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Contents

Additional Spectrum	7
Peca ptsrotes.....	7
Counterterrorism ops.....	8
Absent justice.....	9
Out of tune.....	10
Vanishing lifeline	11
Kurram fragility	12
Captive shift	13
Inheritance denied.....	14
Balochistan turmoil.....	15
Skewed priorities.....	16
Fertility puzzle.....	17
Kashmir question	18
Letters from jail	19
Agriculture tax.....	20
No time left	21
Karim Aga Khan	22
Cotton production.....	23
Depopulating Gaza	24
'Pause' in US aid.....	25
Mobilising opposition	26
Dhanmondi attack.....	26
Wheat decision	27
A year later	28
Race against time	29
Football suspension	31
Justice for all.....	32
Held back.....	33

A positive note	34
IMF scrutiny.....	35
Shadow voices.....	36
Paradise at a premium	37
Hate in India	38
Sunken dreams.....	38
Ill omens.....	39
Trump’s folly	40
Corruption ranking.....	42
Support from remittances.....	42
Amazing show	43
Difficult target	44
Dangerous times	45
Miners in danger	46
Solar panels scam.....	47
The Peca problem	48
Childhood trauma	49
Welcome return	49
Maintaining balance.....	50
Tax policy reform.....	51
UN monitoring report	52
Climate funding gap	53
Cholistan project	54
Right to know	55
Dam dispute	56
Premature alarm	57
Forsaken province	58
In poor health.....	59
Ukraine initiative	60

High cost of SOEs	61
Poor impression	62
Rules for thee	63
Paying taxes.....	63
Judiciary in the dock	64
Defending freedom	65
Anti-Muslim crimes	66
The long wait.....	67
Oblivious to drought	68
Taliban divisions	69
Digital children	70
All out.....	71
Bearing the brunt	72
Afghan resettlement	73
Deadly roads	74
Controlling crypto	75
Forgotten inmates.....	75
The challenge before banks	77
Torkham tension	78
Weak link.....	78

Additional Spectrum

PAKISTAN'S mobile operators need more spectrum, the radio waves that carry voice calls and wireless data, as their present government-rationed spectrum slices are choked, and unable to meet the rapidly growing demand for data. Poor mobile connectivity marked by frequent call drops, and a slower, erratic internet service are only a few of the signs of the existing digital infrastructure falling far behind demand as the authorities fail to make more spectrum available to the operators. If their capacity issues are not addressed, it will become impossible for the telecom operators to keep pace with the demand and improve their deteriorating services.

The GSMA, which represents mobile operators and entities across the mobile ecosystem, says in a new paper that delays in assigning spectrum could lead to significant economic losses, with a two-year delay potentially costing the GDP \$1.8bn between 2025 and 2030, and a five-year delay resulting in losses of up to \$4.3bn. It has also criticised Pakistan's spectrum policy that prioritises collection of revenue in massive licence fees over digital transformation. Interestingly, the government has not auctioned additional spectrum since 2014 when Pakistan launched the 3/4G services. Attempts to auction additional spectrum were abandoned or did not succeed because of the unsustainable costs to be paid in dollars. The GSMA says that even past auctions in 2014 and 2021 resulted in unsold spectrum, leading to reduced spectrum supply for telcos and overall significant economic losses. Mobile operators appear indifferent to plans to launch 5G services and auction more spectrum this year, due to the pricing formula that is being seen as "a significant threat to the future development of mobile services". That said, the government must prioritise digital infrastructure development over revenue generation if 5G services are to be successfully rolled out and the dream of its 'Digital Pakistan' initiative is to materialise.

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Peca ptsrotes

DESPITE the immense pressures they routinely face, Pakistani journalists have always cherished and jealously safeguarded their freedoms. There is hope that, despite everything, the fight has not yet left the community. On Friday, they rallied for the observance of a 'Black Day' against recent amendments to the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, which were bulldozed by the ruling coalition through parliament and signed into law by the president earlier this week. There are now harsher penalties in effect for anything deemed 'fake news' by the authorities, expanded state oversight of digital platforms, and preparations for new regulatory bodies to monitor and clamp down on social media. Decrying the Peca amendments as a 'black' law, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, which organised the protest, had called out ruling parties for advocating for

freedom of expression when in the opposition and betraying them once in power. Condemning the amended Act for enabling detentions and penalties without fair trial procedures, the PFUJ has also announced a nationwide 'press freedom movement', to be led by journalists and rights activists, and said it would join formal challenges to the law along with lawyers across the country.

In a just society, the legitimacy of any law is considered not in its convenience to the rulers of the day but in its universality. A good law must protect and safeguard rights and freedoms regardless of who holds power. The Peca amendments, on the other hand, seem to have been designed to serve a few while endangering the many. Those who legislated and enacted the amendments do not seem to have given adequate thought to their potential dangers. It is also strange that they have overlooked repeated warnings, even from well-wishers: after all, one of the first casualties of the original Peca were the same parties that had helped the law's passage. Unheard and dismissed, the press and legal fraternities have chosen to take a worthy stand; one that is reasonably cautious of the implications of the newly updated law. For their own sake, the ruling parties should pay heed to their concerns. All stakeholders realise that there can be no compromise on national security, but at the same time there are sharp disagreements over how the digital sphere must be secured. The government must listen to opposing viewpoints and address all stakeholders' concerns.

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Counterterrorism ops

THE past year was not a good one where deadly terrorist attacks go, for according to the military's data, 2024 saw the highest number of civilian and military casualties in a decade.

Much of this bloodshed is the handiwork of the banned TTP and other religiously inspired militants, though separatist groups in Balochistan also launched several major attacks. Now it seems that the state has decided to push back hard, going after militants in the worst-affected parts of KP.

Since the start of 2025, numerous operations have been conducted in several KP districts. Two separate attacks occurred in North Waziristan, in which four personnel were martyred on Thursday. As per the military's media wing, 13 terrorists were killed in the encounters. Moreover, around 30 terrorists have been killed in earlier operations. Counterterrorism action was also carried out on Friday.

The military should continue its CT operations till all the affected areas are cleared of militancy. The state has a good idea of the geographical area which needs to be focused on, for the vast number of the 444 terrorist attacks last year occurred in KP. The security

forces need to zero in on the districts where militants have established a foothold, and neutralise or evict these malign actors from Pakistani territory. The loss of personnel is particularly tragic, and as this paper has written before, civil and military personnel need to be given better equipment and training that could help save lives in the heat of battle.

The issue of abandoned American weapons in Afghanistan has also come up recently. Earlier, top officials, including the defence minister, had said that TTP fighters were using weapons US forces left behind in Afghanistan after their 2021 retreat. US President Donald Trump has said that “we want the military equipment back” with reference to these weapons.

The Foreign Office has also weighed in on the issue, with the spokesman saying that Pakistan has repeatedly called for ensuring that the weapons “do not fall into the wrong hands”. Making sure that American arms should not end up in the hands of TTP or other terrorists should be a priority for all regional states, as well as the international community. The previous US administration acted hastily by leaving such high-tech gear to be scooped up by terrorists. The current US set-up should do all possible to see that whatever remains of these armaments is retrieved.

To prevent the bloodshed witnessed in 2024, Pakistan will have to act internally, by honing its CT policy to meet the threat, while also maintaining diplomatic pressure on the Afghan Taliban to ensure their soil is not used by anti-Pakistan actors. Together with kinetic operations and supplementary actions, terrorism can be defeated.

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Absent justice

THE judges of the Islamabad High Court had issued an SOS. It was swept aside with customary disdain.

Though five judges of the court had, through a letter, expressed strong reservations about a plan to transplant judges in the IHC from other courts, President Asif Zardari did just that late Saturday. It remains to be seen whether one of the relocated judges will also end up as chief justice of the IHC, as had been feared. Given the government’s bent, it would not be a surprise. It had long been anticipated that the IHC and its judges would be penalised at an opportune time for complaining to the former CJP against the establishment’s meddling in court affairs.

If the senior-most judges are so helpless, what hope does the common citizen have? Who do ordinary Pakistanis turn to for justice, when it is becoming increasingly clear that even those supposed to uphold it do not have any for themselves?

The judges' fears, expressed in the letter, were never unfounded. The nation had witnessed a capable Supreme Court justice being denied a well-deserved promotion, apparently only because of their refusal to agree with the position taken by the ruling regime in a key case. Other developments — especially regarding the fixing of important cases and major appointments — further cemented perceptions that the judiciary was being consciously remoulded to guarantee the continuity of the status quo. The president's decision merely affirms the trend.

However, the ruling regime will not always be able to push everyone standing in its path against the wall. There will come a time when reactions will not be limited to mere letters and protestations. The laws of nature suggest that all systems eventually revert to their mean position. And so, at some point, the architects of Pakistan's present-day policies will confront the consequences of their decisions. How those consequences play out will depend on what strength remains in the state's institutions.

Right now, all roads seem to lead to dystopia; to an oppressive future characterised by totalitarianism and general tyranny. This may seem like an overly gloomy prognosis to some. Realistically, however, it is difficult to expect much from a system that is gradually becoming completely divorced from any objective measure of fairness. There is a reason justice is such a cherished ideal in all stable societies: it allows their systems to correct course quickly and without incurring painful costs.

Pakistan needs its judiciary to be able to ensure justice for its citizens. Without public faith in its justice system, it runs the risk of accelerated social breakdown. A nation so young and so full of potential should not be bled of its hopes for a fairer future. The gradual slide towards anarchy must be reversed.

Published in Dawn, February 2nd, 2025

Out of tune

WITH the start of UN World Interfaith Harmony Week, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's call for dialogue, understanding, mutual respect and cooperation among religious communities is a timely reminder of how much remains to be done to promote communal tolerance in the country.

“The groundbreaking Interfaith Harmony Policy and Strategy of Religious Tolerance are now in motion, targeting hate speech at its core, safeguarding every temple, church, and

shrine,” he said, while admitting that challenges remained. And these challenges are considerable.

It is no secret that constitutional assurances of freedom for religious groups to practise their faith and of protection for the life and liberty of all citizens ring hollow for many of Pakistan’s religious minorities, who include Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and Ahmadis among others, forming only 4pc of the population. They exist on the peripheries of society, with many at risk of being targeted by divisive zealots with disruptive agendas and actions.

For centuries, coexistence among different faith groups was hardly considered novel. But in the present times, thanks to the space ceded to radical elements, belonging to a minority sect or group can be a sombre presage of severe consequences.

Pakistan’s communally charged situation can hardly be said to be an unplanned phenomenon; with different rulers at different times exploiting religion to promote their own agendas. This has come back to haunt the country in the form of not only religiously inspired militancy but also vigilantism in society, the misuse of blasphemy laws, forced conversions, desecration of religious places, etc.

Such activities can often be traced to sinister purposes of control and settling personal scores. Small wonder then that episodes such as the torching of Christian neighbourhoods and mob justice for a blasphemy accused are not uncommon. For even marginal healing to begin, the process of accountability must be set in motion for those who spew bigotry and encourage violence from the pulpit. Harmony requires prosecuting and punishing hate-mongers, and formulating inclusive policies with measures to curtail venomous narratives.

Pakistan, as an economic backwater, needs social cohesion for development and political agency. The state should adopt a more aggressive approach to reverse the tide of zealotry and establish a platform for leaders from different faiths to break the social impasse.

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Vanishing lifeline

AS the world marks Wetlands Day, Pakistan’s critical ecosystems find themselves in an unenviable position. The country’s 780,000 hectares of wetlands — nature’s own water-management infrastructure — are diminishing at an alarming rate. The timing could hardly be worse. Pakistan is grappling with a severe winter drought, with rainfall 40pc below normal levels. Farm output, particularly wheat production, could plummet by half. In such circumstances, functioning wetlands — which act as natural reservoirs and flood barriers — become invaluable. Yet Pakistan has managed its 19 internationally recognised

Ramsar sites with remarkable ineptitude. The problems are particularly acute in Sindh, home to 10 Ramsar sites. Take Keenjhar Lake, which supplies drinking water to Karachi's millions. Industrial effluents pour in unchecked, while water availability dwindles. Similar stories plague Manchhar Lake and the Indus delta wetlands. The country's environmental protection agencies are mere spectators.

This is a peculiar form of economic self-harm. Wetlands provide ecosystem services worth billions annually through flood protection, groundwater recharge, and support for fisheries and agriculture. Their degradation threatens not just biodiversity but also livelihoods and food security. The climate change ministry has made encouraging noises about wetland restoration as part of its drought-mitigation strategy. But we have a history of producing ambitious environmental policies that simply gather dust. Implementation remains the Achilles' heel. Rapid action is needed on three fronts: stringent enforcement of existing environmental laws, dedicated water allocation for wetland maintenance, and a comprehensive restoration programme. The economic returns would far outweigh the costs. But this requires political will and bureaucratic coordination — both rare commodities. If Pakistan's wetlands continue to deteriorate at the current pace, the country may find itself facing not just an environmental crisis but an economic and social one too. We better save them.

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Kurram fragility

JUST as the people of Kurram began to see some relief in the form of convoys laden with essentials reaching Parachinar and other parts of the district cut off from the rest of the country due to bloodshed, fresh violence on Friday showed that calm in the tribal district can be shattered very easily.

Local authorities had intervened to keep the peace after two men were injured in a firing incident. Yet even the government peacemakers came under fire, highlighting the volatile state of affairs in Kurram.

Assistant Commissioner Saeed Manan, who was trying to mediate, was shot but is, thankfully, out of danger. However, a policeman, Ashiq Hussain, later succumbed to his wounds. This is not the first time officials and security men have come under attack.

Last month, the then deputy commissioner Javedullah Mehsud survived a murderous attack in Bagan, while days later militants martyred a number of security men. A 'limited' counterterrorism operation was launched thereafter, but as the latest attack shows, much more needs to be done to pacify Kurram.

Admittedly, the Kurram imbroglio is complicated, where tribal disputes over land and water have become intertwined with long-running sectarian feuds. There is also a geopolitical and security angle, as many of the Sunni militant groups active in the area are on good terms with the Afghan Taliban, while Shia militants linked to the Zainabiyoun Brigade maintain a strong presence in Kurram.

Bloodletting has been continuing since last year, and matters exploded after a convoy was attacked in November. Since then, attacks and counterattacks have been frequent.

The state has made several — some would say belated — attempts to quell the violence, the most significant coming in the form of a peace deal hammered out on New Year's Day. But clearly, it will take full commitment by all state institutions, as well as the earnest cooperation of local tribes, to make the agreement work.

A grand jirga was held on Friday in Kohat to discuss the Kurram situation. At this gathering, the KP government spokesperson seemed upbeat about peace prospects. While the state's efforts to contain bloodshed are appreciable, it will take more than words to bring lasting calm to Kurram.

At the Kohat Jirga, the KP spokesman said it was essential that "miscreants" involved in troublemaking be handed over to the authorities. He also said a relief package for Kurram was being finalised. Both these issues are important.

Those involved in violence must face the law, while those who have suffered during the conflict must be compensated financially. Moreover, the closure of roads in Kurram cannot be tolerated, and all thoroughfares should be made safe for travel. Efforts to engender reconciliation and forgiveness between Kurram's tribes must also continue.

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Captive shift

THE objective of the Power Division's directive to the public distribution companies, including K-Electric, to sign service-level agreements with industries using gas-based captive power for their electricity needs is to lure them away from their off-grid, in-house generation to the national grid. The idea is to arrest falling demand on the grid and boost the use of a huge idle grid capacity for slashing the burden of capacity payments on consumer tariffs. The industry's total self-generation capacity across the country, mainly in Punjab and Sindh, is estimated to be 2,150MW. The government could slash its capacity payments on surplus generation capacity by Rs240bn and cut the consumer tariffs by Rs2 per unit even if the industry agrees to shut down 70pc of its in-house generation and shift to the grid. The authorities have already raised the gas prices for

captive power plants from Rs3,000 per mmBtu to Rs3,500 per mmBtu to discourage the use of self-generation under its \$7bn agreement with the IMF.

Captive power is quite popular among manufacturers, especially textile producers, due to a combination of economic, operational and infrastructural factors. Our energy infrastructure faces challenges such as frequent power outages, and voltage fluctuations, which can significantly disrupt industrial operations. Besides, in-house generation is cheaper than electricity from the grid, which enables businesses to control their energy costs, while ensuring uninterrupted production. The agreements with the industries will commit to the “provision of stable, reliable and high-quality electricity supplies to them, catering to their specific needs”. In case of supply disruptions or grid fluctuations, the distribution firms will face heavy penalties. The agreements will also cover mechanisms for addressing technical faults in electricity supply and dispute resolution. The question is whether distribution companies are in a position to give such undertakings to the industry. Although the Discos and K-Electric have large distribution networks, especially in Punjab and Sindh where captive power is located, the network is mostly unreliable and plagued with inefficiencies due to lack of investment in its upgradation, the key reasons why industries opted out of the grid in the first place. Unless the distribution companies start investing in their networks, it would be impossible to lure the industries back to the grid. But do they have enough cash to upgrade their network?

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Inheritance denied

PAKISTAN's heritage — from the Hindu Kush range to the Indus banks and delta — is a testament to the richness of our identity. But one of the largest ancient civilisations has spent decades under threat because it was never a national priority. Recently, Karachi's TDF MagnifiScience Centre organised a virtual journey to the cultural remnants of the Indus delta through digitally documented sites. A part of the Digital Heritage Trail by MaritimEA, an organisation focused on cultural heritage management, maritime archaeology and 'blue economy master-planning', The Lost Cities of the Indus Delta project digitally documents Lahiri Bunder, Bhambhor, Ratu Kot Fort, Ranu Kot, Jam Jaskat Goth, and more. While this is an encouraging endeavour, which acknowledges that preserved tangible and intangible antiquity can change our fortunes, the battle to shrink human interventions, plunder, and climactic impact must be fought in real time and on-site.

