedly has now had a change of heart. It is the responsibility of the government to protect the constitutionally guaranteed rights of these citizens and give them answers about their missing family members.

Digital economy

EVER SINCE Covid-19 cases broke out in the country in February last year, the State Bank has implemented several actions to encourage digital payments and reduce the use of cash transactions. Starting from the suspension of the fee charged by banks on interbank fund transfers, the bank recently launched a new instant real-payment system, Raast, which connects banks and digital wallets as a first step towards a digital economy. Pakistan has joined the list of 56 countries that have developed instant real-time payment schemes. Raast will be used initially for the payment of dividends, pension and Ehsaas disbursements to destitute women. Besides, the Roshan Digital Account initiative for overseas

Pakistanis is not only facilitating them in opening accounts and investing in the stock market and real estate schemes digitally from their countries of residence but also shoring up much-needed foreign exchange flows into the country.

Now the State Bank has instructed banks to issue only Euro-pay MasterCard Visa (EMV) chip- and PIN-compliant payment cards, which will become active for making payments and online e-commerce services the day the customers receive them. Banks have been given until end June to make arrangements for issuing EMV cards, which will make cashless payments more secure and easier through the introduction of new features. This will also allow consumers to make loan repayments through cards and lodge complaints through digital channels without the need to visit a bank branch. The measure aims at strengthening the security of digital payments and curtailing fraud risk. The new measure is expected to promote the e-commerce ecosystem and shape consumer behaviour in favour of online payments, according to the State Bank. Earlier in 2019, it had instructed banks to adopt a 3-D secure protocol to prevent online fraudulent transactions. As many as 15 banks have so far adopted this standard for securing online transactions. The measures taken so far to promote digital payments are a positive step towards a digital economy, which is easier to document and tax. But the goal of cashless and digital payments will not materialise unless more people are connected to banking channels and the government allows tax incentives to consumers and businesses making digital transactions. Additionally, the government needs to ensure that internet service providers and telecom firms improve their services and extend it to those living in remote areas so that more people can take advantage of the measures being executed to promote a digital economy.

Bypoll controversy

THE recent round of by-elections have thrown up quite a few surprises. They have also generated controversy over mismanagement and suspected rigging in at least one seat for the National Assembly. The PTI government is putting up a brave face but in many ways these elections have exposed a few chinks in the PTI armour. The polls in Sindh showed that the PPP retains its hold on the province and the last two years have not diluted its support among the voters. This was evidenced not just by the PPP's victory in both the provincial assembly victories but also the impressive margin with which the party won. Also

noteworthy is the fact that the runner-up in the Malir seat PS-88 was not from PTI but the TLP.

In Punjab, however, it was a straight fight between the PML-N and PTI. The two seats, NA-75 Daska and PP-51 Wazirabad, were won by the PML-N in the 2018 elections. While the PML-N has been able to retain the provincial seat, the ECP has held back the result of the Daska seat because of alleged irregularities. The ECP has, in fact, issued a strongly worded press release that is, for all practical purposes, an indictment of the Punjab government. PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz Sharif has accused the PTI government of indulging in blatant rigging while the PTI claims it has won the contest fair and square. The ECP has taken the correct stance by stating unequivocally that at 20 polling stations they suspect results may have been tampered with. The ECP also goes on to say that this entire affair seems to be a result of weakness showed by administrative and law-enforcement institutions. The government of Punjab must take this concern by the ECP seriously because it reflects adversely on the ability of the government to provide the support that the ECP requires by law in order to organise free and fair polls. It is important for the ECP to get to the bottom of this controversy and identify those responsible so that citizens' confidence in elections is not impacted.

The biggest blow for the PTI has come in KP, the province that it considers its fortress. The Nowshera provincial assembly seat won by the party in 2018 has now gone to the PML-N candidate. This should be a wake-up call for the PTI which has been claiming that the opposition has lost ground since the last elections. These by-elections may not provide a full picture of what the electorate is thinking but it does give a peek into the prevalent mood. This mood is not going in favour of the ruling party. The PTI may need to do some soul searching in order to figure out why there is such a gap between what it says and the reality on the ground.

Sparring in parliament

IN keeping with the trend of unruly and inconclusive debates on key issues that have become the hallmark of this National Assembly, yet another session of parliament descended into chaos this week. During Friday's session, opposition MNAs staged a protest around the dais of the speaker and compelled him to

adjourn proceedings till Monday as they said the ordinances that were promulgated should have been on the house agenda — a position the government's adviser on parliamentary affairs Babar Awan accepted. Another protest ensued when the debate turned to inflation, and the speaker invited Minister for Power Omar Ayub to take the floor, even though leading opposition MNAs were not done speaking. This prompted opposition members to again surround the dais, with the speaker declaring they could not “dictate” to him. Although lively debates in a charged atmosphere are hardly uncommon in parliament, this particular Assembly has established a reputation for creating commotion to the point of futility. Perhaps one reason for this is that, unlike previous assemblies where speakers gave the floor to the opposition to speak first and then wrapped up the debate by allowing the relevant minister to talk, this particular Assembly has become a boxing ring where government and opposition MNAs spar. As a result, debate is up in the air while proceedings are dominated by noise and unparliamentary language.

Examples of raucous debate exist in many countries, but our parliamentarians would do well to follow the better ones such as that in the British parliament. Commons debates are often lively, and while MPs may interrupt each other to challenge what is being said, the decorum of the House is maintained. This allows a dynamic debate and provides room for constructive discussion. In Pakistan, the Assembly becomes a fight club and any goal of discussing new laws and burning issues is abandoned. The government should set the tone by observing some etiquette and discipline itself and resist the temptation to come into the Assembly with its gloves on.

Student unions' ban

THE damaging effects of the Zia-era stigmatisation of student unions can be felt acutely in the current political atmosphere. The ban on student unions — which successive governments have failed to revoke — created a big vacuum in the political and ideological education of our youth, and gave space to many narrow-minded individuals who use politics as a means to attain money and influence. Indeed, as Senator Raza Rabbani recently pointed out at the annual Asma Jahangir Memorial Lecture, student unions allowed ideological nurturing of aspiring politicians. The senator was also correct in pointing out that participation in student politics was one of the key ingredients of the democratic struggle,

which was stifled during the dictatorships of Ayub Khan and Ziaul Haq, along with labour and intellectual activity. The ban on student unions was institutionalised via an interim court order in 1992 that restricted all student political activity in the wake of deadly clashes on varsity campuses. This was followed by the apex court ruling of 1993 that allowed very limited student activity. Over the years, for those opposed to the idea of student political activity, this ruling has served as a pretext for not allowing the unionisation of students. However, old ideologues, including Mr Rabbani, believe that this interpretation is flawed as Article 17 of the Constitution stipulates that the forming of associations and unions is a basic right.

Clearly, the argument that student unions pave the way for violence is invalid since there have been several violent incidents on campuses despite the decades-long ban on student political activity. Although, when he assumed office, Prime Minister Imran Khan indicated he would allow student unions, his government's response to the student march in late 2019 was nothing less than autocratic. There were reports of harassment and rustication of students while others were booked on the pretext of inciting violence when the rallies were peaceful and well-organised. The authorities should realise that the struggle for unionisation is a battle for independent thought and inclusivity.

Confronting Islamophobia

IN a globalised world, despite the shrinking of distances and the coming together of cultures, hateful ideologies persist. Discrimination and violence on the basis of race, religion, and sect continue to bedevil our seemingly modern world, as ancient tribal prejudices refuse to die down. Amongst the hateful ideologies that have affected a large portion of humanity is Islamophobia, where Muslims are demonised and isolated either due to their beliefs or the violent actions of a few wayward groups and individuals acting in the name of Islam.

In this regard, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, while virtually addressing a session of the UN's Economic and Social Council, highlighted the issue of Islamophobia. Without naming India, Mr Qureshi denounced the "discriminatory citizenship laws ... and repeated state-sponsored pogroms against minorities" while also calling for a "global alliance against the rise and spread of Islamophobic as well as other violent nationalist and racist groups".

Read: UNGA adopts Pakistan-led resolution on ‘promotion of interreligious, intercultural dialogue’

Indeed, the virus of hate has spread far and wide across the world. The foreign minister has rightly made reference to India, where the Hindu hard right has made a mockery of Indian secularism by hounding the country’s Muslim minority. But even elsewhere in the world, for example in parts of Europe, anti-Muslim and anti-foreigner sentiment is high, with some states led by ultranationalist regimes echoing the poisonous rhetoric that their fascist forebears espoused in the mid-20th century, in the lead-up to World War II.

Therefore, there is a need for a global response to racist and fascist ideologies that threaten minorities. In many cases, foreigners and those declared the ‘other’ are easy scapegoats for society’s failures, with all ills blamed on ‘outsiders’. This conundrum has been succinctly summed up by Mesut Ozil, the star German footballer of Turkish descent: “I am German when we win, an immigrant when we lose.”

However, despite the deep-seated prejudice against Muslims and foreigners in many societies, the fact that extremist militants have greatly contributed to the discrimination against Islam must also be acknowledged. Transnational terrorist outfits such as Al Qaeda, the self-styled Islamic State group and others of their ilk, claiming to be working for the glory of Islam, have in fact done a great disservice to Islam and Muslims. Their large-scale slaughter of both Muslims and non-Muslims is antithetical to religious injunctions that place the greatest value on human life, and are in stark contrast with traditional Muslim thought.

Moreover, Islamist militancy is thoroughly a modern construct, a reactionary phenomenon born out of the injustice and repressiveness found in most Muslim states, and the colonial interventions of non-Muslim powers in places such as Palestine and Kashmir. The world community must therefore address both issues: the profound anti-Muslim prejudice evident in many societies, as well as the repressive systems in most Muslim states that help create the foot soldiers for religiously inspired militancy.

Token response

THE government's conduct regarding its efforts to regulate 'unlawful' online content remains opaque and smacks of tokenism, notwithstanding attempts to appear otherwise at the prodding of the Islamabad High Court. On Jan 25, it promised the court it would consult with relevant stakeholders to revise the social media rules it had notified in January 2020 before the next hearing on Feb 26. To that end, a meeting was held in Islamabad on Friday during which the attorney general, as the government's representative, agreed to the formation of a council to review 'undesirable' social media content, provided the prime minister gave his nod. The proposed body would include representatives of journalists, civil society and digital rights activists.