Neglect and greed have made vast archaeological tracts and treasures almost invisible. The eighth-century ruins of Mansura in Sindh, formerly known as Brahmanabad, are a case in point: without fencing and security, smugglers and ecological devastation blight this incomparable repository. Where heritage and cultural conservation cannot change the world, it can certainly make it worth living in. The government must do its duty to making preservation and restoration a political agenda with an effective budget and legislation, alongside the stringent application of the Heritage Act, 1974, and the Sindh Cultural Heritage (Preservation) Act, 1994. Pakistan's rare inheritance requires international collaboration and best practices to create socioeconomic growth through tourism, employment and development. Such an undertaking is not easy. However, it is the most constructive way to rebuild a sense of identity, memory, tolerance and learning. Policies that define cultural rights so that inclusion and peace are sacrosanct form the most vital aspect of this journey.

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Balochistan turmoil

THE unacceptable loss of at least 22 security men in two separate attacks between Friday and Saturday — in Balochistan and KP — underscore the need to address the problem of terrorism in both provinces with alacrity.

In the first incident, at least 18 paramilitary troops were martyred as they were reportedly ambushed by terrorists in Kalat. In the second episode, four Levies personnel from Balochistan were martyred in KP's Dera Ismail Khan, near the border of both provinces.

The Kalat atrocity has been claimed by the separatist BLA, and while no group has accepted responsibility for the D.I. Khan attack, the area is known to have a TTP presence. These abhorrent attacks illustrate the fact that the biggest terrorist threat Pakistan faces comes from two major actors: religiously inspired militants, and separatist forces.

Though there is no evidence to suggest that the BLA and TTP coordinated these attacks, some experts have said that the latter may be courting the former to jointly fight the state.

After KP, Balochistan is most affected by militancy. As per one think tank, there were at least 24 terrorist attacks in the province last month, resulting in the loss of 11 security men and six civilians.

The sophistication and frequency of attacks indicate that separatist forces may be getting help from external hostile actors. Undoubtedly, the state's first priority should be to secure all of Balochistan, and ensure that its people are able to live in peace.

While security operations need to be carried out to ensure terrorist groups cannot operate freely, efforts are also required on the diplomatic front to confront inimical states, and warn them against stoking fires within the country. Moreover, funding and arms transfers to the separatists must be traced and blocked.

Yet, while the state cannot compromise on Balochistan's security, a distinction needs to be made between the province's political forces, and separatist militants. Conflating the two is unhelpful, and state action against political activists may actually propel the latter towards militancy.

Poverty, underdevelopment and the issue of enforced disappearances are hard realities in Balochistan.

Therefore, those elements that raise these issues in a democratic fashion should not be demonised by the state. Lately, we have seen terrorism cases filed against Baloch rights activists. Indeed, in the heat of the moment, some activists may use questionable language during rallies and protests, but this cannot be equated with terrorism.

While the state should confront and neutralise actual terrorists murdering security personnel and innocent civilians, an accommodative approach is required where Baloch activists and political forces are concerned.

Though trust between the estranged Baloch population and the state cannot be built overnight, the government's most potent counterterrorism weapon can be ensuring Balochistan's full constitutional rights.

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Skewed priorities

OVER the past few years, the people of Pakistan have paid immensely for their state's failure to expend national resources in sensible, sustainable ways. The pressure that foreign lenders have been exerting on Pakistan to force it to live within its means is one of the consequences of the country's history of bad policies. Stricter oversight from the IMF has worked in some ways, but it has also resulted in several anti-people outcomes. Since our federal policymakers have a limited appetite for broadening the tax base, they have taken to repeatedly appropriating funds earmarked for the people's development and using them to meet the country's financial needs. Seen from another perspective, re-appropriation of development spending has been used as a tactic by the ruling elite to force ordinary people to shoulder as much as possible of the burden of years of their own bad policies. Considering how hard ordinary Pakistanis have been hit by higher taxation and runaway inflation, basic decency would demand that the government show at least

some regret for repeatedly taking from their development funds. Instead, Islamabad has little remorse for its misdeeds.

Though tax collection for the ongoing fiscal year is now almost half a trillion rupees behind target, the size of politically managed development schemes is being doubled to Rs50bn for fiscal 2024-25, according to reports. While it will be argued that these funds will be spent on projects that ultimately benefit the public, there are three key issues that bear highlighting. Firstly, funds allocated to political schemes usually end up with lawmakers from ruling parties. This can mean that areas where the opposition is more popular may be deprived of the benefits of such schemes. Secondly, because these funds are spent at lawmakers' discretion, there is a high chance of corruption and cronyism in the award of project contracts. Lastly, the argument for lawmaker-led schemes is that they know their areas better and understand local needs; however, the question remains whether, in practice, their priorities actually align with local development needs. What cannot be denied is that these schemes are meant to maximise political benefits for the ruling elite. Given the dire state of our finances, no amount of public funds should be used so arbitrarily, especially not for political purposes. The present mess is a result of such skewed priorities.

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Fertility puzzle

THE dramatic fall in global fertility rates — from 4.8 births per woman in 1970 to 2.2 in 2024 — represents one of history's great demographic shifts. Yet some nations remain stuck in transition. Pakistan, South Asia's second-most-populous country, exemplifies both progress and challenges in bringing birth rates to sustainable levels. The country's fertility rate has tumbled from six births per woman in 1994 to 3.6 today, according to the UN's latest World Fertility Report. But this masks stark disparities. Urban women average far fewer children than their rural counterparts. The adolescent birth rate, at 40 per 1,000 women aged 15-19, remains stubbornly high. At current trends, Pakistan will not reach replacement-level fertility of 2.1 children until 2079 — decades behind its neighbours. Bangladesh's fertility rate has fallen to 2.14 and is projected to reach replacement level by 2026. India achieved replacement-level fertility in 2020.

This matters enormously for Pakistan's development prospects. High fertility strains public services and household resources. Yet managed properly, a falling birth rate could yield a 'demographic dividend' of working-age adults unburdened by dependents, powering economic growth as it did in East Asia. Achieving this requires a more muscular approach from policymakers. Access to family planning remains patchy, particularly in

rural areas. Many women lack the autonomy to make reproductive choices. Child marriage, though illegal, persists. Meanwhile, female labour force participation remains among the world's lowest. The government should integrate family planning into primary healthcare while expanding girls' education and women's employment. Religious leaders could be enlisted to challenge cultural resistance to contraception. Better data collection would help target interventions. None of this is rocket science. Bangladesh shows what determined policy can achieve. But our lacklustre governance limits implementation, while conservative social attitudes run deep. Without sustained political will to complete the fertility transition, we risk squandering our demographic moment. The next decade could prove decisive.

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Kashmir question

ALMOST eight decades since Pakistan and India became sovereign states, the Kashmir issue remains unresolved, bedevilling ties between the neighbours, with the people of the disputed region unable to exercise their right to self-determination.

Moreover, since the events of August 2019, India has tightened its grip over the occupied territory, removing the limited rights the held region had under the Indian constitution. Though the hard-line BJP government may think the Kashmir dispute is a thing of the past, the fact is that the territory remains internationally disputed, and no amount of constitutional tinkering and attempts to alter occupied Kashmir's demography by New Delhi can change this reality.

The BJP government may like the world to think that it has transformed held Kashmir into a proverbial heaven on earth, but the dark reality of the Indian occupation cannot be hidden.

While Pakistan has long been raising the Kashmir issue at international forums, neutral observers, too, have pointed out the Indian state's excesses in the disputed region.

For example, Human Rights Watch has said that journalists in IJK remain vulnerable to state violence, including physical assault and the threat of "fabricated criminal cases". It adds that "hundreds of Kashmiris", including journalists and human rights activists, remained in detention.

On the other hand, Amnesty International has also criticised India's "arbitrary detentions" and "stringent anti-terror laws" in IJK. It also says that repression in the region has escalated since Article 370 was scrapped in 2019. These descriptions are a mere glimpse of the ugly reality of the occupied region.

The fact is that the only principled and peaceful solution to the Kashmir dispute remains the plebiscite the UN Security Council called for in 1949, after India had taken the Kashmir case to the world body.

Over the decades, no Indian government has taken any serious steps to implement the UN's resolution, with the result that the Kashmir dispute has become a source of permanent discord in the subcontinent.

However, until there is a long-term solution in light of the aforementioned resolution, an alternative option for peace in Kashmir and the entire subcontinent would be the implementation of the four-point plan hammered out during the Musharraf era.

That scheme envisaged a 'soft' LoC, with free movement of people and goods across Kashmir, and eventual demilitarisation.

If both sides, particularly India, are serious about peace, reviving this formula could be the starting point for fresh negotiations. The important thing is to continue the dialogue process, on bilateral disputes as well as the Kashmir issue, and move beyond rigid positions.

On Kashmir Solidarity Day today, Pakistan should reaffirm its support for the people of Kashmir. It should also keep the door open for India in case it decides to resolve the Kashmir question through dialogue.

Published in Dawn, February 5th, 2025

Letters from jail

OVER the past week, former prime minister Imran Khan has directly addressed his concerns to both the chief justice of Pakistan and the army chief. Disappointingly, he refuses to extend the same regard to the chiefs of his rival parties. Why is that so? Only he can answer. Perhaps it is ego; perhaps it is something else. But while there may be good reasons for why the PTI wishes to keep a distance from the PPP and the PML-N, it seems a little unnecessary that this distance be measurable in light-years instead of ideology and policy divergences. After all, all three parties are representative of the people of Pakistan. How many, respectively, is indeed a debatable topic, but no one can deny that each party has a stake in the country's politics. This alone qualifies each of them to be regarded and treated by each other as legitimate stakeholders in a shared future. It is true that none of them has acted fairly towards their rivals, and all of them harbour legitimate grievances towards each other. But politics is "the art of the next best", not settling vendettas.

That said, the concerns raised by the incarcerated PTI chief are indeed valid, but they are decidedly not new. Each of the three parties has suffered at the hands of an errant judiciary and an overreaching establishment. They have more in common with each other than they would care to admit. Though each of the three has repeatedly cast the other two as the biggest villains in the country, the truth is that all three face bigger problems that each of them individually has failed to adequately contend with. The answer has been clear all along to those who wish to see civilian rule strengthened in Pakistan: the PTI, PML-N and PPP must work together and with each other even as they build their individual political identities. It may make for a gripping political soap opera, but their feuding has not benefited the common citizen in any conceivable way. Indeed, the damage it has caused is shocking in scope. The PTI chief, as well as the leaders of the PML-N and the PPP, must acknowledge that they share common problems. There will be better outcomes if they start to talk to each other and resolve them together.

Published in Dawn, February 5th, 2025

Agriculture tax

WITH Sindh and Balochistan finally approving changes to their agriculture income tax laws to harmonise their AIT rates with the federal personal and corporate income tax regime, the country has met another IMF funding programme goal. Even though the provinces, barring Punjab, breached the deadlines set by the IMF for the passage of the required changes in their AIT laws, the amended versions should help reinforce Pakistan's case during the first biannual performance review of the programme, due later this month or early March. The provinces had committed with the lender to make the required legislative changes in their respective farm tax laws before the start of 2025 to increase their own tax collection efforts.

The harmonisation of the provincial agriculture tax laws with the federal income tax laws is not only crucial for broadening the tax base, it is also important for plugging a big loophole that facilitates tax evasion due to a low slab rate. While it is senseless to expect the changes in the provincial AIT regimes to significantly increase revenues immediately, the measure should make the national tax system a bit more equitable. Therefore, criticism of the centre for 'imposing' the new AIT rates on Sindh's people by the province's chief minister and other PPP legislators was misplaced. What the recent economic and financial crisis has underlined is that the state, which has one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios of less than 10pc in the world, has no option but to collect taxes from every segment of the economy. Nor can it shift the tax burden of one segment onto another to meet its increasing revenue needs for building infrastructure and improving public services. That said, the passage of the amendments to the law was the easier part. It will more difficult

to revamp the collection system. For that, the provinces must build the capacity of their revenue officials and digitise their land records.

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No time left

PAKISTAN teeters on the edge of an environmental abyss. Ranked among the most climate-vulnerable nations, it endures extreme heat, apocalyptic floods, prolonged droughts, and choking air pollution.

The annual smog that engulfs urban centres is not merely an inconvenience — it is a broader governance failure. Meanwhile, rural communities watch helplessly as their worlds disintegrate: glaciers retreat, monsoons become erratic, and fertile lands turn to dust.

Yet, climate change concerns continue to remain a footnote as politics dominates the national discourse, surfacing only when disaster strikes. A proactive approach, built on long-term resilience, is the obvious way forward. But what are we willing to do about it?

Dawn's 'Breathe Pakistan' campaign is one attempt to make it central to the national conversation. However, Pakistan needs much more — it needs a revolution in environmental governance.

This demands unprecedented coordination among stakeholders: government bodies, industry leaders, international partners, researchers, CSOs, and communities. The time for symbolic gestures and non-binding commitments has passed.

The path forward requires fundamental shifts. First, climate change must be elevated to the highest tier of national security concerns, alongside terrorism and economic stability. This means overhauling environmental protection frameworks with substantial fines for polluters, stringent emissions controls, and massive investment in public transportation.

Urban planning must pivot from concrete-jungle expansion to green development, with strict preservation of remaining urban forests. Agriculture, both a casualty and a contributor to climate change, also requires urgent reform.

Pakistan's excessive reliance on water-intensive crops has depleted underground reserves. The solution lies in introducing drought-resistant crop varieties, implementing water-smart irrigation systems, and incentivising farmers to adopt climate-resilient techniques. This revolution must be supported by a parallel energy transition, leveraging our abundant renewable resources — solar, wind, and hydroelectric power.

The private sector, often seen as part of the problem, must be brought into the solution. Corporate accountability on carbon footprints should be non-negotiable, with tax incentives for sustainable business practices.

Pakistan's international partners, too, have a role — debt relief mechanisms tied to green development, knowledge transfers, and climate finance must be expanded to help chart a sustainable path.

Environmental education needs radical reimagining. Pakistan requires comprehensive climate literacy programmes integrated into school and university curricula. Media outlets must move beyond disaster coverage to sustained environmental journalism, investigating root causes and highlighting solutions. Change begins at the grassroots, and public participation is indispensable.

Pakistan's survival hinges on its ability to treat climate change as the defining challenge of our time. Either we act now, or we surrender to a future of escalating disasters.

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Karim Aga Khan

PRINCE Karim Aga Khan was a man who straddled various worlds and cultures. Beyond his role as spiritual leader of the world's Ismaili Muslims, he was a man of great wealth and influence, channelling funds towards the socioeconomic uplift of his flock as well as other communities, particularly in the developing world. Pakistan — where his followers can be found from the coastal towns of Sindh to the mountains of the far north — was among the key countries he focused on, especially with regard to health and education schemes, with people from all confessional backgrounds benefiting. A major university and hospital, as well as countless health and education schemes across the country, bear the Aga Khan mark. Perhaps his concern for Pakistan, apart from the presence of his community members in the country, can be traced to his grandfather, Aga Khan III, who played a key role in the Pakistan Movement.

Though Karim Aga Khan was the leader of a religious group that traces its origins to the eighth century, he was a thoroughly modern man. He wore many hats — Olympic skier, breeder and owner of thoroughbred horses, astute entrepreneur, philanthropist, and religious leader. He rubbed shoulders with royalty and the global political elite, while his followers were spread out across the world, from the subcontinent to the mountains of Central Asia and the coast of East Africa and beyond. In almost seven decades as head of the Ismaili imamat, the late prince transformed his jamaat, while also contributing to the communities and states where his followers lived. Arguably, it was his contributions to

health, education and culture that will particularly stand out. He encouraged his followers to pursue educational excellence, and the institutions he oversaw also offered pathways for people from all confessional backgrounds to gain quality education. Prince Karim's contribution to cultural preservation was also considerable, particularly of historical monuments in Muslim states. In his condolence message, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif stated that the late Aga Khan "championed the cause of the marginalised". In fact, Prince Karim's focus on health and education would be a model worthy of emulation for religious and community leaders across the Muslim world. There is little doubt that the 50th Ismaili imam, Rahim Aga Khan, will have formidable standards to uphold.

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Cotton production

PAKISTAN'S cotton crop is on the ropes. The crop output has been falling since FY15, when the country harvested a record quantity of nearly 14m bales. In the past 10 years, its production has fluctuated from 4.9m bales to just over 10m. This year is no different, as the output is estimated to plunge by nearly a third to around 7m bales from last year's 10.2, the latest cotton arrivals indicate. Even though Pakistan remains the world's fifth largest cotton producer, our share in global production has plunged to around 6pc compared to India's 22pc.

The reasons for the collapse of the cotton crop, the backbone of the textile exports, which fetch over half our export revenue, range from government policy failures to farmers shifting from cotton to more profitable crops like sugarcane due to unavailability of quality seeds, slow adoption of modern farming practices and the impact of climate change. Our scientists and researchers have done little to build new seed technologies to help cotton farmers fight crop diseases and manage the impact of the climate change as seen in heatwaves, drought, and excessive rain. It was against this backdrop that the First National Cotton Revival Conference was held in Multan recently. The government officials, scientists, researchers, and growers attending the moot called for "policy reforms, including the development of high-yield and climate-resilient seed varieties, efficient irrigation systems, and enhanced farmer support programmes" to revitalise the cotton economy. The world is implementing "sustainable and better cotton" initiatives to improve the social, environmental, and economic sustainability of cotton production. This makes it imperative for Pakistan to urgently implement suggested policy reforms to revive the cotton economy so that it remains a part of the global textile and clothing supply chain. However, if the past is any guide, there is little chance of the authorities considering these suggestions, let alone implementing the much-needed reforms.

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Depopulating Gaza

DONALD Trump's latest plan to depopulate Gaza of its Palestinian inhabitants and 'redevelop' it as a tourist resort would be too absurd to comment on had the scheme not come directly from the horse's mouth.

With Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu standing by his side, President Trump said the US would "take over the Gaza Strip and ... own it". If implemented, such a plan would target Gaza for ethnic cleansing and foreign occupation, in order to create a 'Riviera of the Middle East' — one built on the remains of tens of thousands of Palestinians murdered by Israel.