However, whether Friday's meeting could be described as a meaningful consultation, of the kind that is necessary when an issue as important as the right to freedom of expression is at stake, is questionable. For one, while the invitees included a representative of the Asia Internet Coalition, missing from the list were reps of local industry associations and digital rights groups — both obviously relevant to the discussion. While the meeting was ostensibly open to all who wished to attend, it was not announced through a public notice, ensuring a limited input. A single meeting cobbled together in this manner a week before the next hearing does not meet the criteria of a thorough and representative consultation, even if the attorney general has promised follow-up meetings. There exists, for good reason, a trust deficit on the matter between the government and the stakeholders that has widened ever since the rules were notified without any warning. When that undemocratic step led to an outcry by local and international digital rights groups, the rules were 'suspended' by the prime minister, a meaningless action as he does not have the authority to overrule cabinet decisions. The 'consultation' with stakeholders and experts that followed included a questionnaire listing 10 questions with 'yes' and 'no' options. When the new version of the rules was drafted, it was not shared with them; in any case, almost none of their recommendations were incorporated. With the prospect that the court, after hearing multiple legal challenges against the social media rules could declare them as being unconstitutional, the government has scrambled to appear conciliatory. As a good faith measure, it should first withdraw and de-notify the rules and then sincerely undertake broad-based consultations on the matter.

Attack on media

THE attack on the head offices of the Jang Group by charged protesters exhibits the kind of pressure that journalists in the country must work under. On Sunday, scores of people ransacked the reception areas of the Geo office in Karachi, and also beat up a cameraman and other staffers. The mob was said to have been enraged over some comments made by an anchorperson on a show focusing on political humour. Although construed as offensive by some, the remarks aired were evidently in the context of the satirical and tongue-in-cheek nature of the show. Every citizen of this country has a right to protest, but resorting to violence and destroying public or private property must be criticised at all levels. And more so if an apology has already been submitted, as it was in this case by the media house. What is even more surprising is the fact that the police did not stop the angry protesters as they attacked the offices of the largest media group in the country. They chose to do nothing, as according to a report in this paper, they assumed that the person leading the enraged mob would talk to the management and come to a resolution. The attack was roundly condemned by journalists' associations, representatives of the Sindh, Punjab and federal governments and other high-ranking officials. Later, the Sindh Police promised to take action against the suspects after "collecting CCTV footage" of the incident.

In an environment where news organisations and journalists are already intimidated and routinely feel the necessity to 'sanitise' their work, such violent attacks expose the government's hollow claims of a 'free media', making reporters, anchorpersons and others in the field even more vulnerable to outside pressure. One hopes that the promise of better security made by the Sindh government is fulfilled soon and that the inquiry ordered by Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah leads to action against those responsible for the violence.

Poll storm in NA-75

THE Election Commission of Pakistan is meeting today to decide on the course of action regarding the by-election in NA-75 Daska whose result it had withheld in light of reports of irregularities and mismanagement.

The chief election commissioner will receive reports from all concerned staff of the commission and then decide whether there should be re-poll in the 20 polling stations marred by controversy, or if a fresh election should be ordered for the whole constituency. The ECP had issued a strongly worded press release a day after the election saying that the staff of those 20 polling station could not be reached till the morning while the police and administration officials of the Punjab government were also unavailable.

The election in Daska also witnessed violence between PTI and PML-N supporters as a result of which two people lost their lives. The ECP should take this election as a test case to identify all the problems that marred it, apportion blame where it lies and take strict action against all those found responsible. It should also ensure it gets answers about the whereabouts of its staff that disappeared in the night along with the results from those stations.

The 'mystery' must not remain unsolved. With such a large staff having gone missing, it would be an absolute travesty if the ECP cannot unearth the facts and bring them to the public. The people have a right to know what is happening with their votes. At the same time, the ECP must also demand answers from the Punjab government. If the chief election commissioner cannot depend on the support of a provincial government, then the leadership of that government has some serious explaining to do. At stake is the credibility of the entire system. If a democratic state cannot even organise a free and fair election in a single constituency, and if the polling staff has to work under threat of abduction without anyone being held responsible, then Pakistan's democratic institutions are far weaker than we would want to admit.

The PTI and PML-N have worsened the situation by sacrificing facts at the altar of political expediency. The former party has the most to lose. If it is tarred with the brush of rigging, its politics will suffer grievously. It is of great concern, therefore, to hear PTI leaders pointing fingers at the ECP instead of demanding answers from their own government in Punjab. It is high time that all parties took the pending issue of electoral reforms seriously. Without these reforms, our elections will remain controversial and generate political instability continuously. For now however, all parties must adhere to the decision of the ECP even if it goes against them. They must accept the findings and the verdict without dragging the ECP into further controversy. A lot is riding on the Daska election.

Electric vehicles

THE approval of Pakistan's first electric vehicle policy towards the end of last year has given rise to an ongoing media debate. It has been pointed out that while we are now one step closer to a pollution-free environment, a greener future will depend a lot on the development of fast-charging electric vehicle batteries and the availability of charging infrastructure on roads and highways. The new EV technology is considered a game changer for the environment and promises various benefits to developing countries like Pakistan that are facing chronic balance-of-payments crisis by reducing their fossil fuel imports, and to consumers by slashing their recurring fuel and maintenance costs. However, the adoption of EV technology remains slow even in developed countries despite its salutary impact on the environment and multiple economic advantages for consumers. Pakistan is unlikely to defy this global trend in spite of significant tax and other concessions announced in the policy to escalate the adoption of the technology. According to reports, the government plans that 30pc of all new cars, trucks, buses, vans and jeeps, and 50pc of all two-, three- and four-wheelers will be electric vehicles by 2030. By 2040, 90pc of vehicles on the road are envisioned as electric. An ambitious target indeed.

The slow adoption of green technology across the world has also raised the question of whether it is advisable for Pakistan to jump directly into an electric future or take the hybrid route. While Chinese carmakers are in favour of a direct shift to an EV future, Japanese automobile companies want the government to follow a route where both electric vehicles and hybrid (including plugged-in hybrid) electric vehicles are allowed to compete as is the case in countries like India, Thailand and Malaysia. Hence, Japanese carmakers in Pakistan have been calling for similar incentives and concessions for hybrid technology. The step-by-step approach, they say, to move from the existing internal combustion engines to zero-emission vehicles will benefit every stakeholder — automobile companies, auto parts manufacturers, government and consumers. They have a strong point when they argue that hybrid electric vehicles can 'achieve scales given their costs and subsequently when EV technology becomes more affordable the country can always graduate to electric vehicles'. The Engineering Development Board, which is developing the next Auto Industry Development and Export Programme 2021-26, needs to carefully weigh the arguments

advanced by both sides and take ground realities into account before finalising the new policy.

Return of militancy

A WORRYING trend observed in Pakistan's northern areas over the last several months saw a dramatic escalation on Monday. In a brazen daytime attack, masked gunmen shot dead four female vocational trainers travelling in a van near Mirali, North Waziristan district. While the driver was injured, another trainer escaped unhurt.

The victims were working for a technical institute in Bannu to impart skill development to local women. Coincidentally, the attack took place on the fourth anniversary of the launch of Operation Raddul Fasaad that followed on the heels of the kinetic operations that had successfully destroyed the terrorist infrastructure in the tribal areas. Based mainly on intelligence-based operations, Raddul Fasaad tackled the tentacles of militancy that had spread throughout the country. At a press conference on Monday, DG ISPR Maj Gen Babar Iftikhar said that more than 375,000 IBOs had been carried out in Pakistan over the past four years to curb urban terrorism and dismantle remaining militant networks.

Nothing, however, quite underscores the return of violent extremism as does the mass murder of innocent women working for the good of society. And make no mistake, this act, the very audacity of it, was meant to send a message: the militants are confident enough to again carry out the kind of attacks that spread terror in large swathes of the country not too long ago. The signs have been there for some time. There has been an unmistakable uptick in targeted killings of civilians as well as deadly clashes of militants with security personnel in the tribal areas.

The reunification in Afghanistan of several splinter groups with the TTP that, according to a recent UN report, was overseen by Al Qaeda, have heightened the terrorist threat in the region. The same document also held the TTP responsible for more than 100 cross-border attacks between July and October 2020. While no one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack on Monday, the KP police believe the TTP are the perpetrators. However, the modus operandi also tallies with the obscurantist agenda of the Shura-i-Mujahideen. An extremist group based in North Waziristan, it has threatened music shop owners, barbers,

etc and, in one of its recent flyers, warned women to desist from working with NGOs.

The fact is, extremism is a hydra-headed monster that needs a sustained, multifaceted approach to vanquish. In that, we have fallen woefully short. Efforts at mounting a counter-narrative, which was critical to secure the gains made on the battlefield, have been piecemeal and inconsistent. Paigham-i-Pakistan, that much-vaunted unified message against extremism signed by 1,829 Islamic scholars in 2018, looked good on paper but was never owned by the religious community. The process cannot be forced or imposed from above: the state must strengthen the hand of progressive forces that have a stake in the local communities. It is the only long-term solution.

FDI decrease

THE more permanent and non-debt-creating FDI inflows to Pakistan have shrunk by a whopping 27pc to a meagre \$1.1bn in the first seven months of the ongoing fiscal to January from \$1.6bn received in the same period in the last financial year, according to new State Bank data. The inflows during January also dropped to \$192.7m, down by 12pc when compared to \$219m in the same month of the previous fiscal. The decline in FDI is mainly attributed to the almost 20pc plunge in net inflows from China to \$402.8m, and outflows of just below \$26m to Norway during the period July to January. China, nevertheless, retains its position as the largest investor in Pakistan followed by the Netherlands, Hong Kong, Malta, the UK and the US. Much of the FDI received during this fiscal has gone into coal and hydel power, the financial sector, and, oil and gas exploration.

The FDI inflows are crucial for technology transfer, improvement in business management practices, competition, exports, employment and deeper integration with the world economy. But FDI to Pakistan has been on the decline since 2017 after Chinese investment in the power and transport sectors under the CPEC initiative started to dry up. According to UNCTAD's World Investment Report 2020, FDI stock declined sharply from \$40.8bn to \$34.8bn in two years by 2019, entailing a hefty net outflow of \$6bn. Consequently, we have seen a record increase in our foreign debt both in absolute terms and as a ratio of the size of the economy. Pakistan has never been a favoured destination for foreign investors because of a number of factors. Barring the record-high investment of

\$5.6bn and \$5.4bn in 2007 and 2008, annual FDI inflows have accounted for less than 1pc of the nation's GDP although other states comparable to Pakistan have attracted close to 3pc of the size of their economies. While Pakistan, to a large extent, has successfully addressed the security challenge and energy shortages — which have kept foreign investors from betting on this country in recent years — it has clearly not been enough to make Pakistan an attractive destination for foreign companies. The government also needs to tackle other challenges including a burdensome investment environment, policy inconsistency, an unskilled labour force as well as the lack of developed industrial infrastructure to woo foreign investors for sustained and rapid growth and a more stable external sector.

Myanmar protests

THE protests against Myanmar's Feb 1 military coup have refused to die down, with hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets against the generals' power grab. The coup was triggered by the military's lack of acceptance of recent election results, in which the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy did well. While already controlling parliament through reserved seats for uniformed lawmakers, the generals were apparently not happy with the growing power of the civilians and decided to strike, citing electoral "irregularities", though no serious proof of election fraud has been uncovered. It seems the junta did not expect such a public reaction to the coup. After the passage of nearly a month since the takeover, the protests have only gathered steam even though there have been fatalities, while the generals have ominously warned of "loss of life" if the "confrontation" continues.