Members of team Trump have scrambled to spin their boss's words, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio saying that the idea "was not meant as hostile", while the White House press secretary has said the US has no plans for boots on the ground in Gaza.

Global leaders from across the spectrum have denounced the plan, though Mr Netanyahu — responsible for the butchery in Gaza — has termed the scheme "remarkable". As for the Palestinian people's reaction? A resident of Gaza City queried by foreign media summed it up best: "Trump can go to hell. ... We are going nowhere."

The world should know that despite surviving a genocide, carried out by Israel and supported by the US, the people of Gaza refuse to part with their land. They have buried their children, yet they refuse to be evicted from the land of their forefathers in their determination not to repeat the Nakba. Israel would be more than happy to empty out Gaza, as well as the occupied West Bank, thereby making more land available for settlers to colonise.

But the Palestinian people will continue to resist these devious schemes, even while facing some of the most advanced and deadliest armaments on earth. The war on Gaza has proven that the will of the Palestinian people cannot be broken, and that they cannot be bought off, bribed or beaten into submission.

At this point, the two-state solution seems like a distant memory, with the Israelis refusing to budge an inch, and an American administration willing to shield Tel Aviv from all censure. In the absence of any workable and just solution that protects the rights of the Palestinian people, the only foreseeable outcome is more conflict. As it is, after the Gaza ceasefire, Israel has turned its guns on the West Bank. This cycle of bloodshed can be broken if the Palestinians get a contiguous and viable state, but Israel does not want to talk peace. The least feasible 'solution' is the Trumpian plan for Gaza's ethnic cleansing

and occupation, which is a non-starter. This is their land, and the Palestinians cannot be forced off it.

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‘Pause’ in US aid

THE impact of the Trump administration’s decision to ‘pause’ all US foreign aid programmes, especially those funding development and lifesaving health services for women and girls, will be felt by millions in poor countries across the world, including Pakistan. The suspension of critical healthcare aid is estimated by the UN to affect 1.7m people in the country, including 1.2m Afghan refugees, many of whom would no longer be able to access necessary sexual and reproductive health services with the closure of over 60 facilities. These health facilities were being administered by the UNFPA, whose regional director expressed concern at the prospect of millions of women and girls facing life-threatening danger due to the lack of access to UNFPA services in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The UNFPA requires over \$308m in 2025 to sustain even basic services in these countries.

Since President Donald Trump has also ordered a review of USAID in order to scale down the agency through which foreign assistance is channelled, the implications of American aid suspension for several projects in the country are disturbing. Though the programmes have been halted pending a 90-day review, many fear that the suspension would be indefinite or at least last for several months. There is little possibility of the Pakistani authorities being able to immediately finance the affected health facilities or other USAID-sponsored schemes. The chances of other Western nations stepping in to fill the funding gap, at least in areas that focus on refugees and women, appear dim too. That said, Mr Trump’s decision to cut off aid may also offer an opportunity for the government to stop depending on foreign aid, at least for health and other areas in the social sector, and ramp up its budgetary allocations for initiatives directly linked to the well-being of its citizens. There is no doubt that, after years of reliance on US aid, Pakistan’s cash-strapped government will find it difficult to face the challenge. But it is time to step up and divert a small portion of resources from other schemes, say funds allocated for projects proposed by the lawmakers, to save the lives of thousands of young girls and women affected by the actions of the new US administration. That is what caring governments would do for their people.

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Mobilising opposition

POLITICS makes strange bedfellows. There has not, for quite some time, been a guest list as intriguing as the one made for a recent meeting of Pakistan's opposition parties, hosted by former National Assembly speaker Asad Qaiser. According to reports, the meeting was attended by PkMAP's Mahmood Khan Achakzai, JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman, SIC chief Hamid Raza, MWM leader Allama Raja Nasir Abbas, former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, ex-PPP senator Mustafa Nawaz Khokhar, incumbent Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Omar Ayub, and others. Stranger still was the pronouncement after the meeting: a grand opposition alliance, to be steered by Mr Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, himself a former PML-N prime minister, will be mobilising a resistance movement against the current regime. Mr Abbasi was reportedly nominated to the responsibility "because he is not a controversial individual." He has been asked to lead a steering committee that will seek to bring all opposition parties on one platform against the government.

It is still early days to comment on whether this plan will materialise. There are, after all, too many ifs and buts in the equation. Nevertheless, it would have been exciting for politics enthusiasts to learn that a fresh game is afoot. The common purpose is to topple the government and enforce a new round of free and fair elections. Given how deeply entrenched the 'favoured' parties have become in recent months, it was only a matter of time before those who find no favour at this time realised they must fight back or be interred in the same place as Pakistani democracy. The selection of Mr Abbasi as the coalition's chief is a particularly interesting one. It suggests that, occasionally, the PTI may not be as self-centred as it often is, and could consider ceding space to others if the need arises. The country could benefit from some good politics. Let us wait and see.

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Dhanmondi attack

HISTORY has shown that unless states deliver development and equal rights to all, disenfranchised people can target even supposedly cherished symbols of the state to vent their frustration. A recent example of this was seen in Bangladesh, when enraged mobs set fire on Wednesday to the Dhanmondi residence in Dhaka of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, founder and maker of that country. Though Mujibur Rahman's residence was also torched last year during protests against Sheikh Hasina's government, this time the edifice was demolished after Ms Hasina made a controversial speech online. The ex-PM, who is also the Sheikh's daughter, is currently in India, and tensions were inflamed in

Bangladesh when she called on people to resist the interim administration. Dhaka has lodged a strong protest with New Delhi over Sheikh Hasina's speech.

It is sobering that to many Bangladeshis, the Sheikh's residence now represents a "fascist stronghold". Unfortunately, Ms Hasina and the Awami League have mostly themselves to blame, as her authoritarian rule excluded many Bangladeshis from equitably partaking in the fruits of economic progress, while political freedoms were also curtailed. It is also true that after separating from Pakistan, Sheikh Mujib would, in January 1975, create a one-party state in Bangladesh, stunting the country's democratic development. In a dark turn of events, in August 1975 the Sheikh and most of his family members would be brutally massacred in the same Dhanmondi house by mutineers. Bangladesh needs to move on from the Awami League's heavy-handed rule and return to full democratic rule. Dr Muhammad Yunus's administration should stick to the timeline announced for elections — late 2025 or early 2026 — to ensure a proper democratic transition. Both the interim set-up and the future elected government must prioritise justice and inclusivity over vengeance. Moreover, the recent events at Dhanmondi offer a lesson for all regional states: when the population is pushed to the edge through exclusionary policies, one can expect an explosion of public anger.

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Wheat decision

THE federal decision to stop setting the minimum support price for wheat and cease the staple's procurement operations from this year was much delayed. Politically tough as this policy shift is, multilateral lenders had been putting pressure on Islamabad to fully deregulate agricultural commodity markets since the late 1990s to address distortions impeding the sector's productivity potential. Both military and civilian governments had resisted the shift to avoid the public fallout, until the ongoing IMF funding programme thrust it on the current administration as a key structural policy reform to be implemented by June 2026. That the government has finally agreed to gradually exit the agricultural commodity markets became clear when Punjab decided against purchasing wheat last year, despite farmers' protests amid crashing prices.

Wheat price setting and procurement operations had been carried out since the 1960s to protect farmers from sudden price fluctuations and guarantee them a minimum return during periods of surplus and deficit. Besides, they were used to stabilise the staple's supply to ensure food security and safeguard urban consumers by fixing retail flour prices. But these goals put a huge financial cost on the exchequer, with the centre and provinces spending a lot on procurement operations, with exceptionally high incidental expenditures

on storage, freight, and interest payments on bank loans. Wastage and pilferage were other issues adding to the costs. Nonetheless, the massive subsidy the government paid as a price for its interventions in the wheat market is not the only basis for the argument for policy reforms. Its intervention in agricultural commodities, especially the wheat trade, made the sector unresponsive to changing technology and farming practices, increased price volatility, encouraged hoarding, misallocated resources, and burdened the budget. Ironically, farmers have not benefited from this policy. The bulk of subsidies was pocketed by middlemen, flour millers, and corrupt officials. The impending shift will indeed create chaos in the market in the short term before it adapts itself to the new realities. The savings will give policymakers the fiscal space to invest in high-yield seed varieties, and help farmers adopt new technologies to improve productivity, slash production costs and, consequently, consumer prices. If the government must intervene, it should only be for addressing market inefficiencies and ensuring food security.

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A year later

IT was what one may safely describe as a 'memorable' occasion. Exactly a year ago today, adult-aged Pakistanis from all faiths, cultures, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes had headed to their assigned polling stations to cast their ballots in a much-delayed general election.

It was remarkable how many expectations they ended up defying that day. One recalls the unannounced blackout of all mobile communication services, enforced by the authorities shortly before polls opened, which had left people without access to vital election-related information and unable to contact their friends and families.

It was not enough to deter the over 59 million citizens intent on having their voices heard that day. One also recalls the smug predictions of television pundits and the surveys fed to the media in the run-up to election day. None of them prepared the nation for the coup ordinary Pakistanis pulled off merely with the help of a stamp and a ballot paper.

No observer can honestly deny that the last election's results were highly unexpected.

Considerable effort was made to keep one party out of the race. The party's leadership was jailed, its workers picked up, its electoral symbol withdrawn, and its candidates, even after being forced to declare themselves independents, not allowed to campaign.

If the previous elections were manipulated — perhaps by the same elements — to bring the PTI to power, they went out of their way to ensure that it did not have any chance this time around.

Despite all their machinations, however, the PTI ended up winning an unexpectedly large chunk of the popular vote.

The results announced two things: one, that Pakistan's youth had finally arrived on the political scene, and two, that ordinary voters had overwhelmingly rejected the narratives set by the powers of the day. In this sense, the 2024 election was indeed a historic one.

Much went wrong after Feb 8, 2024, mainly because responsible individuals within the Pakistani state refused to come to terms with the country's changed realities.

However, though the injustices that followed the last general election cannot be forgotten, it is equally important to start thinking about what must now be done to mitigate their effects.

The country has continued to march on a path of implosion, unable to contain the dissonance created by a conflict between what those controlling the state want and what the people want for themselves. Unless this fundamental conflict is resolved, the country will not be at peace with itself.

A war of egos has been fought between a handful of individuals at the cost of the well-being of millions of ordinary Pakistanis. This unnecessary war must be called to an end. The people of Pakistan have been wronged for too long. They need a change.

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Race against time

SOME of the foremost authorities on environmental issues converged in Islamabad this past week to talk about the urgent nature of the climate crisis in Pakistan. Alongside these experts at DawnMedia's Breathe Pakistan conference, policymakers and jurists, too, laid out both the scale of the challenge and the action required to surmount it.

Pakistan faces what Supreme Court Justice Mansoor Ali Shah calls a "dual injustice" — bearing a disproportionate burden of climate impacts while lacking the structural capacity to respond. The conference's outcomes were sobering. Pakistan needs \$40-50bn annually until 2050 for climate adaptation, yet current flows amount to barely one-eighth of that.

The World Bank's climate chief, Valerie Hickey, highlighted that while 70pc of global climate finance goes to mitigation, Pakistan's pressing need is adaptation. More

concerning still, less than 20pc of total climate finance reaches the Global South, where it is needed most.

Some bright spots emerged. Punjab has allocated Rs100bn for climate resilience and Rs10bn specifically for smog mitigation. KP's forests serve as a carbon sink, removing half of Pakistan's carbon emissions. The centre's Uraan Pakistan initiative promises to integrate climate resilience into energy and development planning. But these efforts, while laudable, are dwarfed by the scale of the challenge. The outcome of inaction is already visible. We lost 97 school days to climate disruptions in 2023-24.

The Indus, Pakistan's lifeline, is now the world's second-most plastic-polluted river. Air pollution alone causes 128,000 deaths annually, reducing life expectancy by 3.9 years and costing the economy billions. By 2050, nearly half of Pakistan's agricultural land could become unsuitable for farming.

The conference crystallised three imperatives. First, climate finance must be restructured. The finance minister's call for more predictable, flexible, and grant-based support reflects the frustration with current mechanisms. Second, regional cooperation is essential. Pakistan's initiative to engage with India on transboundary air pollution is a promising start. Third, domestic resource mobilisation must improve; we cannot wait for foreign help while our glaciers melt and crops fail.

The path is clear, if daunting. We must streamline our climate governance, implement the Climate Change Act's delayed provisions, and create promised institutions like the climate change authority. The private sector must be better incentivised to help find climate solutions.

The media also has a vital role. By shifting from disaster reporting to solutions-oriented journalism, it can engage the public and hold policymakers accountable. It must also break down the jargon that often hinders effective climate communication. The conference has shown the way. The question is whether the country can summon the political will — both local and international — and resources to follow it.

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Open door

THE door is still open for talks, National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq has reminded the PTI. What matters, however, is the mood in the opposition camp. Key opposition leaders agreed this past week on the common agenda of seeking fresh elections. Their meeting created enough of a stir that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif took it upon himself to visit JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman, bouquet in hand, at the latter's residence. Though the details of their discussion were not formally shared, a few media outlets reported that the maulana had spoken his mind. It seems pertinent to mention here that the JUI-F chief

recently publicly reiterated a demand for fresh elections, describing the option as the only solution to Pakistan's crisis. The opposition seems upset with the high-handedness on display by the ruling parties, especially after the enactment of a slew of legislation aimed at solidifying their grip on power. There appears to be a growing realisation that a concerted pushback may be necessary, which could lead to a showdown.

Though the PTI may be tempted to take the confrontational path once again, especially if it feels the rest of the opposition may also rally around it, it is worth giving the offered talks a chance. The previous round of negotiations was called off too abruptly and prematurely by the PTI side, apparently because the party's leadership sensed the government was not serious about forming judicial commissions to probe the Nov 26, 2024, and May 9, 2023, incidents. Now, the prime minister is inviting the party back and has offered a commission to investigate both the 2018 and 2024 general elections, which does not seem like a bad idea. Indeed, with the incarcerated PTI chief also pushing for politics to be left to politicians, this may be a good time for a dispassionate inquiry into how non-democratic forces prevailed over the last two elections. Ordinary voters deserve to know how they have been wronged. Such a commission could uncover the injustices suffered by the various political parties, provide them catharsis and closure, and prompt an honest discussion among the civilian stakeholders on how the country should move on. If both sides can cede some space on each other's demands, they will be off to a good start.

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Football suspension

ONCE again, Pakistan has been ousted from the global football family. FIFA recently suspended the Pakistan Football Federation, for the third time since 2017, stating that the suspension would not be lifted unless the PFF Congress accepted the constitutional amendments tabled by it. With this move, FIFA also extended the mandate of the PFF Normalisation Committee, due to end on Feb 15, till July 31. The rejection of the amendments to the PFF constitution, according to FIFA, hindered the holding of free and fair presidential elections. The PFF, mired in crises since 2015 and under a FIFA-elected NC since September 2019, seemed to be finally headed towards an elected set-up following polls at lower levels — until its suspension. FIFA's argument centres on the fact that the current PFF constitution limits the pool of potential candidates.

However, FIFA's move to add a partial revision of the constitution to the mandate of the PFF NC came only last year, and was not disclosed until only a few months ago, when officials of FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation held a review workshop with the PFF Congress. When appointing the NC over five years ago, it had stated that the elected

body would make the constitutional amendments. Congress members — who came in after winning elections at the provincial level — have every right to feel aggrieved; their argument is that opening up the election means a person who lost polls at the lower level can still run for PFF presidency. FIFA also has not kept its part of the bargain. It had planned meetings with government officials before tabling the proposed amendments. The meetings never took place. PFF NC chairman Haroon Malik has appealed to MNAs to help convince the congress to accept the amendments. A meeting between FIFA and the government would not only ease the situation but also end the normalisation process for an elected set-up at the helm of the PFF.

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Justice for all

ALONG with his domestic agenda, Donald Trump is busy ripping to shreds the post-World War II 'rules-based international order' that his country helped forge. The latest salvo in the Trumpian campaign have been sanctions targeted at the International Criminal Court. Mr Trump has signed an executive order sanctioning individuals investigating the US or its allies, namely Israel, America's most allied of allies. The move appears to have been prompted by the ICC investigation probing the Israeli prime minister for war crimes in Gaza. According to Mr Trump's order, the ICC has "engaged in illegitimate and baseless actions" targeting the US and Israel. During his last stint in the White House, Mr Trump had also sanctioned the then ICC prosecutor and another official over investigations of possible US war crimes in Afghanistan. Neither the US nor Israel is a member of the court. However, a large chunk of the global community disagrees with Mr Trump's assault on the ICC; 79 states have signed a joint statement defending the global court's work — including staunch US allies such as France, Germany and the UK.

The message the latest move sends to the world is that of hyper American exceptionalism, that the US and its vassal Israel are beyond reproach, that powerful actors can literally get away with murder. Though the prevailing international system has largely been used by powerful states of the Global North to target foes who do not toe the line, while looking the other way as allies break the rules, there can be little disagreement with the ICC's mandate: to punish those involved in crimes against humanity. And what Israel has committed against the Palestinians since October 2023 is an egregious crime against humanity. Instead of being dismantled, the system should be improved so that all states are subject to the same rules, and the rich and the strong are not able to evade justice. But expecting the current US administration to help create a more equal world is delusional. The current order is collapsing, and the Trump administration is hastening its demise. Hence, a new, fair global order is required, which focuses on justice — in all its

forms — and equality, balanced with respect for sovereignty. The Global South should help build this new world, along with states that share universal values.

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Held back

It is a crying shame how women are conspicuously absent from Pakistan's civil services. Despite comprising half the population, they occupy just 5pc of federal government positions. This paltry representation persists despite a 10pc quota that supposedly guarantees their presence in bureaucracy. Numbers recently shared by the Pakistan Public Administration Research Centre tell a woeful tale. Of 1.2m federal employees, a mere 49,508 are women. More telling is their distribution: 78pc languish in lower-grade positions (BS 1-16), while a microscopic 0.12pc reach the rarefied air of BS-22. Even the Defence Division, which employs the largest share at 37.31pc of all female federal employees, has not achieved gender parity. The pattern extends across autonomous bodies and corporations, where women comprise just 5.41pc of the workforce.