Much of the world community, led by the UN, has condemned the military coup and called for a swift return to civilian rule. "Release the prisoners. End the violence. Respect human rights", the UN secretary general has said. It is unfortunate that much of Myanmar's post-colonial history has been marred by military interference in matters of governance, with the civilians frequently sidelined by those in uniform. This has resulted in the retardation of Myanmar's political system, as evidenced by multiple ethnic and religious conflicts within the country. Ms Suu Kyi was hardly an ideal leader, her pro-democracy credentials severely tarnished by her cold silence as the military butchered Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya in a merciless campaign. However, the fact is that the country's

problems have been exacerbated by the military's lengthy rule, and it is only through the continuation of the democratic process that all of Myanmar's people — regardless of ethnic background and religious belief — can expect justice. The junta should return to the barracks, respect the popular will and let the political process continue in Myanmar, instead of training its guns on its own people.

IHK & human rights

WHILE the right-wing BJP government in New Delhi has tried to brush the Kashmir issue under the carpet, there is no denying the fact that this is the key obstacle to peace in South Asia. If the Kashmir question is resolved as per the demands of justice, and most importantly, as per the wishes of the Kashmiri people, the temperature in this region is likely to come down very quickly, leading to better relations between India and Pakistan.

Prime Minister Imran Khan during his recent visit to Sri Lanka has stressed this point, telling a conference in Colombo that “my dream for the subcontinent is that we resolve our differences” and that “we want ... the Kashmir dispute to be resolved according to” the UNSC resolutions.

However, a just resolution of the Kashmir question requires an end to the brutal tactics that India has unleashed in the disputed region, as well as accountability and punishment for those who have violated the people's fundamental rights. This point was rightly raised by Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari while addressing a session of the UN's Human Rights Council.

In particular, Dr Mazari slammed the double standards of the self-declared global champions of human rights, who have preferred to keep quiet on the Kashmir issue, even after India stepped up its repressive tactics following the scrapping of the region's special status in the Indian constitution. They have chosen to “prioritise political, strategic and commercial interests over human rights” she observed, while asking the global community to “stand ... on the right side of history” and call out the grave abuses in India-held Kashmir.

Indeed, many in the West do not lose a moment to castigate geopolitical rivals — China, Venezuela, Iran, North Korea, for example — over real and perceived violations of human rights. However, the violations of clients and partner states are conveniently overlooked, as these states are needed to advance geopolitical

agendas, and human rights concerns appear to be expendable. If peace is to come to South Asia, then the brutal human rights violations in IHK must end forthwith, and New Delhi accept the fact that it has perpetrated decades-long abuse in the occupied region.

Once this is done, a framework needs to be created to help resolve the dispute involving the three main stakeholders — Pakistan, India and the Kashmiris. If New Delhi keeps on claiming that Kashmir is an internal issue — it clearly is not, as per the UN — then peace will be difficult to achieve. India's foreign allies can play a major part in promoting peace by letting New Delhi know that the status quo in the occupied region is not okay, and that multi-stakeholder dialogue can lead to an end to the imbroglio. If India continues to be pampered and the Kashmiris' plight ignored, peace in South Asia will remain a distant dream.

A better law

THAT the Sindh Police has taken an initiative to bring improvements to the criminal justice system is a positive development. The law-enforcement agency has suggested a number of amendments to the colonial-era Criminal Procedure Code that would reduce the burden on the police, courts, prosecution and prisons, and also make access to justice less cumbersome for the citizenry. Among the proposed changes are the enactment of an alternative dispute resolution mechanism and civil trials, bail and pecuniary penalties for suspects in custody for possessing a small quantity of contraband. It has also been suggested that an SP-ranked officer should be made responsible for authorising or disallowing an arrest, as the case may be. At present, Section 54 of the CrPc gives unbridled powers of arrest to SHOs which are often abused.

These suggestions do have merit. Every dispute does not have to end up in court, but can be resolved before matters escalate. While fears that an ADR mechanism might strengthen parallel justice forums cannot be discounted, if handled cautiously by the state, it could save the aggrieved parties time and expense involved in court proceedings. Also, our overcrowded jails are heaving with under-trial prisoners, as well as convicts serving long sentences for having been in possession of a small amount of contraband. Procedural changes can rationalise this system with penalties proportionate to the crime and at least partly address the problem of overcrowded facilities. However, a qualitative

difference at the policing end of the criminal justice system depends on two important considerations. One is trust between law enforcement and the public, and the other is a truly empowered and independent police. Unfortunately, both these factors are missing in Sindh — which is not to say that the other provinces are much better. Extrajudicial killings for which no accountability appears to be on the horizon, police pressurising victims to ‘compromise’ with well-connected perpetrators of crimes against them, difficulty in filing FIRs, etc have created a huge trust deficit. Many sections of the public see the police as an instrument of oppression rather than as upholders of the law. Linked with this is political interference in police operations, particularly where transfers and postings are concerned. These interventions have often created rifts between the IG Sindh, a federal appointee, and the provincial government. Such issues must be addressed if the criminal justice system is to see real improvement.

Power breakdown report

A NEPRA inquiry into last month’s power breakdown that left almost the entire country without electricity for up to 22 hours has identified serious violations of safety and security protocols, as well as flaws in generation and distribution operations that resulted in the extended blackout. The probe underlines that barring a few hydel power plants none has the arrangements required to urgently restore supply to consumers. The report rightly laments the fact that the failure of the power authorities to fully execute recommendations of investigations into earlier, similar events had contributed majorly to the latest countrywide power breakdown. The fault, for example, originated at the Guddu power station, the same place where multiple such events have occurred over the last one decade, implying nothing had been done by the plant operators to prevent future breakdowns. Nepra points out that the system operators — NTDC and K-Electric — have also not established any contingency plans or developed guidelines for early system recovery following a total or partial shutdown.

The report also reinforces the popular view that the country’s power sector is getting crushed under the heavy burden of poor governance and the incompetence of the power bureaucracy. It is also a signal for the government to undertake urgent reform in the power bureaucracy and bring in qualified professionals to run the operations of public-sector companies. This could actually be the first step towards reorganising this crumbling sector for improved

governance to reduce inefficiencies and corruption. The appointment of retired or serving military men and powerful bureaucrats to key posts in the power companies is largely to blame for their rapid decay, accumulation of a debt of over Rs2.3bn, increased transmission losses, electricity theft, lower bill collection, lack of transparency and poor governance. The second area where the government needs to take immediate steps relates to the adoption of new technology for averting large-scale breakdowns in future. Appointing the right person to the right job and the adoption of advanced technology can address most issues plaguing the power sector.

Terrorist's escape

THE military's revelation this week about the escape of former TTP spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan has given rise to more questions about an incident that was already steeped in mystery. It has now been confirmed by the army that Ehsan escaped from its custody a year ago — a development that had been largely met with conspicuous silence, until now, from both the government and security establishment.

The military's official disclosure of action against those responsible for the escape is a step in the right direction as Ehsan's escape is indeed a serious matter. However, details about the events that led to Ehsan's surrender and eventual getaway are few.

It is alarming that the nation knows so little about the circumstances of the escape of a terrorist who has in the past claimed with relish some of the most chilling terror attacks in Pakistan — including the killing of scores of students in the Army Public School attack as well as the assassination attempt on rights activist and Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai. In 2017, Ehsan was said to have given himself up to the army and remained in its custody for three years. In this period, the military released a video interview in which he admitted to committing terror acts while also alleging that Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies had given operational and financial assistance to the TTP and Jamaatul Ahrar.

In January 2020, rumours of his miraculous 'escape' started to make the rounds, with no official comment from the state aside from a fleeting confirmation from then interior minister Ijaz Shah. Soon after, Ehsan released audio tapes confirming his escape and thereafter has been linked to multiple Twitter

accounts. Last week, an account purportedly linked to him threatened Malala Yousafzai. Shockingly, this high-profile terrorist who was arguably instrumental in the TTP's terror operations in the country has never been formally charged or presented in any court of law.

The lack of transparency surrounding the entire Ehsanullah Ehsan affair is unacceptable. The defence establishment and interior ministry must provide answers and demonstrate that those who were responsible for his escape were held accountable. It is not clear how many military personnel were involved in this incident and what the investigation into their actions revealed. Without the facts, the truth will remain elusive — as will justice for the scores of citizens who have suffered due to the deadly violence a group like the TTP and its accessory Ehsan have perpetuated.

The pain and suffering of these families, especially those who are still looking for answers to the APS massacre, will continue if events such as this remain shrouded in secrecy. Silence will make way for disinformation and alternative 'truths', both of which will undermine the pledge the government and military made to eradicate terror through counterterrorism strategies and operations.

Penalising filers

THE FBR has decided to penalise taxpayers filing their returns late. Apparently, these filers will be required to pay a surcharge to appear on the new Active Taxpayers' List to be published on March 1. Companies will have to pay a surcharge of Rs20,000, and associations of persons and individuals (salaried and non-salaried) a fine of Rs10,000 for inclusion on the list which is a central record of online income tax return filers for the previous tax year. In normal times, it would be difficult to not support the FBR decision to penalise those who fail to comply with their tax obligations in time. But in the given circumstances, when people have been struggling with the impact of the pandemic on their livelihoods, the decision is harsh and unfair, especially in the case of individual salaried and non-salaried taxpayers. There are a significantly large number of people who previously submitted their returns and paid their taxes within the deadline but couldn't comply with this obligation this year. Therefore, the FBR needs to review its decision and exempt at least individuals from the payment of fine.

According to the FBR, the number of income tax filers had grown by 9pc to 2.52m by the end of last month when compared to the 2.31m returns received in the corresponding period last year. The tax deposited also rose 63pc to Rs48.3bn from Rs29.6bn. This can be compared to 1.8m returns filed and Rs22bn deposited by the end of the extended deadline on Dec 8 last year. The increase in tax filers, no matter how meagre the total number, shows that more people are realising the importance of becoming part of the system. Hence, we see a good many returns still being submitted as reflected by the numbers filed after the expiry of the extended deadline. In the current situation, the FBR decision to punish late filers will discourage people from filing future returns for fear of unnecessary punitive actions and reinforce its public image of an unfriendly organisation. Penalising the existing taxpayers will neither help the tax authorities broaden the tax base nor increase the number of filers. Instead of imposing fines on late filers, the FBR should pursue those who remain outside the tax filing system. Only those filers who have given wrong figures for their assets and hidden their income should be penalised to improve the FBR's credibility and promote tax compliance. Honest taxpayers, including those filing late, should be spared surcharge payments.