Such statistics would be disappointing anywhere; in Pakistan, they are economically suicidal. Our persistent financial woes — a volatile rupee, chronic trade deficits, and an ongoing IMF programme — cannot be addressed while excluding half the talent pool. Nations that have embraced female participation in public service, from Rwanda to Sweden, demonstrate that diversity in bureaucracy correlates strongly with economic resilience and policy innovation. The notion that qualified women are scarce defies reality. Our universities regularly produce more female graduates than male in several disciplines. The real barriers are more prosaic: inadequate childcare, inflexible working hours, and the subtle yet persistent bias that views women as unsuitable for senior positions. A mere 6.09pc increase in female employment over the past year suggests the problem is far from solving itself. For a nation seeking economic revival, the solution is clear, if not simple: Pakistan must tackle the structural impediments that keep women from entering — and ascending in — public service. Without such reform, the bureaucracy will remain both unfair and inefficient. In governance, as in economics, no country can soar with one wing clipped.

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A positive note

PAKISTAN'S economy has 'stabilised'. Yet it remains just a shock — a failed performance review of the IMF's 37-month \$7bn programme — away from a relapse.

This is the crux of a special note released by Fitch Ratings ahead of the first biannual programme review, expected to start soon. Not that Pakistan is likely to fail the upcoming review, but Fitch, like many others, is not too bullish on the government's commitment to implementing the difficult reforms needed to address the imbalances in the economy.

While acknowledging the "progress in restoring economic stability and rebuilding external buffers", the note cautions that "structural reforms would be key to the IMF programme reviews and continued financing from other ... lenders".

A weakened balance-of-payments position is at the core of our economic crisis. Even though liquidity has strengthened of late, thanks to a robust increase in remittances, curtailment of imports, and generous rollovers of bilateral debt by China, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, foreign "reserves remain low relative to funding needs".

Media reports suggest that the government has again reached out to Beijing for a two-year rescheduling of \$3.4bn loans maturing between last October and September 2027 to cover the financing gap identified by the IMF.

There is no doubt that the economy has turned a corner as far as macro indicators are concerned: inflation is down to below 3pc, the current account is running a surplus, foreign payments — other than the loans rolled over — are being made on time, international reserves are growing, the exchange rate has stabilised, reduced interest rates are pushing private credit offtake, etc.

On the fiscal side, Pakistan has met at least three of five Fund benchmarks: it has achieved the targets for a primary budget surplus, net revenue collection and provincial cash surplus — though it has fallen short in FBR tax collection by nearly Rs470bn and failed to tax retailers.

These improvements, including provincial legislation to harmonise agriculture tax rates with the federal tax regime, means that the forthcoming review should not be negative. We may also see rating agencies upgrade our ranking, helping us access foreign bond markets and other sources of commercial loans as private flows remain elusive.

But the 'turnaround' has come at great cost to the salaried middle class. With the government unable to press the growth accelerator without upending the fragile recovery, the sufferings of low-middle-income households are unlikely to disappear soon. The only way the ruling elites can compensate them for their sacrifices is to put the country on the path of reforms and stick to it.

IMF scrutiny

THE technical IMF mission, which is taking stock of Pakistan's economic governance structure and its vulnerability to corruption, is expected to widen the focus of the reform effort to a broader range of institutional restructuring for inclusive and sustained growth.

The mission will be in the capital for a week to scrutinise the “severity of corruption vulnerabilities” across six core state functions: fiscal governance, central bank governance and operations, financial sector oversight, market regulation, rule of law, and the AML/CFT regime.

It is expected to engage with numerous stakeholders, including the judicial, State Bank and SECP authorities, election bodies, finance and revenue officials, and others to review their processes.

The review of the judicial and regulatory systems is part of the present loan programme — Pakistan has committed to the Fund that it will strengthen its institutional capacities to fight corruption, support inclusive growth, and provide a level playing field for businesses and investment.

Following the examination, the lender will share its ‘Governance and Corruption Diagnostic Assessment’ findings with the government by July as part of the \$7bn funding programme. The assessment will analyse governance and corruption vulnerabilities, and identify priority structural reforms. It is expected to help the government take action to address corruption and strengthen integrity and governance to promote transparency.

Pakistan's unfinished reform agenda has mostly focused on tax, trade, exchange, monetary policy, and other areas. While these areas are crucial and in dire need of structural changes, our problems go much deeper.

The larger picture requires our policymakers to not just prioritise economic fundamentals but also our justice system, law enforcement, education, healthcare, and the bureaucracy, among others. Strengthening these foundations of the economic superstructure will help make the economy competitive and boost growth.

Without these, nothing will work to strengthen productivity, tax revenues, and trade, or to attract investment, especially foreign private investment, the biggest source of non-debt-creating inflows.

For example, a handicapped corrupt justice system unable to protect investors against the breach of contracts or the high-handedness of corrupt officials is a far bigger factor in

scaring away foreign capital to other destinations than the nation's unfair tax system and other market imbalances.

Similarly, no one would want to invest in a country where only illiterate or semi-literate labour with poor skills and low productivity — a direct result of poverty, lack of education and health challenges — is available. The Fund's diagnoses of issues in our judicial and regulatory system should hopefully prepare the ground for the much broader institutional reforms beyond the ones to which the IMF loan is tied.

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Shadow voices

OVER the weekend, another 'open letter' addressed to the army chief and attributed to former prime minister Imran Khan was posted on social media. The long missive gained considerable traction, as anything related or attributed to the jailed ex-premier usually does, with many discussing, dissecting and debating its contents and what their implications could mean in the present political context. But the question also arose: were these Mr Khan's own words, or someone else's version of what he may have said during his limited interactions with his confidants and legal counsels? After all, his first 'letter', too, was apparently never inked on paper.

The jailed leader does not seem to have any facility to correspond directly with the outside world. He certainly does not have access to social media. His surrogates frequently tussle over who gets to meet him and who does not, and Mr Khan has often complained that he has little control over those allowed to visit him. There are very few within the PTI who seem to know who actually runs the former prime minister's social media accounts, and quite a few have previously expressed their exasperation with the more hard-line stance taken by them, which has undermined their own efforts at finding diplomatic solutions to the party's problems. This presents a complicated situation. With quite a few groups within the party vying for influence and control of the official narrative, there is no way to tell what the PTI's official stance is on key matters. However, as bad as this is for the party, it is also dangerous for the state. The policy to tightly control Mr Khan's visibility in mainstream media and to keep him silenced and sequestered has inadvertently increased ordinary people's reliance on alternative mediums for information. Mr Khan is followed by millions on social media. This means that whatever gets posted from his accounts gets immense visibility, even if it is not exactly what he may be thinking at any given point. So far, Mr Khan has not had any known issues with how his accounts are run. However, the danger remains that his accounts' operators may cause much harm, even if inadvertently,

over a small miscommunication. All stakeholders need to avoid anything which may escalate tensions and create an environment where hostilities spin out of control.

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Paradise at a premium

PAKISTAN'S recent triumph at the New York Travel and Adventure Show 2025, winning the Best Partner Pavilion Award, marks a significant milestone for our tourism sector. This recognition not only validates Gilgit-Baltistan's extraordinary appeal but also positions Pakistan prominently on the global tourism map. The enthusiastic response from international visitors, particularly those interested in mountaineering and adventure tourism, suggests promising prospects for a region blessed with five peaks exceeding 8,000m. However, this success brings with it a profound responsibility. The rising influx of tourists to GB presents several problems. Among the most concerning issues is environmental degradation. Popular destinations like Hunza, Skardu, and Fairy Meadows have seen a surge in littering, deforestation, and water pollution. Similarly, reckless construction of hotels and guesthouses is altering the landscape without due regard for environmental impact. Equally troubling is the cultural erosion. Locals report increasing incidents of disrespect towards their traditions and personal spaces. Domestic tourists, in particular, have been observed violating social norms, and even harassing local women. The habit of inscribing names on ancient forts and monuments, playing loud music, and intruding into private homes further points to the lack of manners.

Infrastructure is another area of concern. The Karakoram Highway and mountain roads face mounting pressure from tourist traffic, while hospitals, and water and electricity supplies are also burdened. Economic benefits remain skewed, with outsiders owning most hotels and tour companies, while locals battle rising living costs. The government must act decisively: implementing environmental regulations, waste management systems, and sustainable development plans. Educational initiatives on cultural respect are essential. Most critically, policies must ensure tourism revenue benefits local communities rather than external investors. While global recognition deserves celebration, it should catalyse action. Otherwise, GB risks becoming a victim of its own success. That would be a market failure of Himalayan proportions.

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Hate in India

HISTORY shows that rulers use hate speech to provoke hate crimes and ‘othering’ among communities. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s decade-long rule is riddled with divisive rhetoric; his BJP is bent on creating discord in Indian society, making daily life for the country’s minorities, particularly the Muslims, increasingly challenging. The US-based think tank, India Hate Lab, has released a new report exposing an alarming surge in hate speech — from 668 cases in 2023 to 1,165 in 2024; communal venom rose by 74.4pc with 98.5pc of the hate speeches directed at Muslims. Over two-thirds occurred in BJP-ruled states or in those run by its allies. As a vital aspect of Mr Modi’s Hindutva politics, communal flames burn brighter during election season. According to the IHL, last year’s election campaign witnessed BJP leaders deliver more than 450 hate speeches with 63 from Mr Modi himself. Indeed, it is high time India’s activists and opposition parties showed greater commitment to battling the evil for the sake of an inclusive and progressive society.

Unfortunately, the state-sponsored diet of hate seems to have gained ground among Indians as public and media outrage is rare. Few have understood that feeding hate deflects attention from the BJP’s failure to deliver the governmental and policy reforms that it promised for a rising India. And hate retains the Hindu-majority vote bank for the party. Allowing rampant hate speech by godmen and lawmakers enables ordinary people from the majority religion to employ violence — such as lynchings and bulldozing homes to degrade and subdue Muslims — to assert a sense of supremacy. The Hindutva rampage — from destroying mosques to economic boycotts of poor Muslims — aims to erase Muslim history. Maligning Muslims is a minor, albeit chilling, part of this agenda. The oil-rich Muslim brotherhood and the international community, which claims to uphold human rights, need to walk the talk.

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Sunken dreams

ANOTHER tragedy has struck Pakistani migrants seeking a better future. A boat capsizing off the Libyan coast has left at least 16 Pakistanis dead, with others missing or in detention. This disaster, following closely on the heels of last month’s deaths of a large number of Pakistanis at the hands of human traffickers, underscores the relentless peril faced by those seeking escape from economic hardship and instability at home. Pakistanis have, for years, risked treacherous journeys across the Mediterranean, lured by promises of prosperity in Europe. Many come from KP — in this case the majority belonged to Kurram — where unemployment, insecurity, and lack of economic

opportunities force them into the hands of ruthless traffickers. These criminal networks prey on desperation, promising safe passage but delivering only exploitation, extortion, and grisly death. The state's response to this crisis has been reactionary at best.

Dispatching embassy officials after each tragedy is necessary, but it does little to prevent future calamities. Pakistan must work closely with transit countries such as Libya, Turkey, and the UAE to establish stronger intelligence-sharing and border monitoring to intercept trafficking operations even before boats set sail. Moreover, the authorities must crack down on local recruiters enticing young men with false promises. Too often, these criminals face little accountability, despite countless reports of their involvement in forging documents, arranging illegal transport, and extorting families. The FIA must pursue traffickers with the same vigour as they do other organised crime rings. For this, both resources and political backing is required. Beyond enforcement, the root causes of migration must be addressed. We need targeted interventions in regions like Kurram. When young people see no future at home, no amount of warning about dangers abroad will deter them. The government must focus not just on job creation, but also skills development programmes aligned with domestic and legal international job opportunities. In addition, we need better awareness campaigns. Many victims fall prey to traffickers' false promises because they lack information about legitimate alternatives. Our embassies abroad should be better equipped to assist Pakistanis in distress and to facilitate legal migration channels. Human trafficking is a national crisis. The state must act now to punish those who profit from this trade and create conditions where no Pakistani feels compelled to risk their life at sea.

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Ill omens

It sometimes appears as if those struggling for an independent judiciary have needlessly burdened themselves with preserving the institution's prestige. When the top judges of the country have few concerns about public perceptions, it seems futile to worry endlessly about institutional integrity. 'Que sera, sera', as they say.

Ever since the 26th Amendment, matters seem to have gone according to script without a hitch. Judges perceived as being 'too independent' or holding views opposed to the ruling regime's policies appear to have been systematically sidelined and substituted by individuals seemingly more acceptable to the regime. There has been little transparency about why certain judges have been transferred from one high court to another or why certain judges have been elevated while others have not.

Meanwhile, a disturbing pattern has emerged, with capable judges being denied promotions apparently over their unwillingness to compromise on judicial autonomy and refusal to kowtow to the powers that be.

That all this has continued unchecked despite loud voices of protest being raised from within and without the institution is disappointing. One wonders whether the institutional leadership realises the long-term ramifications of the ongoing 'remaking' of the judiciary.

A perception has already built up that the courts are being packed with 'like-minded' judges so that the regime can secure legal endorsement for its widely criticised actions and policies.

Ideally, this perception should have been actively avoided; instead, several judges have participated in the decision-making process, which has provided critics with yet another indictment of the present state of the judiciary.

It seems particularly pertinent to point out that while the judges who have found favour with the ruling regime may be very capable, they are quite likely to find it difficult to gain the public's trust and respect given the circumstances in which they have been handed their responsibilities. The nation does not remember the PCO judges kindly.

Where will this leave the nation? When the institution meant to dispense justice loses public trust in its integrity, to whom do the people turn? This is a worrying question that has been raised before but does not seem to have registered.

It is disquieting that very few of those in important positions seem to think long enough about their decisions and the consequences. There are good reasons why political scientists and philosophers alike have stressed the tripartite distribution of state power: it is an essential ingredient in ensuring sociopolitical stability. Any disequilibrium in the division of power has far-reaching effects, as has been witnessed in the past both at home and in some neighbouring countries.

Alas, with reason and rationality in retreat, reflections on actions and consequences no longer seem to matter. One can only hope for sense — and sensibility.

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Trump's folly

DONALD Trump has reiterated his horrifying plan to take over Gaza and permanently displace its Palestinian residents. In a meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah II at the White House, the US president signalled his intent to push ahead with the scheme despite global condemnation.

“We’re going to take it. We’re going to hold it, we’re going to cherish it,” Mr Trump declared, making it abundantly clear that he views Gaza not as the homeland of 2.2m Palestinians, but as a piece of real estate to be seized and repurposed.

This latest pronouncement only reinforces the fears of those who see the plan as a blueprint for ethnic cleansing. The proposed mass displacement of Gazans amounts to a grave violation of international law.

That Benjamin Netanyahu supports this scheme should surprise no one: the Israeli PM has already made clear his vision for a ‘Greater Israel’, which would see Palestinian territories effectively erased. His map of a ‘New Middle East’, proudly displayed at the UN last year confirms his expansionist ambitions.

The reaction from the Arab world has been swift. King Abdullah, facing immense US pressure, has refused to endorse the plan. Egypt has rejected any moves that would force Palestinians onto its soil, while Saudi Arabia has called the proposal an “unacceptable violation of Palestinian rights”.

The Arab League, too, has opposed Mr Trump’s reckless vision. Yet, despite this overwhelming backlash, the Israeli PM and US president remain undeterred. Mr Netanyahu has termed the plan “remarkable”, while Mr Trump has threatened to cut aid to Jordan if it refuses to absorb Palestinian refugees. Washington’s coercive tactics to strong-arm its allies into supporting an apartheid-like restructuring of the region betray its moral bankruptcy.

Mr Trump’s plan will not bring peace; it will bring further devastation, radicalism, and instability. The mass expulsion of Palestinians will not end the conflict — it will ensure its perpetual escalation.

This latest move by the Trump administration also threatens the fragile ceasefire in Gaza, as Palestinian groups see it as yet another attempt to erase their presence from their land. Hamas, for example, has already warned that it will not resume hostage releases under the current conditions.

With tensions already at a breaking point, the dangerous Trump scheme has only deepened uncertainty and turmoil in the region.

The Trump-Netanyahu scheme is not just infeasible — it is a moral abomination. The international community must not only reject it outright but also ensure that those who promote such inhumanity are held accountable. The world cannot afford to stand by as such blatant violations of human rights unfold. This is Palestinian land. It is not for sale, and its people will not be erased.

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Corruption ranking

IT comes as little surprise. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2024, unveiled on Tuesday, sees Pakistan drop two points from its overall score, which now stands at 27. It is an embarrassing reflection on those in power, especially after the improvement reported just a year earlier. Several stakeholders had rushed to take credit for Pakistan's two-point improvement in 2023, celebrating it as a shining example of the country doing better under its new management. It remains to be seen whether anyone will step forward to take responsibility for the regression that has been seen the very next year. As it is, there are several other fires that need tending. Looking at the broader picture, the CPI trend for Pakistan reveals some interesting insights. Starting from 2018, the country has done consistently worse every year in terms of the perceived prevalence of corruption, with 2023 being the sole exception. This decline has run parallel to the increasing influence of unelected stakeholders in governance, raising concerns about accountability and transparency under 'hybrid' regimes. On the other hand, between 2012 and 2018, Pakistan did consistently better in terms of perceived corruption in the country. This should be taken as an opportunity for reflection.

Another major concern highlighted by Transparency International is the impact of perceived corruption on pressing climate-related needs. "Corruption obstructs environmental policy, hijacks climate financing and hinders the enforcement of regulations and policies, leaving the most vulnerable with little recourse," TI notes in a statement on the Asia Pacific region. With respect to Pakistan, it finds "systemic governance gaps and policy implementation barriers — including delays in implementing regulations and establishing institutions under the Climate Change Act of 2017", which have "left its climate finance far below the projected \$348bn needed by 2030". This is deeply worrying. Pakistan must work with international partners and donors to meet critical climate adaptation needs, yet these efforts risk being undermined by persistent concerns over financial mismanagement, which could potentially deter international donors from investing in Pakistan's climate resilience. While the country is making efforts to improve its policy, governance and administrative capacities for what will be a long struggle against environmental devastation, corruption, it seems, is the little-discussed Achilles' heel. It must receive the same attention and seriousness as efforts to secure climate finance. Without this, much good work will be wasted.

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Support from remittances

EVEN though workers' remittances dipped, albeit negligibly, in January on a month-over-month basis, the earnings that overseas Pakistanis send home continue to help the

country's current account stay in the positive zone. That remittances are helping the current account run a surplus month after month amid a widening trade deficit and dwindling foreign official and private inflows shows the economy's reliance on the cash sent back by Pakistanis abroad. According to a brokerage company, remittances have been instrumental in delivering a current account surplus in eight out of the last 12 months, despite rising exports. The inflows have also been a key factor behind the stable exchange rate.

Data shows that monthly remittances have averaged \$3bn per month, a significant increase from the \$2.3-2.4bn monthly average seen in FY23 and the better part of FY24, since March. Cumulatively, remittances soared to \$20.8bn in the first seven months of the current fiscal year — up by nearly 32pc from a year ago. The growth is led by an increase of 42pc in flows from the UAE and Saudi Arabia. A crackdown on the grey dollar trade, reduced political and economic volatility, a stable exchange rate, and forex market reforms are the major reasons for the robust remittance growth. Last but not least, IT firms, along with IT professionals, relocating to Dubai and elsewhere, due to curbs on the internet, is another reason for the rising remittances. The State Bank expects the current fiscal year to close with a record \$35bn in remittances compared to last year's \$30.25bn, and the current account to end in a surplus that is 0.5pc of the size of the economy, thanks to overseas workers. However, overdependence on remittances for a longer period can prove risky for balance-of-payments stability. Such risks can be curtailed only through a rapid boost in export earnings to finance imports, rather than using inflows from remittances.

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Amazing show

PAKISTAN'S ability to turn it up at the flick of a switch remains uninhibited. The latest show came in Wednesday's tri-nation series match against South Africa. It had become a virtual semi-final after both sides lost to New Zealand in their opening round-robin games. Chasing an imposing 353 to win, Pakistan seemed to be losing the plot — winning was crucial to keeping alive the euphoria of hosting the Champions Trophy, which starts next week — when they were reduced to 91-3. Pakistan needed a hero. They got two, in captain Mohammad Rizwan and his deputy Salman Ali Agha. Both struck magnificent centuries — Rizwan ending unbeaten on 122 and Salman hitting 134 — to take Pakistan to their highest-ever successful chase in One-day Internationals. Their partnership of 260 runs was the best ever for the side in an ODI chase and the third highest overall. It was remarkable how Pakistan showed the mental fortitude that was needed after they were outclassed by New Zealand. Rizwan and Salman make it look easy; both middle-order

batters helped restore faith in the team. Victory in Friday's tri-series final against New Zealand will raise hopes, with Pakistan playing the same opponents in the Champions Trophy opener on Feb 19.

However, the victory does not mean that areas of concern — particularly in bowling — can be forgotten. Pakistan have bled runs, especially in the death overs in both their tri-series matches. The pacers have been hit to all parts and the spinners have not looked as effective. That needs to be addressed by the team management as Pakistan hope to get pace spearhead Haris Rauf back to full fitness before the Champions Trophy. Haris looked good in the game against New Zealand until he was forced out of the game and tri-series after a muscle sprain. In his absence, the others need to step up on Friday and demonstrate that Pakistan are ready for the Champions Trophy.

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Difficult target

A ONE-two punch delivered by an unforeseen, sharp dip in inflation and an extremely slim base of taxpayers is expected to leave the country's top tax agency with a big hole in its overly ambitious revenue target of around Rs13tr. Since the announcement of the present budget, it was obvious to most that the FBR would miss the target that demanded revenues to grow by nearly 40pc over last year's collection as the authorities had skirted structural reforms needed to broaden the tax net and make the taxation system equitable and just. Much of the burden of the additional revenues was shifted onto existing taxpayers, including salaried classes; the rest was expected to come 'autonomously' from economic expansion and higher inflation.

With inflation now below 3pc, the tax authorities expect a revenue shortfall of at least Rs0.5tr. Many fear that the hole could widen to almost Rs1tr as the FBR is already struggling with a gap of Rs468bn in its target for the July-January period. According to a report in this paper, the tax authorities argue that this gap cannot be covered without increasing the tax rates for existing taxpayers or imposing new taxes due to the narrow base. This proposal has already been rejected by the prime minister on account of its negative political consequences. The revenue shortfall, on the other hand, will not go down well with the IMF, which was reported to have refused an earlier request from Islamabad to slash the tax target in view of rapid deflation. However, the tax authorities are confident that the IMF will overlook the collection gap if they achieve the tax-to-GDP ratio of 10.6pc for the current year since the lender is aware of the economic factors responsible for it. How the IMF is going to respond will not be clear until the second biannual performance review of the programme in summer. Yet we will get some early

hints from the Fund during the first review next month. The difficulty facing the FBR in meeting its target underscores how crucial it is to execute tax reforms to broaden the base and make the system fair and equitable if the country's tax revenue potential is to be realised. Contingent upon it is not just the IMF funding but also Pakistan's future financial and economic viability.

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Dangerous times

SPEAKING the truth should never be a death sentence. The most recent figures published by the Committee to Protect Journalists highlight that last year was the deadliest year for reporters and media workers ever since the committee started keeping track of journalist killings about 30 years ago. The CPJ notes that at least 124 journalists were killed in 18 countries in 2024, "reflecting surging levels of international conflict, political unrest and criminality worldwide".

Given its disregard for international law and human rights — as well as its routine engagement in war crimes — it is unsurprising that the Israeli military was the worst offender, by a significant margin. A total of 85 journalists were killed in the Israel-Gaza conflict in 2024, all at the hands of the Israeli military. Of the total, 82 were Palestinians, while three were of other nationalities. Alarming, Pakistan ranked at number two, along with Sudan, for the most journalist fatalities.

"Today is the most dangerous time to be a journalist in CPJ's history," CPJ CEO Jodie Ginsberg was quoted as saying. It is possibly also the most difficult professionally.

The rise of social media has greatly democratised information creation and sharing. Inadvertently, it has also magnified all the dangers of mass communication that responsible media outlets spent decades building processes and policies to avoid. With disinformation spreading and public discourse growing increasingly polarised, demagogues worldwide have attacked mainstream media, seeking to erode its credibility.

'Influencers' have used their clout and platforms to sow distrust against media workers, gradually diminishing public empathy for journalists' struggles and plight. This much is evident in the apparent lack of concern for journalists' life and liberty amid a rapid rise in reported fatalities.

"The rise in journalist killings is part of a broader trend of muzzling the media globally. This is an issue that should worry us all — because censorship prevents us from addressing corruption and criminality, and from holding the powerful to account," the CPJ chief notes.

This trend is especially evident in Pakistan, where the media has been under siege for many years amid an ongoing sociopolitical crisis. Attempts to control it have become considerably more brazen with time, and the industry is now being targeted with lawfare as well as outright violence by both state and non-state actors.

Pakistan accounted for six journalist killings in 2024, of which three were deliberately murdered, according to the CPJ. The year marked the first time since 2021 that journalist fatalities were recorded in the country, making the deteriorating situation all the more alarming.

Journalists' lives should not be written off as mere statistics. They provide a vital public service that involves much personal sacrifice. It is tragic that their important contributions to society are being repaid with increased violence and suppression.

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Miners in danger

YESTERDAY'S devastating terrorist attack in Harnai, which killed at least 11 coal miners and injured seven others, is a reminder of the multiple hazards these workers confront. Coal miners in the region already contend with treacherous working conditions — labouring in poorly ventilated shafts, risking cave-ins, and facing chronic health issues. Clearly, they must also fear for their lives on their way to work. The attack, targeting labourers from KP, is not an isolated incident. Harnai's coal mining community has fallen victim to both industrial accidents and terrorist violence. These miners, who leave their families behind to work in appalling conditions for minimal wages, represent some of Pakistan's most vulnerable workers. Their targeting speaks to a broader crisis of security and governance in Balochistan. The security situation in Balochistan stems from historical grievances, economic marginalisation, and strategic neglect. Despite being Pakistan's richest province in terms of natural resources, Balochistan has always lagged in development indicators. Successive governments have approached the province through a security-centric lens, failing to address issues of economic disparity, political representation, and social development. The province's porous borders with Afghanistan and Iran have made it vulnerable to cross-border terrorism. However, the root causes run deeper. Decades of centralised decision-making have left the residents feeling disconnected from the development process. The exploitation of natural resources without proportionate benefit to local people has fuelled resentment, which militant groups exploit.

The state must move beyond purely military solutions and implement an agenda, which includes meaningful local participation in resource management, investment in education and healthcare, and creation of economic opportunities beyond extractive industries. The

federal government must ensure fair resource distribution and give Balochistan's elected representatives genuine authority in decision-making. Furthermore, specific attention must be paid to protecting vulnerable workers. Mining operations need enhanced security protocols, and intelligence gathering must be strengthened to prevent attacks. Sustainable peace will only come through addressing the underlying socioeconomic grievances. More than mere condemnation, the blood of these miners demands a fundamental shift in how the state approaches Balochistan's challenges.

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Solar panels scam

THE scam involving over-invoicing to the tune of more than Rs69bn in the import of solar panels raises many questions regarding the capacity, and willingness, of various links in the import chain — banks and customs authorities, as well as regulatory bodies — to detect and prevent trade-based money laundering as per their responsibility. It also underlines the presence of chinks in our AML/ CFT regime. It is astounding that no one in the chain saw that most companies involved in money laundering did not have the financial capacity to import solar panels on such a large scale. It is unacceptable that the fact that many of them were closely linked to one another and stolen identities were used to pull off the scam, went unnoticed. Astonishingly, the banks through which the payments were routed did not raise red flags on the abnormally large cash deposits by importers. Where they were raised, it is unclear if any action was initiated. It is also mind-boggling that the customs authorities could not see that the imported equipment had been invoiced at a highly inflated price.

It is now more than a year and a half since the scandal came to light and an investigation was launched. Yet new details keep emerging, thanks to a painstaking inquiry by a parliamentary panel. The inquiry undertaken by the panel is crucial not just to hold those involved in this fraud accountable but also to identify the gaps in the current AML/ CFT regime and its enforcement to prevent the recurrence of future scams. Not too long ago, Pakistan faced the threat of being declared a pariah by the FATF because of its weak AML/ CFT regime. It was after three years of immense effort and improvement in the framework that the global watchdog let Pakistan off the hook. It is, therefore, crucial that the inquiry by the parliamentary panel be fully supported by the authorities.

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The Peca problem

THE movement against the deeply problematic Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act and the recent amendments made to it seems to be finding its voice. It has been encouraging to note that journalists across the country have made good on their promise to resist efforts to clamp down on the freedom of expression by organising protests, filing lawsuits and creating public awareness about the controversial law.

It has been doubly heartening that various rights activists and different civil society groups have started joining their voices, in the hope that, together, they may force the government to rethink.

On Thursday, a statement was issued from the Karachi Press Club, after a joint consultation organised by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in collaboration with the Karachi Union of Journalists and Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, through which the participants unanimously rejected the Peca Amendment Act, 2025, as being violative of fundamental freedoms.

Those who shared their views on the occasion added enlightening perspectives to the debate. One speaker pointed out that it is not just social media that is affected, but any media platform that publishes its content on digital platforms. Another journalist, reflecting on widely held concerns regarding Peca, shared examples of how various other laws and regulatory mechanisms that had originally seemed to have been created with good intent were later used to target the media or political and rights activists.

A former KPC president also highlighted that press workers, or even ordinary citizens, could no longer expect any protection from state excesses, not even from the judiciary, especially after the 26th Amendment. The HRCP chairperson said it best: "It is not just a journalists' issue, it is a political issue and also a labour issue. Actually, it is the issue of all those who stand up for the truth."

Meanwhile in Islamabad, the PFUJ president made it clear that the movement would not back down. "If the court also [rubber] stamps this law like parliament has done, then we will remain on the streets," he vowed.

The journalists' community has also been protesting at hunger strike camps in Lahore, Sukkur, Peshawar, Hyderabad, Quetta, and elsewhere. It is about time civil society took a strong stand.

The fight for fundamental freedoms is not the media's alone, but one that concerns every citizen. Media and press workers have taken a brave step by placing themselves at the forefront of the struggle; other social groups and organisations should take the cue and exercise their constitutional rights if they, too, feel that freedom of expression is worth fighting for.

Meanwhile, the government must reconsider whether its policy of steamrolling critical voices is a reasonable one. It must pay heed to valid criticism and address people's concerns.

Childhood trauma

BEING a child in this society should not be so hard. But recurrent reports of child abuse — from burying girl children alive to torturing a 12-year-old domestic worker to death for consuming her employers' chocolate — point to a pervasive malaise. The Senate Functional Committee on Human Rights has, yet again, expressed concern over the escalation in cases of child abduction, murder, rape and trafficking across the country. In 2024, according to the Sindh police chief, some 289 kidnapping cases were registered, with 266 incidents of runaway children; 37 children in Karachi were killed, and there were 209 complaints of child abuse, involving 117 boys and 96 girls. The child kidnapping statistics from Punjab are even more unsettling: the crime rose from 2,339 cases in 2022 to 2,448 in 2023. If such dire circumstances do not evoke greater action from the state and the citizenry, what will?

The government knows what to do: campaigning for better parenting, ending patterns of family violence, creating safe school and madressah conditions, and establishing a trained front-line force tasked with rescuing children in high-risk settings. But it seems hesitant to accept that the sickness requires active treatment. As a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Pakistan should not show such prolonged lethargy. Lawmakers need to spring into action to ensure that our children do not suffer in silence, that they have agency, respect and safety. Child rights are mandatory for a humane society; childhood trauma results in lifelong susceptibility to mental illness, drug use, stress, poor focus and violence, making individuals inept at adapting their emotional reactions to people and situations. Sadly, progress has been negligible because no government has kept pace with the scale of the problem. As Nelson Mandela said: "Safety and security don't just happen; they are the result of collective consensus and investment."

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Welcome return

IT is almost here; the moment Pakistan has long been waiting for — the first International Cricket Council tournament on its soil since it co-hosted the 1996 One-day International

World Cup. The dry runs of the recently renovated stadiums in Lahore and Karachi have been successfully completed during the tri-nations series, and although concerns remain about the national team's form, the country is ready to usher in the cricketing world. The mood somewhat soured when India refused to send its team. Its matches were subsequently shifted to the UAE after an agreement that will see Pakistan, too, play its matches on neutral ground when tournaments are held across the border. But the rest of the teams are beginning to arrive; New Zealand and South Africa are already here, and have had a taste of what the new stadiums have to offer during the tri-nations series that ended on Friday. It truly marks the return of international cricket to the country, almost six years after foreign teams resumed their tours to Pakistan following the attack on the visiting Sri Lankan team in 2009. The Pakistan Cricket Board, which renovated the stadiums in the three host cities just months before Feb 19 when the Champions Trophy is due to begin, must be applauded. The facelift means that fans flocking to the venues will have a more immersive experience than previously. Therefore, there has been a great demand for tickets: long queues outside selling points reflect people's passion for the sport.

However, in the run-up to the tournament, it was disappointing to see swathes of empty seats at Karachi's National Bank stadium during the tri-nation series final between Pakistan and New Zealand. The result was disappointing too; Pakistan's sloppiness in the field as well as in their decision-making contributed to a five-wicket loss. It was Pakistan's second defeat to New Zealand — the side they take on in the Champions Trophy opener next week — in the tri-nation series, having also been thrashed in the round-robin stage of the tournament. It was thanks to a record run chase against South Africa that took them to the final where Mohammad Rizwan's men came up short — two dropped catches and a missed review proving costly. New Zealand have made a statement. Pakistan need to make one on Wednesday to show they mean business.

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Maintaining balance

THERE are good reasons to be wary. With a new US administration under Donald Trump consolidating its grip on that nation's foreign policy, there is uncertainty about the short- to medium-term future of Pakistan-US ties.

Recent developments give cause for concern. The Foreign Office has been compelled to publicly express its concerns regarding the outcomes of a recent meeting between President Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Specifically, Islamabad is

worried about Mr Trump's offer to sell advanced military technologies, such as F-35 jets, to India, which has implications for Pakistan's national defence.

It is also indignant that the joint communiqué issued after the meeting has called for Pakistan to "expeditiously bring to justice" those responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks and the Pathankot incident and called for Pakistani territory to not be used for cross-border terrorism. Such references are "one-sided" and "misleading", the FO has said.

Meanwhile, the US has nominated S. Paul Kapur, a scholar of Indian origin known for his hawkish views on Pakistan, to be its representative for South and Central Asia. Mr Kapur would be the latest addition to a bevy of strong critics of Pakistan in the new administration. His nomination is already being seen in some circles as a sign of Washington's souring view of Islamabad's policies.

Then there are vocal groups of Pakistani expatriates in the US who rallied behind Mr Trump during his campaign and have been pushing for the new administration to take a harder line on Islamabad's internal policies. All of these factors seem to give the impression that the regime in Islamabad is in the unenviable position of being forced to once again 'prove' its utility for US policymakers.

There is no question that Pakistan's concerns regarding India are valid. New Delhi seems to once again be leveraging economic heft to avoid accountability for its own involvement in running global assassination and terrorism networks, while at the same time using its engagements with foreign partners to shift blame publicly onto Pakistan.

Islamabad should not stand by idly as India plays this game; it must take a more proactive approach to establishing Pakistan's bona fides. It is regrettable that despite Pakistan's long engagement in the global war against terrorism and its continuing counterterrorism cooperation with the US, the steep price its people have paid in social and economic terms is still not recognised or appreciated.

Clearly, we need to rethink our foreign and security policies to bring them closer to the expectations of foreign allies while keeping national interests supreme.