Minister's non-appearance

FEDERAL Water Resources Minister Faisal Vawda's continued absence from the Election Commission's hearing on the issue of his dual nationality speaks volumes for his views on due process. The minister has paid a Rs50,000 fine and even tendered an apology to the ECP for not attending proceedings, yet continues to skip hearings and prefers to send his lawyer instead. The entire saga has seen considerable foot-dragging by the minister, who most recently said he missed the hearing due to his mother's poor health. Even if this a genuine reason, his multiple past absences and the ECP's strong displeasure over his repeated postponements paint the picture of a lawmaker hoping to somehow evade legal proceedings. Not only has Mr Vawda avoided appearing before the ECP himself, a switch in lawyers mid-case has prompted criticism about delaying tactics. The case itself is fairly straightforward: if candidates for parliament do not renounce their second citizenship and the application is not approved by the other country at the cut-off date for filing nomination papers, they do not qualify for contesting elections. Last year, a report surfaced which suggested that Mr Vawda may have been in possession of a US passport at the

time he filed his nomination papers in June 2018. It is therefore a matter of Mr Vawda and his lawyers appearing before the authority and presenting their defence with evidence to avoid disqualification.

The fact that the minister is being fined for repeated adjournments and still avoiding the ECP does not speak well of his respect for the election body. It is remarkable that a member of parliament, and that too one who is a sitting federal minister, has decided to adopt such a haughty approach to proceedings. Even if one were to put aside the merits of the case, Mr Vawda's persistent disregard for due process in itself is appalling. The minister should know that both as a matter of principle and optics, his approach to this matter is unbecoming of an elected representative.

LoC ceasefire

THE Pakistan-India relationship is known for its complexity and bitterness, but there are times when surprises of a more positive kind are sprung. The recent decision by both militaries to honour the 2003 ceasefire along the LoC certainly qualifies as a pleasant surprise, considering the acrimony that has marked relations of recent.

In a joint statement released after hotline contact between the respective directors general military operations, "both sides agreed for strict observance of all agreements ... along the LoC and all other sectors". Considering that two years ago on this date both nuclear-armed rivals were at the brink of war, this is a welcome development. Moreover, too many innocent lives have been lost in cross-border shelling and ceasefire violations last year.

The move has not gone unnoticed, with the US State Department spokesman welcoming the move and encouraging continued "efforts to improve communication between the two sides". Washington has also urged Islamabad and New Delhi to hold direct parleys on Kashmir.

It is difficult to say in concrete terms whether this development is the result of bilateral backchannel contacts between Pakistan and India, or if the new US administration has 'nudged' both actors to try and resolve their differences. Regardless of the impetus, the fact that both sides are talking instead of facing

off at the border heralds a welcome change in the region, especially if the bellicosity that was emerging from New Delhi not too long ago is remembered.

And while the statement covers purely military matters along the LoC, buried within it are the seeds of normalisation, should both sides — particularly India — wish to pursue deconfliction. The “DGMOs agreed to address each other’s core issues/concerns which have propensity to disturb peace and lead to violence”, the statement says. Of course, from Pakistan’s perspective Kashmir is the core issue, and it is hoped that this and other irritants to peace are eventually addressed in a frank and progressive manner by both sides.

However, no one should be under the illusion that the bitterness afflicting bilateral ties will magically disappear on the basis of one statement. Peace-building is a long and arduous process, and when the relationship is as complex as that of Pakistan and India, things will take time to fall into place. As for external players, if the US is serious about peace in South Asia, it should clearly let New Delhi know that dialogue with Pakistan needs to be continued.

In the short term, the development bodes well for the people living along the LoC, who have paid with their lives due to Indian aggression. In the longer view, if New Delhi genuinely wants peace with Pakistan, it should make efforts towards restarting the dialogue process. Confidence-building measures will be more effective once political temperatures cool and India reviews its disastrous policy in held Kashmir.

Null and void

HAD people not lost their lives, the ham-fisted attempt at rigging the Daska by-election on Feb 19 could have been described as a parody. In fact, what transpired that day was a shocking display of the extent to which local and provincial administrations were willing to go to corrupt the process. It is therefore fitting that the Election Commission of Pakistan has declared the by-election null and void. In its detailed order issued on Thursday, the ECP said that the poll “has not been conducted honestly, fairly and in a transparent manner... leading to make the process of results doubtful/ unascertainable”. Not only did officers of 20 polling stations go missing after the votes were cast, but violent clashes created an atmosphere of intimidation for voters during the day, thereby rendering the exercise egregiously tainted overall. The regulatory body has therefore

announced re-election not only at the 20 polling stations that were considered problematic, but in the entire constituency. While the PML-N, which is claiming that its candidate's mandate was stolen, welcomed the ECP's decision, the PTI revised its initial stance. It had earlier said that it respected the ECP's decision and that it proves the PTI had fulfilled its pledge to allow institutions to function independently. Later however, the ruling party said it would challenge it in the Supreme Court.

The Daska by-election can be seen as a test case. With general elections a little over two years away, and possibly other polls in the interim, had the ECP taken a lenient view of the excesses committed, it would have sent a very wrong message and opened the floodgates for more in the same vein. Moreover, the regulatory body has also taken to task those involved in the brazen attempt to thwart the will of the people in the Daska constituency. Exercising the powers given to it under the Elections Act 2017 to ensure that polls are held in a conducive manner, the ECP has ordered federal and provincial authorities to suspend several public officials. These personnel, according to the ECP statement, will not be appointed for any election duty in future. The Punjab chief secretary and IG police, both federal appointees, have been summoned by the regulatory body for "ignoring their duties" on the day in question. It is heartening that the ECP under its current chairman has demonstrated it will tolerate nothing less than a free and fair election.

Underfunded police

FOR decades, successive governments in the country have talked about police reforms. While the latter are essential, it is absurd that politicians should harp on about enhancing the capabilities of the police without ensuring a commensurate increase in crime-fighting resources. Indeed, the required funds are missing in the police budget though crime figures keep pace with an increasing population. According to a report published in this newspaper, the Islamabad police can only spend Rs400 on average per case — around 8,750 cases were investigated last year. For the current fiscal, the capital's police must work with a meagre sum of Rs3.5m. Understandably, the lack of funds impacts the overall quality of investigations since Rs400 is not even enough to cover the cost of one out-of-city raid while the processes involved in forensic investigations such as fingerprint processing, lab tests, crime scene mapping and sketching of suspects cost

thousands of rupees. It is no wonder then that, according to the report, police officials resort to asking complainants for money or pay out of their own pocket for routine procedures that should be paid for by the government. Considering that the Islamabad police come under the purview of the federal government, this destitute state of the capital law-enforcement agency could not be more shocking. Even if the federal government is struggling financially, it should still be able to spare more funds to meet the recurring expenses of the police force of the nation's capital.

Meanwhile, similar conditions persist in the police forces of all provinces. Effective and transparent investigations are one of the primary functions of any police force and if not performed properly, they can have a negative impact on the law enforcers' public image. When police officials ask complainants for money for routine procedures, it only reinforces an undesirable public image of the force, and adds to demoralisation in the ranks. An independent and effective law-enforcement infrastructure is in everyone's interest. The public's sense of security and confidence in the police force cannot be taken lightly.

FATF decision

THE decision taken by the Financial Action Task Force to keep Pakistan on the grey list until June, despite the country making significant progress on the recommended actions, has disappointed many. There are examples where other nations were taken off the list of countries under enhanced monitoring by the global watchdog although they did far less than Islamabad which worked hard to tighten its anti-terror-financing and money-laundering controls over the last two years.

Pakistan has complied with 24 out of the 27 actions suggested by the FATF. One hopes that it acts vigorously in the remaining areas to be taken off the grey list soon. The FATF announcement that Pakistan has made "significant progress" even if some "serious deficiencies" remain in the mechanisms to eliminate terror financing, and the government's view that the country would not be put on the blacklist again, has been a ray of hope for all concerned.

At the same time, the FATF decision should jolt the authorities out of their complacency. There is no option but to work quickly and show progress on the rest of the FATF action plan. Even though doing so will not be easy for the state,

it is clear that unlike previously, the world wants complete compliance with the global body's exacting standards this time around. The FATF president's statement that the watchdog will verify the completed actions and members of the task force would vote (to remove Pakistan from the list of countries on the grey list) "as soon as they improve their investigations and prosecutions of all groups and entities financing terrorists and their associates and show [that] penalties by courts are effective" underlines this new reality.

It goes without saying that complete compliance will bring its own dividends for the economy. The increasing inflow of remittances through legal channels is only one of the many economic benefits that Pakistan stands to reap from adopting global standards on illicit financing.

Last but not the least, the battle to stay out of the grey list in future will not end once Pakistan is taken off it. There is bound to be a tough struggle for a much longer time until the world learns to look upon this country as a responsible and trustworthy partner in the international fight against terrorism. The end of the endeavour to get off this list is in sight and the country must leave no stone unturned to reach its goal.

Covid concerns

WITH every form of restriction now effectively lifted in the country after an assessment of the Covid-19 situation, the weeks ahead present a new challenge for the government. As schools, cinemas and mass indoor gatherings such as weddings begin to return to the pre-Covid era, a successful vaccine roll-out is imperative. In the UK, where both national morale and the economy have taken a colossal hit due to record deaths and cases, a successful inoculation drive is restoring hope and trust. Pakistan has been fortunate, that despite a weak and unsophisticated healthcare system and a large population, it has reported a far lower number of deaths and cases when compared to several higher-income countries. The exact reason for this is yet to be determined. But while experts scratch their heads, and factors such as herd immunity and a young population are mulled over, the authorities cannot be complacent. The Covid-19 nightmare is far from over. Therefore, the resumption of regular commercial activities must go hand in hand with a mass vaccination programme.

A successful programme hinges on a public awareness programme, a streamlined monitoring and distribution strategy and transparent communication. Thus far, China's Sinopharm has arrived in Pakistan with over half a million doses. Covax has donated 17m doses which the government expects will arrive in phases from March to June. While the vaccine is being administered to healthcare workers across the country, registration rates remain low. Healthcare workers in some areas have shown reluctance citing several concerns, including fears about side effects and lack of information about efficacy. Here, the government must do more to raise awareness and build confidence so that people understand that the benefits of getting the vaccine outweigh the perceived risks. Secondly, systems in place from past vaccination programmes must be made use of. This includes a plan for how budgets will be used as well as one for the detection and monitoring of new cases in order to determine the extent to which the population is protected. Third, a daily update on vaccinations is imperative, as it will not only build transparency but also reinforce the idea of how central the vaccine is to resuming normal activities.

Though cases in the country remain low, the story did turn grim during the first and second peaks. Today, anecdotal accounts of severe Covid-19 symptoms and deaths are not uncommon. Testing, however, remains abysmally low at between 30,000 and 40,000 daily. For a population of over 200m, of which 70m have been identified by the government as potential vaccine recipients, this figure is a tragedy. Increased testing is a must if the government wants to continue to keep commercial activities going. Failure to ensure this will mean we might be forced to face yet another peak — especially if the vaccination programme is slow.