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Tax policy reform

THE cabinet's decision to create a Tax Policy Office at the finance ministry has raised hopes that tax policy is finally being separated from revenue administration, which is simply the function of tax collection. The FBR would still have a role in the tax policymaking process, but it will be restricted to suggesting rather than dictating. Why

should tax policy be bifurcated from tax collection? The answer is simple. Tax policy should be closely aligned with broader economic and sectoral growth aims rather than focusing on just revenue collection for running day-to-day affairs. The concentration of powers — to frame tax policy and collect revenues — in the hands of the tax bureaucracy brings the entire focus of policy on revenue generation. It defeats the aim of using the policy framework for growing the economy through equitable and fair taxation. Sadly, successive governments' urgent revenue needs have kept them from divesting the FBR of its policymaking powers at the expense of both GDP growth, and fair tax. The tax bureaucracy, too, has previously resisted moves to take away its policymaking function in order to retain its control over who pays tax and how much, and who does not.

The decision will help the government meet another IMF programme goal ahead of the first biannual review of the ongoing loan by the lender next month. But the separation of policy and collection will mean nothing, nor will it produce the desired results, if the TPO is staffed with another set of bureaucrats rather than tax experts well versed in the latest technology, who can tap economists and business leaders for their input regarding a pro-growth tax policy and a transparent taxation system that is responsive to the needs of the people. It has taken us decades to take this first step. But, as they say, it is never too late.

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UN monitoring report

THE latest report of the UN Security Council's sanctions monitoring team paints a grim picture of the banned TTP's growing operational capacity.

It says that "the status and strength of TTP in Afghanistan had not changed", but its attacks on Pakistan have "significantly increased, with over 600 attacks during the reporting period [July-December], including from Afghan territory". This underscores Pakistan's long-standing concern at Afghan soil being used for cross-border violence.

Despite the Afghan Taliban's reassurance that their territory would not be used for terrorism against any country, the report confirms that they "continued to provide TTP with logistical and operational space and financial support", including funds for the TTP leadership and the creation of new training centres in Kunar, Nangarhar, Khost, and Paktika provinces. Such support undermines Pakistan's security and further strains its ties with Kabul.

Pakistan's ambassador to the UN Munir Akram had also warned the UNSC that the TTP was now "an umbrella organisation" for various militant actors, increasing the risk of

regional instability. The report corroborates this, noting that the TTP's coordination with Al Qaeda and other extremist outfits "might transform [TTP] into an extra-regional threat".

Islamabad has historically pursued a dual-track approach to dealing with the TTP menace — diplomatic engagement with Kabul alongside military action against the terrorists.

However, with the Taliban's continued reluctance to take concrete action against the TTP, Pakistan has also resorted to cross-border strikes against militant hideouts in Afghanistan. While such operations may provide short-term relief, unilateral military actions are not a sustainable solution. They risk worsening relations with Afghanistan and complicating broader stability.

Pakistan must intensify its diplomatic engagement with Kabul, stressing that its tolerance of the TTP is a serious breach of regional peace and bilateral trust. The Afghan Taliban leadership, in turn, must recognise that harbouring groups like the TTP will only increase global scrutiny and isolate them further.

Unfortunately, instead of accepting the realities detailed in the report, the Afghan Taliban have rejected the findings, dismissing them as propaganda. This can only be perceived as a sheer unwillingness to act, an approach that has implications not only for the Pak-Afghan relationship but also regional security. The international community must continue to ramp up the pressure.

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Climate funding gap

PRIME Minister Shehbaz Sharif's recent appeal for climate finance at the World Governments Summit in the UAE underscores a critical challenge Pakistan faces: bridging the enormous gap between climate funding needs and available resources.

The unfortunate reality is that Pakistan requires \$40-50bn annually for climate adaptation and mitigation, yet receives merely \$1.5-2bn from international sources. This disparity demands urgent attention, particularly given Pakistan's position as one of the world's most climate-vulnerable nations despite minimal contribution to global emissions.

The floods of 2022 serve as a haunting reminder of our vulnerability, having submerged a third of the country, affected 33m people, and caused \$30bn in economic losses. With Pakistan projected to lose over 6pc of its GDP annually to climate-related damages, the need for substantial climate finance cannot be overstated.

That Pakistan's energy transition alone requires \$100bn in investment highlights the extent of the challenge. However, the international climate finance architecture remains flawed.

Our limited access to the Green Climate Fund, securing only \$250m compared to India's \$782m and Bangladesh's \$441m, reflects systemic barriers that climate-vulnerable nations face. Complex approval processes, stringent credit ratings, and high borrowing costs continue to direct climate finance towards lower-risk projects in developed economies rather than where it is most urgently needed.

The way forward requires action on both international and domestic fronts. Globally, multilateral institutions must reform their frameworks to ensure equitable access to climate finance for vulnerable nations. The Loss and Damage Fund, while promising, needs streamlined mechanisms for accessibility. Global bodies must recognise that climate finance is not charity but a matter of climate justice.

At home, Pakistan must boost its institutional capacity to develop bankable climate projects. Our commitment to producing 60pc clean energy by 2030 and converting 30pc of vehicles to electric needs to be backed by action plans that can attract both public and private investment. Creating an enabling regulatory environment through targeted incentives, mandatory climate risk disclosures, and public-private partnerships is essential.

Pakistan must also prioritise financial innovation, exploring blended finance models, green bonds, and parametric insurance schemes. Developing specialised expertise in climate finance and technology, while fostering coordination between federal and provincial levels, will be crucial for effective fund utilisation.

The international community must match its pledges with action, while Pakistan needs to demonstrate its readiness to manage climate finance effectively.

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Cholistan project

THE Green Pakistan Initiative took off with the launch of three business franchises under the umbrella project in Cholistan last week. The ventures, which are backed by the military, promise to serve farmers as a "one-stop shop solution", providing them with high-yield seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, and fuel at discounted rates.

Farming implements and machines, including tractors and drones, will also be rented out to them at affordable prices. In addition, soil testing and other research services will be

offered to growers in collaboration with agriculture research institutions in the country to encourage innovation in this most important economic sector upon which depends our food security and much of our export earnings.

The GPI was created in 2023 to “promote corporate farming” to attract Gulf investment in agriculture, introducing contemporary best practices, reducing costs, and increasing yields to boost farm exports. The army has already been given control of thousands of acres of both ‘barren’ and fertile state land in Punjab, mostly in Cholistan.

While the business services mentioned have ostensibly been introduced for farmers of all sizes, and are likely to be extended to other parts of the province later, only large — corporate — farms spread over at least 5,000 acres will likely benefit from most of these facilities due to the cost and area under coverage. With the expansion of business services, the benefits may also trickle down to large family-based growers.

It is apparent that the GPI goals of bringing foreign investors and introducing modern farming practices to improve agricultural productivity and exports are largely aligned with Pakistan’s broader economic aims. However, the manner in which the initiative was launched during the caretaker set-up raises questions.

First and foremost is the issue of the construction of two canals to irrigate land in Cholistan under the GPI’s control. The project approved by the federal government in agreement with Punjab has caused much anxiety in Sindh. Both the Sindh government and farmers in the province are objecting strongly to the controversial plan, pointing out that the schemes were approved without discussion at the CCI for dubious reasons.

Punjab’s argument that these canals will be fed with floodwaters from India-controlled Sutlej does not have a leg to stand on. What happens during the years when there is no flood in the river? From where will the water come in flood-less years?

There is also the issue of evictions of tenants from state land in Punjab in order to transfer those lands to the GPI. What kind of a development strategy or plan would seek to strip thousands of their livelihoods and ignore smallholders? It, therefore, is advisable that the government and the security leadership transparently resolve these issues with all parties concerned before moving ahead with the plan.

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Right to know

IT is an unfortunate paradox that while on paper Pakistan has some of the most impressive right to information laws, their execution is anything but. Institutional inertia

and a culture of secrecy are to blame, according to Fafen's latest policy brief. It reveals that federal bodies proactively disclose only 42pc of the information they are legally required to share. It is painfully clear that Pakistan's RTI framework requires more than just well-crafted legislation. Fafen proposes a range of legal reforms — from setting strict disclosure timelines to removing ambiguities in exemption clauses. These suggestions have merit. The current system suffers from convenient escape hatches, with Section 7 of the RTI Act providing broad exemptions and ministers wielding discretionary powers to classify records. The problem, however, runs deeper. The Information Commission's current structure and authority level is problematic on two fronts. First, as Fafen notes, it functions primarily as an appellate body rather than a proactive enforcer of information access, lacking the authority to enforce strict compliance. Second, the commission's staffing presents a serious conflict of interest. What should be a watchdog institution has become a comfortable retirement home for bureaucrats, transforming oversight positions into cushy post-retirement jobs. Rather than challenging government departments to comply with RTI obligations, they appear more interested in appeasing officials — perhaps in the hope of securing tenure extensions. As a result, citizens' right to information is routinely sidelined.

Fafen is right to call for greater autonomy and financial independence for the commission. However, a more basic reform would be to ensure that at least two of the information commissioners come from civil society rather than government circles. These individuals must be properly trained and committed to transparency, rather than simply filling a bureaucratic seat. Additionally, clear performance metrics should hold commissioners accountable for their role in ensuring public access to information. To bridge the gap between policy and practice, Fafen also advocates for leveraging technology. It proposes the development of an online platform where citizens can submit and track information requests in real-time. This would prove useful in keeping track of which ministries are failing to comply with RTI requirements. The stakes are high. In an era where misinformation fuels political polarisation, an effective RTI framework would provide good defence against destabilising narratives.

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Dam dispute

THE situation in Chilas needs attention and a fair-minded approach so that it can be resolved amicably. Diamer locals are once again protesting over what they feel is the denial of their rights due to the state's failure to implement its end of the bargain in land acquisition deals made for the Diamer-Bhasha dam. What stands out about the latest round of protests is that it has been joined by religious scholars, tribal representatives,

political and religious parties, and even youth organisations, scholars, lawyers, and civil society leaders. In other words, the issue seems to have united a wide section of society in a tribal region, where local matters are usually dominated by internecine conflicts.

The protesters' demands include land settlement payments for around 18,000 acres of land that have been appropriated as 'state property' by Wapda for the dam, the release of a household support package to 2,500 families that have allegedly not yet received it, and replacement land for displaced families. The list of demands, in fact, is said to include 31 points. On the other hand, Wapda says it has already completed compensatory payments for 91pc of the land it has acquired, while the remaining is subject to legal proceedings. It has also clarified that compensation for affected buildings, markets, and other infrastructure was completed a decade ago, and that the household support package payments remain outstanding for only a few hundred more families, instead of the 2,500 claimed by locals. It has further pointed out that locals have not yet vacated businesses they had already been compensated for. This presents a tricky situation, where both sides seem to have good reasons to stand their ground. However, the dispute must not be allowed to escalate, and the federal government should move quickly. Local leaders, too, ought to demonstrate more flexibility. This is a project of national importance that cannot be subjected to narrow interests.

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Premature alarm

LAST month's \$420m current account deficit reflects the pressure of debt payment and a rising import bill on Pakistan's balance-of-payments position, amid drying up foreign loans and falling foreign private investment. This gap most likely marks a temporary reversal of the earlier trend of continuous surplus posted for five consecutive months — August to December — on account of a substantial boost in remittances from overseas Pakistanis.

The remittances have recorded a surge of \$5bn between July and January from a year ago. The January gap slashes the accumulated current account surplus from \$1.2bn to \$628m — still significant progress from the deficit of \$1.8bn posted in the same period last year, spawning hopes that the current account surplus/ deficit will remain range-bound between +0.5pc and -0.5pc of GDP during FY25.

The gap in the current account is not surprising, given the 38pc decline in foreign loan inflows to \$4.58bn in the first seven months of the present fiscal year from \$6.31bn a year ago. In its monthly report, the Economic Affairs Division said that the external assistance

does not include the \$1bn received from the IMF under its funding programme. The government is targeting foreign debt inflows of \$19.4bn, including \$9bn from China and Saudi Arabia, this fiscal year. Though FDI has risen by 27pc to \$1.3bn in the first half of the year, the meagre amount underlines the lack of investor confidence amid our painfully slow progress on structural reforms. And even after the passage of two years, the 'promised' investment flows from the Gulf remain elusive.

The weakened financial account indicates that debt payments and a surging trade gap of over \$16bn is mostly being financed through the current account. The 'empty' financial account is also responsible for a reduction of \$1bn in the State Bank's international reserves in eight weeks from Dec 13 to Feb 7, despite the purchase of \$3.8bn from the market in July-October.

The alarm being raised by some analysts is premature. It is anticipated that debt payment pressures will subside as most maturing loans have already been paid and imports are expected to slow down. If the momentum in remittances continues, we might see a small surplus in the current account.

Aside from a 'natural', gradual depreciation in the rupee value, there is also no reason for the exchange rate to deteriorate steeply. That said, the fragility of economic recovery demands that the authorities stop relying on remittances to finance the current account deficit and focus on attracting non-debt-creating foreign private investment. Improvement in headline inflation, leading to a fall in interest rates and reserves, besides a stable currency, has given policymakers a chance to fix investment policies and implement structural reforms. The window for changing course is small and time is running out.

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Forsaken province

AND the endless cycle of violence continues. The brutal killing on Tuesday night of seven Punjab-bound passengers in Barkhan district marks yet another tragic episode in Balochistan's troubled history. That armed men could stop multiple vehicles on a major highway, methodically check identity cards, and kill innocent travellers speaks volumes about the state of security in Pakistan's largest province. More troubling still is the fact that this has become a disturbing pattern that has claimed dozens of lives in recent months. Last August, 23 travellers were pulled from vehicles and shot in Musakhail. In May, seven barbers from Punjab were killed near Gwadar. April saw separate attacks in Noshki and Kech. Each incident follows the same horrifying script — armed men targeting civilians based on their provincial identity. While the prime minister and Balochistan chief

minister have issued strong statements after the attack, the fundamental question remains: why does this cycle of violence continue unabated?

Much of the answer lies in the decades of neglect that has left Balochistan's people disillusioned and marginalised. Despite being a resource-rich province, it has seen very little of the development that has over the years transformed other parts of the country. Basic infrastructure remains poor, educational opportunities are limited, and economic prospects for young Baloch are dim. This deep-seated deprivation has created fertile ground for extremist elements to exploit. And still, the political response to the situation has been tepid at best. Political parties are quick to condemn violence in statements, but show little genuine commitment to addressing Balochistan's basic grievances. The province appears to matter only during election season, when grand promises are made and promptly forgotten. What steps has the ruling PPP and PML-N coalition in Balochistan taken for any lasting solution? And what have the Baloch nationalist parties done? Pakistan's political leadership must demonstrate through actions, not words, that they have not forsaken Balochistan. The province needs not just enhanced security measures — though these are crucial — but a complete rethinking of how the federation engages with the province. This means genuine political dialogue, substantial investment in human development, and sincere efforts to bring Baloch youth into the national mainstream. Without addressing these core issues, we risk watching this tragic cycle repeat itself, with more innocent lives lost to senseless violence.

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In poor health

THE absence of decent and affordable healthcare in the country continues to ruin lives. An example of this is evident in the findings of an inquiry committee of the KP health department: in North Waziristan tribal district, 38 health centres have been established in private hujras, with landowners obtaining false OPD slips to create the impression of a functional facility; 20pc of staffers earn a paycheck without performing their duties; and 538 out of the 2,818 employees could not be verified. It was also noted that only 28 units were fitted out with 70pc of medical apparatus, while the rest faced a serious dearth of essential medicines, medical equipment, and basic devices, such as stethoscopes and thermometers.

When it comes to matters of life and death, the state seems unaffected. Although Pakistan has a lot of catching up to do — according to a WHO report for 2024, the country is far from achieving the global universal healthcare goal of 80pc — there is institutional reluctance to accept that an unhealthy populace with weakened abilities cannot prove

productive for the economy. Indeed, it is a travesty that the physical and mental well-being of citizens does not receive significant space in the manifestos of political parties. This lack of political will towards safeguarding and investing in such a vital area has contributed to Pakistan's negligible socioeconomic development. Prioritising quality health units is long overdue; international collaboration is needed and funds must be channelled towards the upgradation and expansion of the healthcare system. While healthcare is unsatisfactory in the urban areas, the rural areas have been deprived of even primary healthcare facilities. Moreover, for any progress to materialise, unscrupulous elements, such as those linked to North Waziristan's sham health centres, must be penalised; the poor have no choice but to rely on the state for their health.

Ukraine initiative

THOUGH Donald Trump has not been able to fulfil his promise of ending the Ukraine conflict "24 hours" after taking office, the American president is clearly not interested in pumping more US funds into this war. Moreover, his overtures to Russia — and use of scathing language to target the Ukrainian president — have sent shockwaves through Kyiv and European capitals.

Mr Trump is not a man known to indulge in diplomatic niceties, but the language he has used for the Ukrainian president has been unforgiving. He has termed Volodymyr Zelensky a "dictator" and a "moderately successful comedian" intent on keeping the American "gravy train" going. This is as clear a signal as any that the flow of American funds and weapons to Kyiv is coming to an end.

In fact, the Russian foreign minister and his American counterpart met in Riyadh on Tuesday to restart bilateral engagement, which had practically come to a stop under the Biden administration. All this signals that US involvement in the Ukraine conflict will be considerably reduced, if not ended altogether.

In a few days, it will be three years since the Russians invaded Ukraine, with the conflict upending the international order, and reviving the ghosts of the Cold War. It is high time that the war ended, but in a just and equitable manner.

Mr Trump was clearly wrong when he accused Ukraine of starting the war, as it was Moscow that invaded its western neighbour. But relations between the West and Russia had been deteriorating since before the invasion, with Moscow fearing that Nato was getting closer and closer to its borders. The Ukraine conflict has, in fact, turned into a proxy war pitting Nato against Russia; there have been perilous moments where both sides have come close to a direct conflagration. The American president is a major Nato sceptic, which would explain his urgency to wrap up this war.

Reacting to the meeting between Russia and America's top diplomats in Riyadh, President Vladimir Putin said he is ready to return to the peace process. This resolve should be backed by confidence-building measures. For a start, both sides should commit to an immediate ceasefire, while Moscow needs to recognise Ukraine's territorial sovereignty; the Soviet Union is now a part of history, and Russia should respect the independence of the ex-Soviet states.

On the other hand, the Nato states cannot afford to treat Russia like a bogeyman and must engage with Moscow in a spirit of mutual respect, working for collective security. It is difficult to say whether Mr Trump's Ukraine peace initiative will succeed, but it will be very difficult for Kyiv and its European backers to face the Russian military machine without America's big guns and endless supply of dollars.

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High cost of SOEs

THERE are losses and then some. The finance ministry's latest overview of the federally owned state enterprises shows that most SOEs keep haemorrhaging at the expense of taxpayers, the economic infrastructure, and crucial public services such as healthcare, education, clean water supply and sanitation. The report reveals that the aggregate losses of several SOEs, particularly those operating in the power and infrastructure sectors, rose to Rs851bn in FY24, with their total debt surging to Rs9.2tr, nearly equalling the tax revenues collected by the FBR for that year. The losses include government assistance of Rs782bn in subsidies and Rs367bn in grants added to their revenues. Some like the Pakistan Steel Mills are incurring losses, while waiting to be sold or liquidated for the past many years. Others such as the Railways and the national carrier are bleeding just to remain operational. The SOEs' accumulated losses stand at a colossal Rs5.75tr. Most losses have accrued in the past 10 years alone. Not all SOEs are suffering losses. Some, like those in the business of oil and gas, insurance and power generation made a cumulative profit of Rs820bn.

The statement that the loss-making state enterprises have become a big burden on the budget and a major risk to fiscal stability does not even begin to capture the full threat that these SOEs pose to an already teetering economy. The government subsidies, grants, loans, and equity injections totalling Rs1.59tr — equal to 13pc of the federal budget receipts and significantly greater than the federal development programme — are enough to show the monsters they have become. Multiple half-hearted, botched attempts in the past to restructure essential and sell off non-essential SOEs underline the lack of political will to fix or part with them because of the easy, large rents they produce for

politicians and bureaucrats. The way the privatisation of PIA was structured last year to keep out serious bidders from the process, and the failed maiden attempt to sell off its majority share reflects the entrenched financial interests of both politicians and the bureaucracy in maintaining the status quo to keep drawing rent out of the SOEs. But for how long? With government resources thinning by the day and pressure by multilateral lenders increasing, we are left with no option but to reconsider our policy on SOEs. It is only a matter of time before these would have to be liquidated, sold, or fixed.

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Poor impression

RECENT developments in the Senate have provided cause for concern on how parliamentary business is being conducted. On Monday, Deputy Chairman of the Senate Syedal Khan Nasar controversially decided to withhold the results of a vote on a motion after it unexpectedly received the support of several government-allied lawmakers as well. The motion in question had sought the immediate consideration of the State Bank of Pakistan (Amendment) Bill, which seeks to improve the private sector's access to bank credit in smaller provinces. The government had strongly opposed the bill, arguing that it was a money bill, and therefore its own prerogative, but the opposition persisted, arguing that it had nothing to do with Article 74. Perhaps a bit frazzled by the debate, the acting Senate chair called for a vote, but the motion got more support than he anticipated. Ideally, he should have then announced the result and let the chips fall where they may. Instead, his actions left the impression that the House was siding with the government even against its membership's wishes.

On Tuesday, as the opposition protested for the return of Senate Chairman Yousuf Raza Gilani, who, it may be recalled, has refused to chair the ongoing session ever since his production orders for a PTI senator were not honoured, the acting chairman suspended three PTI senators for protesting his decision. He also ordered the sergeant-at-arms to expel them from the House. This only added insult to injury. At one point during the ensuing pandemonium, the acting chair remarked that the House could not be run on anyone's wishes and personal agenda. His actions belied those words. Parliament loses its purpose if it cannot adhere to set rules of the game. If the opposition is to be denied any victory at all costs, then it seems pertinent to ask whether it is a dictatorship that is being served by parliament, or some democratic system of governance.

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Rules for thee

It was a year ago when, in the tumultuous aftermath of the 2024 elections, the state banned X. Today, it remains banned — for seemingly everyone except government officials, who continue to use the platform via VPNs. The ban represents not just a violation of constitutional rights, it is also an example of the phrase ‘rules for thee, not for me’ in action. The government’s justification has seen dramatic swings from ‘national security concerns’ to an admission by a ruling party member that the ban aims to control the PTI’s social media presence. This has exposed the political motivations behind what should be matters of public policy and free expression. Unfortunately, this is not our first foray into digital censorship. The YouTube ban of 2012-2016 is a painful reminder of how such restrictions hobble society’s advancement while failing to achieve stated objectives. That ban cost our creative industry millions in lost revenue, stifled digital literacy, and forced Pakistanis to seek technological workarounds — much as they do today with X.

The economic impact of the X ban extends far beyond its reportedly 4.5m local users. Small businesses have seen their digital reach curtailed. Journalists and academics find themselves cut off from global discourse. Tech startups, already struggling in a challenging economy, face another barrier to growth. Most concerning is the message this sends to the international community. As nations worldwide embrace digital transformation, Pakistan appears intent on retreating into digital isolation. This not only damages our reputation but also deters potential investors and partners who value digital freedom and transparency. The government’s suggestion that X might be restored after implementing new social media rules under Peca is cold comfort, given the already restrictive nature of our cyber laws. What Pakistan needs is not more digital restrictions, but an open digital ecosystem that serves all citizens, and not just those in power.

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Paying taxes

FINANCE Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb’s ‘hard talk’ at a retail business conference on Thursday was long overdue. While appreciating the retail sector’s substantial contribution to employment and GDP, he nevertheless took the retailers to task for their negligible tax contribution, warning them that the country could not afford yet another “boom-and-bust cycle”. “Every sector must contribute to taxes. The current burden on the salaried class and manufacturing sector is unsustainable,” he said, while urging the retailers to ‘formalise’ their businesses and contribute to national prosperity since the time for free rides was over.

Indeed, as minister, Mr Aurangzeb has been saying all the right things. But it is time for him to walk the talk. Appealing to the good sense of tax evaders will no longer do. The utter failure of the Federal Board of Revenue to meet the revenue target under the Tajir Dost scheme underlines the need for harsher measures to enforce the tax laws. Retailers are not the only tax dodgers. Those profiting from urban real estate and the ones in the agriculture supply chain, too, are paying only a fraction of what is due to the system in taxes. Making laws does not automatically increase tax compliance. Take the example of real estate. There are various federal and provincial levies on property transactions. However, not even a handful of people pay the exact amount that they are supposed to. Even the organised industry is not paying what it owes to the national exchequer in taxes. The tax gap in the textile industry, especially at the spinning stage, is estimated by the FBR to be Rs700bn. The increase in agriculture tax rates will not boost revenues from this sector; it will require strict enforcement, the use of technology and, of course, strong political will to enforce the amended law. After retailers, the minister must also pay a visit to his friends in the business of real estate, who are seeking amnesty for the realty sector to 'grow the economy and create jobs'. It is time they also got a hard talk from him. More importantly, he needs to sit down and talk to his cabinet colleagues who are pushing for such moves to get premature growth for political and personal reasons. That would be the hardest part of his job but without reining in these elements in government, no reform effort can succeed.

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Judiciary in the dock

IT has now come to this: five judges versus the president, the federation, the Judicial Commission, the registrars of the Supreme Court and the high courts of Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan and Islamabad, and three of their fellow judges.

The five, who are "serving confirmed judges" of the Islamabad High Court, have formally challenged the manner in which three justices were recently transplanted to the IHC from other high courts, how the IHC's seniority list was subsequently changed, and how far more senior, confirmed IHC judges were summarily replaced on important committees by the freshly transferred judges.

The petitioners have called on the apex court to exercise its original jurisdiction under Article 184(3) to hear their pleas, as they believe what happened at the IHC is tantamount to a "dismantling of the salient features of the Constitution"; specifically, "the

independence of judiciary, separation of powers and federalism". They seem to have made a strong case.

It may be recalled that the trouble at the IHC began last year when several judges formally raised the issue of routine meddling by security agencies in court affairs. The contents of their complaint, addressed to the then chief justice, Qazi Faez Isa, were corroborated by similar complaints made subsequently by other high courts as well. Unfortunately, the former chief justice never had the bandwidth to address these complaints, and the matter was not addressed.

Now, and especially after the 26th Amendment, a perception has been building up that all judges who are perceived as a 'threat' by the current regime are being systematically sidelined and 'neutralised' by being denied their due promotions and/ or deprived of any important administrative responsibilities they may have held.

The way things have played out in the SC and the IHC in recent months certainly seems to have lent considerable credibility to that perception.

It has been most disappointing to observe that the petitions against the 26th Amendment have not been taken up with the seriousness and urgency they ought to have attracted from the SC. The judiciary's image as an independent and impartial arbiter has continued to deteriorate as a result.

This petition, if it is taken up, will at least compel various actors to place on the record legal justifications for various actions and decisions which have been publicly perceived as having deprived the judiciary in general, and the IHC in particular, of their institutional independence, autonomy and ability to function without fear or favour.

It must also be reiterated that it is only proper that petitions pertaining to the independence of the judiciary as an institution are heard by a full court so that there is no complaint regarding conflicts of interest. The institutional leadership cannot ignore the growing criticism forever.

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Defending freedom

THERE was no other choice. Despite assurances of consultations with key stakeholders, the government passed the Peca amendment law and has forced journalist bodies, the legal fraternity, and human rights groups to launch a united front against this draconian law, culminating in a convention at the Karachi Press Club on March 1. Journalists have been at the forefront, organising protests, filing legal challenges, and raising awareness.

Their efforts have borne fruit, with various civil society groups joining their cause. With the convention, this movement is gaining critical mass. The decision to band together can be a powerful statement against a repressive legal framework. The concerns are well-founded. Peca expands the state's powers to target individuals for expressing opinions online. It grants authorities sweeping control over digital content, putting all citizens at risk of censorship and persecution. Even before this law was passed, journalists, academics, doctors, students, and activists had been subjected to intimidation. The new amendments formalise these excesses, shielding state actors from accountability while stifling legitimate discourse.

The March 1 convention must serve as a platform for wider mobilisation. While journalists have taken the lead, other societal groups should also step forward. Suppression of speech is not an issue confined to the media — it is a direct attack on the rights of every citizen. Teachers, students, labour organisations, and civil society must recognise that this law threatens their freedoms. Unchallenged, its reach will extend beyond journalists to anyone questioning authority. The government must acknowledge that steamrolling critical voices is neither sustainable nor democratic. It should immediately repeal the latest amendments to Peca and engage in genuine dialogue with relevant stakeholders to draft a more balanced law. Policy recommendations should include independent oversight of content regulation, clear safeguards against abuse, and a commitment to upholding freedom of expression as enshrined in the Constitution. The unity displayed by stakeholders against Peca shows that citizens will not quietly accept the erosion of their fundamental rights. The government must heed these voices before the consequences of this legislation feed into a wider societal discontent. A free press is not an adversary; it is an essential pillar of democracy.

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Anti-Muslim crimes

THE surge in Islamophobic assaults in the UK, as reported by the anti-hate crime charity Tell MAMA, is a stark reminder of the deepening crisis of intolerance and hate. With a staggering 73pc rise and a record-breaking 6,313 reports of anti-Muslim incidents in 2024, the situation is deeply disturbing. Not only do these figures reflect the increasing danger posed by right-wing extremism, they also underscore the failure of mainstream discourse to challenge and reject Islamophobic narratives. Tell MAMA's director Iman Atta has rightly pointed out that the normalisation of Islamophobia in political rhetoric and the spread of far-right conspiracy theories have created an unprecedented threat for Britain's Muslims. The 'great replacement' theory, which claims that Muslims and other minorities are

'replacing' native populations, has fuelled violence online and offline. There is evidence that extremists share tactics to evade law enforcement, target mosques, and even incentivise attacks. This organised hate has made everyday life perilous for visibly Muslim individuals, particularly women, who now fear stepping outside with their children. This atmosphere is not building in isolation. The rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes coincides with a broader increase in societal tensions, as seen in antisemitic incidents, which remain at their second highest recorded level. The Gaza conflict, the riots following last year's Southport attack, and the political weaponisation of issues such as grooming gangs have all contributed to an environment where disinformation thrives, further radicalising individuals.

All is not dark though. Ms Atta notes that Muslim communities remain resilient, with many openly expressing pride in their identity despite the risks. Moreover, the response of the British criminal justice system to violence has been commendable. Still, these efforts are insufficient. The government and civil society must take stronger action against hate speech, regulate social media platforms that enable extremism, and foster unity among all communities.

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The long wait

THE political process appears to be going nowhere. The PTI seems to have run out of ideas and the rest of the opposition has been floating about in a rudderless manner. The ruling parties seem to have little to offer, having compromised their principles in the pursuit of power.

Meanwhile, the steady dismantling of the state apparatus continues apace. National institutions are being systematically weakened; soon, they may no longer be in any position to enforce the social contract between the people and the state. Repeated interference in matters of governance and policy is not only setting the country back politically but also dampening its economic prospects.

It has been difficult to rationalise why all of this is happening, given that there seems to be some acknowledgement, even among those holding the reins, that the current trajectory cannot be sustained. Rarely has a nation seemed so helpless against its worst impulses.

The opposition has announced a two-day conference in Islamabad in the coming week to discuss politics and other national issues. No ruling party has been invited, even though

the rationale given for hosting the conference is that “problems are only solved when they are discussed”.

Representatives of the media and lawyers’ and workers’ unions have been invited, but one may assume that only the like-minded among them will attend. The divisions that exist in politics have spread to every other domain. The conference is unlikely to yield much beyond soundbites and a few headlines in the papers.

It cannot solve Pakistan’s fundamental problem, which is that two of its most important leaders still cannot get over themselves. One considers himself a great politician but refuses to do politics, while the other once called himself the biggest champion of civilian supremacy yet now refuses to stand up for it.

For those watching Pakistani politics from an intellectual perspective, both men have been a disappointment lately. Their stubborn refusal to find common ground has hardened into a personal enmity that has no place in a democratic society.

What has made the fight all the more exasperating is that both leaders appear to have the same vision for Pakistan as a country where the public controls its destiny. Though no one expects them to set aside their personal principles or compromise on political positions, it is not irrational to expect them to give the possible political solutions before them some thought.

Obstinacy has gotten the country nowhere in the last three-odd years. The cycle of violence and retribution will need to stop so that things can improve. Until it does, there can be little hope for sociopolitical and economic stability in Pakistan.

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Oblivious to drought

PAKISTAN faces two types of drought: one caused by dry weather or lower-than-normal rainfall, and the other resulting from lower water supply in streams, reservoirs and groundwater levels, induced by months of no or insufficient rains. With climate change affecting the availability of water across the country in more ways than one, droughts, especially related to dry weather and lower-than-normal rainfall, are projected by a 2022 World Bank study to increase in the coming years. With rainfall below 40pc of the normal amount since September, we are facing a drought across most parts of Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan this year as well. Without significant rainfall, drought, or dry and warmer weather conditions, is projected to exacerbate over the next few months. That is not all. Glaciers in the northern parts of the country have also been shrinking for the last many

years due to below-normal snowfall and rising temperatures, with a forecast of further reduction in future flows in the Indus and its tributaries. The winter temperature this year is recorded to be above normal in most parts of the country.

Given the huge impact of global warming on weather patterns and water resources, aggravated drought conditions in the country do not come as a surprise. What boggles the mind more is the obliviousness of the country's water sector planners to what is happening around them. The disclosure that Irsa, the nation's water regulator, had approved water availability for the planned Cholistan canal a year ago, without taking into consideration decreasing water flows in the river system and the increasing number of dry days and drought conditions indicate the quality of our future water planning. Repeated disturbing climate events demand that such decisions be based on scientific studies and extensive data. The justification that we would have ample floodwaters from the Indian-controlled Sutlej river to feed the new canal is flawed to say the least. We do not see floods in Sutlej or any other river every year. Does Punjab have extra water to feed this canal in the years without floods? With water availability in the Indus system in decline, farmers from Punjab, too, are facing shortages, especially in the drought years. Therefore, our policymakers must rethink the new canal project in view of the increasing water distress in the river system.

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Taliban divisions

THERE are concerning reports of possible divisions within the Afghan Taliban, particularly between the ideological old guard based in Kandahar, and the more pragmatic members of the hard-line movement.

Afghanistan's internal power struggles matter to both Pakistan and Kabul's other neighbours, as well as the larger international community, because if the current dispensation implodes, it may fuel a fresh humanitarian exodus, along with empowering transnational terrorist groups based in that country.

The rumours have been given credence as some senior members of the Taliban apparently fled Afghanistan after making remarks critical of the leadership. This includes deputy foreign minister Abbas Stanikzai, who reportedly left in January after criticising Taliban supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, specifically the latter's harsh stance on girls' education.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has denied that Mr Stanikzai fled, saying he was in the UAE to "visit family". Moreover, Mr Mujahid has downplayed talk that an internal

rebellion was brewing within Taliban ranks, stating that while opinions varied, the 'Islamic Emirate' "remains a united front".

Despite these claims, the world, including Afghanistan's neighbours, should monitor the situation closely. After all, following the collapse of the Najibullah government in 1992, mujahideen warlords engaged in a prolonged civil war, paving the way for the rise of the Taliban; if factional, tribal and ideological rifts widen, this blood-soaked history might be repeated.

The Taliban are by no means an ideal dispensation; however, if the system collapsed without a viable alternative, Afghanistan would return to the violence of yore, adding to the miseries of millions of ordinary Afghans. Moreover, terrorist groups, such as IS-K and the TTP, would take advantage of the chaos. From Pakistan's perspective, the TTP's activities are of particular concern, because of the long terrorist campaign it has waged against this country.

The only workable solution lies in Mullah Akhundzada loosening his iron grip on the country. States cannot be run on ideology alone, and if Afghanistan remains internationally isolated and economically weak, internal discontent will grow.

While the Taliban cannot be expected to respect democratic values, voices of dissent must be heard, and more flexibility shown, particularly with regard to basic freedoms and women's rights. Ideally, a democratic system that promises rights to all of the country's ethnic, tribal and religious groups should be the goal.

But until that goal is achieved, the Taliban leadership should listen to voices of reason, and shed their rigidity. The last time their regime fell because they failed to sever links with Al Qaeda. This time, if the Taliban high command fails to listen to its own cadres and leaders, the collapse could come from within.

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Digital children

As most parents with young children will agree, the easiest way to pacify a bawling child is to hand them a smartphone, tablet, or other digital device. But though this might ensure temporary calm, the long-term effects of this practice — particularly the unsupervised use of digital devices — can have negative consequences. According to a recent survey by cybersecurity firm Kaspersky, 89pc of parents use digital gadgets to keep children occupied. Interestingly, 78pc of the children surveyed said they could not live without their devices. What is of particular concern is that around 22pc of respondents in the Middle

East, Turkiye and the Africa area had not discussed internet safety with their children. While digital devices are now an essential part of life, unlimited exposure to these gadgets can have harmful consequences on the mental and physical health of impressionable young minds. As the numbers highlighted by the Kaspersky survey show, there needs to be a frank conversation between parents, experts, and children to ensure the health and safety of youngsters in the digital age.

Gadgets can be addictive, and as a Unicef report points out, children under three should not have access to such devices. Moreover, parents need to set limits on screen time and discourage their offspring from spending too much time online, while children's cyber activities also need to be monitored to prevent them from accessing inappropriate, dangerous, or violent content. There are many predators lurking online, and parents need to remain vigilant about these threats. Locally, the PTA should carry out campaigns about digital safety geared towards how parents can protect children from online harm while promoting the healthy use of devices. Such messages can be amplified through online platforms popular in the country, so that parents know how to ensure the responsible use of gadgets. The messages should be in Urdu and regional languages to reach all areas of the country.

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All out

PAKISTAN cricket captain Mohammad Rizwan's assessment was brutal — it could not have been any other way. At their very own long-awaited home tournament, Pakistan were left lining up for the exit door.

A humbling loss to India on Sunday meant the Champions Trophy hosts were pointless after two matches, having also fallen in the tournament opener against New Zealand. Yet again, Pakistan were left without control of their destiny, relying on other results for survival.

Rizwan was clear that it was not the position he had envisaged his team would be in but that it was the harsh reality: Pakistan have become also-rans in a sport that enjoys the greatest patronage and support in the country. Their unceremonious exit was confirmed when New Zealand beat Bangladesh on Monday, and this will rankle. In their final group game against Bangladesh, Pakistan will be playing for nothing but pride.

In a tournament that was meant to be a celebration of Pakistani cricket and the team — not too long ago, Pakistan had won the One-day International series against Australia and South Africa — the side could not go far enough. The euphoria of hosting an

international tournament for the first time in almost three decades has died. In sports, the celebration of any tournament lasts longer when the home team goes far. Understandably, fans here are left wondering whether the next tournament at home will give them reason to hope.

Pakistan had gone in as defending champions but went out with a whimper. Their selections were questionable; their approach was mediaeval. Pakistan seemed to be left behind in the evolutionary race of modern-day cricket.

Head coach and chief selector Aqib Javed, the man entrusted with turning around Pakistan's fortunes, has been found wanting. Given the top roles after helping the national team mount a remarkable comeback in their Test series against England last year, his magic has faded. Unfortunate injuries also played their part. Pakistan went into the tournament without Saim Ayub and then lost Fakhar Zaman, but that is no excuse.

The India game had become a must-win but there seemed to be no urgency, no desire, and no inspiration. Pakistan's big names were missing. Babar Azam departed just when he got going. Rizwan went just when Pakistan were getting a foothold into the game. The bowlers were treated with utter disdain by India's batters. India were completely dominant — Rohit Sharma's men made the fabled India-Pakistan cricketing rivalry lopsided.

Pakistan need to turn things around to become contenders once again. The onus falls on the Pakistan Cricket Board to ensure this. It invested huge sums of money in renovating the stadiums for the Champions Trophy. It should now invest some time and effort into rebuilding the national team.

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Bearing the brunt

FOR the past several months, we have repeatedly been told by the prime minister and his cabinet that the government is 'working hard' to slash base electricity prices in a big way. For that, the government had also set up a task force, and staffed it with many sector experts, including a former caretaker minister, to 'engage' independent power producers, barring the ones that involved Chinese investment, to renegotiate their contracts in order to reduce the burden of capacity price payments on the tariffs. The task force, if we consider what the government has been saying all along, was also to suggest other measures, such as cuts in the myriad taxes on power consumers to substantially bring down electricity prices before the approaching summer months. But, instead of getting a tariff cut, media reports suggest that consumers might be paying an additional surcharge

as the cost for the government's plans to partly liquidate the power sector's circular debt that has already soared to nearly Rs2.40tr.

The reports say that the government is "in talks" with the banks to obtain a loan from them to reduce the massive power sector debt by Rs1.24tr. The interest costs would be paid by consumers in the shape of a debt-servicing surcharge, the size of which would be determined by the interest rate to be charged by the banks in their monthly bills. With interest rates down by 1,000 bps to 12pc since June, and projected to plunge further in the next several months, the authorities believe they can borrow money at lower rates and make consumers pay it back to lenders through their bills for seven years. If implemented, such a strategy would amount to punishing consumers for the government's bad policies and the losses being incurred by distribution companies due to their uncontrolled system losses and theft. It seems that the authorities are in a hurry to close the deal with the banks because of the upcoming IMF review of its funding programme. The liquidation of circular debt is indeed crucial for reducing the government's involvement in the electricity business, moving towards a competitive bilateral contract market, and selling off state-owned power companies. The question is: do the consumers have it in them to bear the cost of the government's flawed policymaking, and the inefficiencies and corruption of the power distribution firms?

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Afghan resettlement

AFGHAN refugees who fled their country after the Taliban took over in 2021, and who hoped to resettle in the West, face an unenviable challenge. Even those Afghans who had been approved for entry into the US now face great uncertainty as President Donald Trump's administration has temporarily suspended America's resettlement programme. The noises emerging from the White House indicate that there are slim chances this programme will be revived and that Afghans and others will not be able to board a plane for the US. These decisions have a direct effect on Pakistan, which has been hosting Afghan refugees for the last five decades, with the latest influx coming after the Taliban took Kabul. In this regard, Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar told a foreign media outlet recently that the Afghans denied resettlement by the US will be considered illegal immigrants and sent back to their country of origin. While Mr Dar said Pakistan is open to dialogue with the US over the matter, the state has set a March 31 deadline for Afghans to leave Islamabad and Rawalpindi, where many of the refugees are living temporarily.

The fact is that sending back refugees who worked for the former West-backed Afghan administration, or those who helped foreign military forces, is akin to a death sentence.

The Afghan Taliban consider these individuals ‘traitors’ and would hardly treat them with compassion. Pakistan, on its part, faces a genuine resource crunch and cannot support an increased number of refugees. Therefore, it is morally incumbent upon the US and other members of the Western coalition that occupied Afghanistan to take in these refugees, particularly those who have already been vetted and cleared. The state here must communicate to Western capitals, particularly Washington, the need to resettle Afghan refugees without delay. In the meantime, Pakistan should treat Afghan refugees in a humane manner, and these individuals should not be forcibly repatriated.

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Deadly roads

DRIVING in Karachi can be hazardous, with chaos on the roads, and very little by way of following rules and regulations. Over the past few weeks, there have been several deadly accidents, mostly involving heavy vehicles, with the latest accident occurring on Tuesday, when an individual in Malir was hit by a public bus. A day earlier, an industrialist and his son died after their vehicle was knocked off the ICI bridge by a fast-moving trailer, even though the movement of heavy vehicles during daylight hours is prohibited. Figures quoted in the media say there have been over 130 fatalities caused by traffic accidents in Karachi so far this year, with more than 1,800 people injured. Last year, around 500 people were killed. The frequency of fatal accidents has led to law and order situations, with protesters often torching errant vehicles. The Sindh government has formed a committee to oversee road safety, but the performance of such committees in other areas of public importance does not inspire confidence.

When it comes to dangerous roads, society as a whole is guilty of contributing to hazardous conditions. The state is, of course, mostly to blame, having failed to enforce the traffic rules, with deadly results. Most often, traffic policemen are busy shaking down motorcyclists or drivers of smaller vehicles, while ignoring those in fancier cars. Moreover, drivers can get away with traffic infractions by stuffing a few notes into the officer’s pocket. Therefore, it is essential that a professional and honest traffic police force be deployed to check violators. In this regard, the Motorway Police has a comparatively better record, and this model can be emulated. There should also be strict vigilance of heavy vehicles moving in the city during prohibited hours. Meanwhile, a careless public is routinely seen breaking the law on the roads. Unless drivers display civic sense, our roads cannot be made safer.

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Controlling crypto

THOUGH Pakistan's official position on cryptocurrencies has evolved considerably over the years, there still seems to be more talk than action on embracing digital assets. On Monday, while speaking at the Pakistan Banking Summit 2025, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb urged the authorities to approach modern technologies with 'an open mind', pointing out that, "The reality is that crypto is already in vogue here in the informal market and the numbers are what they are, even if they are one-fourth of what the numbers are being moved around." He also seemed regretful that Pakistan had not made a move yet, musing that, "We need to think through and be ahead of the cycle in terms of the regulatory regime and think on how to move forward with AI and digital assets". While it is difficult to see how Pakistan can move 'ahead of the cycle' given that its efforts to regulate crypto have so far not gone anywhere, it may not be too late for it to catch up with the rest of the world.

The Virtual Assets Bill, 2025, which landed in the Senate last month, envisions "a legal and regulatory framework for the issuance, use, trading, and management of virtual assets within Pakistan, ensuring that such assets are backed by the Pakistani rupee", according to news reports. It proposes the establishment of 'Virtual Asset Zones' for the trading and management of cryptocurrencies, which would maintain strict compliance with AML/CFT regulations, operate transparently and be open to regular audits. It also proposes the creation of a regulatory commission to oversee these 'zones' and related service providers' compliance-related issues, as well as the issuance and maintenance of rupee-based virtual assets. All in all, it is a fairly comprehensive bill. However, the bigger challenge may be Pakistan's poor image vis-à-vis digital rights and regulations. Early cryptocurrencies evolved as an expression of individual freedoms, especially with respect to personal wealth, and in rejection of the various controls exercised by the global financial system. The authorities should admit and embrace this fact. They should aim for a regulatory framework that encourages innovation and protects personal freedoms while exercising oversight. Care must also be taken that pushing cryptocurrencies does not exacerbate the problems unique to Pakistan, such as foreign exchange instability, inflation and capital flight.

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Forgotten inmates

PAKISTAN'S jails are an embarrassment to any notion of justice and rehabilitation.

A report prepared by the National Commission for Human Rights, National Academy for Prisons Administration, and Justice Project Pakistan describes the appalling conditions prisoners have to endure: there are more than 102,000 of them crammed into spaces

built for fewer than 66,000. In Punjab, prisons are at a staggering 173.6pc of their capacity, while Karachi Central Jail operates at an overwhelming 355pc overcapacity. Three-quarters of inmates remain under trial, caught in an endless legal limbo.

Despite some attempts at reform, Pakistan's prison system has seen little meaningful change. Punjab has led infrastructural expansions, constructing 13 new jails since 2010, yet the province still houses 61,813 prisoners in facilities meant for 37,217. Meanwhile, Sindh, KP, and Balochistan lag behind, relying on outdated facilities and policies that fail to ease congestion.

The 2022 amendment to the Control of Narcotic Substances Act has exacerbated overcrowding by eliminating parole and probation options for drug offenders. Nearly 30pc of Punjab's prisoners consists of individuals convicted of drug-related crimes, many serving disproportionately long sentences. Shockingly, while conviction rates for narcotics cases plummeted to just 2pc in Punjab in 2023, incarceration rates soared.

It is a broken system: poor sanitation, malnutrition, and a lack of healthcare create inhumane conditions, with prisoners often forced to sleep in shifts due to overcrowding. And it breeds a mental health crisis where individuals with psychosocial disabilities are detained indefinitely, subjected to abuse and medical neglect. The tragic case of Khizar Hayat, a mentally ill prisoner who died chained to a hospital bed, is just one among many.

Solutions are not unknown. Sindh and KP have updated their legal frameworks for prisons. However, Punjab and Balochistan have stalled on key reforms, with Punjab yet to implement its Draft Prison Rules, 2022, which could improve prisoner welfare significantly. Most prisoners do not need to be behind bars; community service and alternative sentencing must be introduced as viable options.

Moreover, the undertrial prisoner population can be thinned out with bail reforms and expedited court proceedings. An important element to consider is independent oversight. The NCHR should be empowered to conduct surprise inspections and establish an independent prisoner complaint mechanism. Vocational training and education must be integrated into prison management to provide meaningful rehabilitation. Diversion programmes are needed for minor offences and people with psychosocial disabilities should receive treatment rather than be jailed.

A civilised society does not lock people away and forget them. Our prison crisis demands more than committees and reports. The need of the hour is political will and implementation of the proposals that have accumulated over decades.

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The challenge before banks

THE gap is huge, to say the least. And those who own Pakistani banks, and the bankers who work for them, do not seem to be cognisant of — let alone prepared for — the challenges being unleashed by rapid tech disruptions led by the emergence of AI. Not that they do not see what is coming — it is just that the banking model that makes them colossal profits through risk-free lending to the sovereign or a few scores of large corporations has made them complacent. But for how long can they survive by sticking to this model, and refusing to adjust to new socioeconomic realities?

While industry leaders focused on the massive tax burden of 54pc on the banks and the billions of rupees taken from them by the FBR in the name of windfall levy at the recent Pakistan Banking Summit in Karachi, others kept reminding them how destructive it could be for the banking industry to delay the adoption of digital technology and AI, as well as investments in human resource, infrastructure, and product development to meet future demands. The way we do banking today will not exist in the next 10 years, and only those will survive who are capable of adopting new technologies.

There is no doubt that the banking industry has transitioned massively from being a heavily state-controlled sector to a privately owned business in the last three-and-a-half decades. Since then, this sector has grown phenomenally, helped governments finance their deficits, invested in digital space in line with the increase in the use of smartphones and mobile apps, and so on.

However, at the same time, the profit-oriented bankers have ignored various sectors of the economy, including smallholder farmers, housing, small businesses, women, and others who do not have collateral to pledge for a loan. Thus, a very large portion of rural and even lower-income urban populations remain outside the financial system and are dependent on expensive informal channels for funding needs. The way the banking sector has been restructured in the last few decades has come under scrutiny in recent years because of the failure to support the growth of those sectors of the economy that needed their help.

Indeed, the summit touched upon all these issues along with the challenges of future tech disruptions. But a conference or two is not enough to deal with all these problems. It is crucial for the central bank to engage with industry on a regular and proactive basis to help it navigate new and old obstacles to ensure that banks play an invigorating role in the growth and development of hitherto ignored sectors of the economy. Conferences can only underline the issues; they cannot tackle them.

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Torkham tension

CONTROVERSY over demarcation of the common frontier is one of the key obstacles standing in the way of better Pakistan-Afghanistan relations; in fact, it has poisoned ties since this country's independence. Disputes often lead to the closure of border crossings, causing suspension of trade and people's movement. In this regard, the Torkham crossing has been closed for the past five days after the Afghan Taliban forces reportedly started building a bunker in a disputed area. Such closures have become far too frequent, as the underlying factors fuelling bilateral differences have not been adequately addressed. Officials say the closure has resulted in losses worth millions, while thousands of people have been unable to cross. Hundreds of workers depend on border trade to make a living, and have not been able to secure work due to the shutdown. Low-level negotiations to reopen the border continue, but nothing concrete had emerged at the time of writing.

The Torkham issue must be seen through the wider lens of Pak-Afghan relations. As ties with Kabul's Taliban rulers — who, like their predecessors, refuse to recognise the Durand Line as the frontier — remain strained, hostility is reflected at the border. The problem is that there is no proper exchange of information, so when one side starts construction in a disputed area, the other takes umbrage. This can often lead to the exchange of fire and a volatile situation. In order to resolve the issue permanently, a high-level border management mechanism is required. For this, the Afghan side has to recognise the Durand Line as the frontier and that Pakistani sovereignty over the adjoining area is not up for discussion. Beyond this, once the border is clearly demarcated, such disputes should not arise. The fact is that trade is essential to the local economy, and lengthy closures can have a devastating impact on Pakistan's own people as well. Moreover, Pakistanis also have land and business interests across the border, and closing the frontier cuts them off from their assets. Therefore, the state needs to handle this situation with alacrity and wisdom. A boundary management mechanism with representation from both states should be empowered to resolve matters before they balloon into larger disputes, as the area's economy cannot afford frequent shutdowns, while border skirmishes also imperil peace.

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Weak link

KARACHI — economic powerhouse, cultural melting pot, and bustling metropolis of over 20m souls. There is much that distinguishes it among Pakistan's urban centres. Sadly, it has also earned the distinction of being a crucial battleground in our fight against polio. Recent data shows that this year the city has already seen over 41,800 vaccine refusals

— 97pc of all refusal cases in Sindh. More worrying are reports that some polio workers overstate vaccinations to ensure higher compensation, leaving more children vulnerable to the virus. Nevertheless, there has been some progress. Even the current refusal numbers mark a substantial improvement from the general situation five years ago. The government's efforts have focused on community engagement initiatives, mobilisation of influencers, and involvement of health facilities, schools, seminaries and mosques in advocacy campaigns. One promising development in Karachi's latest polio drive is the use of fractional Inactivated Poliovirus Vaccine which enhances immunity when combined with oral polio vaccine. The success of this approach should be closely monitored and, if effective, expanded to other high-risk areas.

Karachi's dense population, continuous movement of people, and the persistent detection of polio in environmental samples means there are high transmission risks. A key challenge that keeps major progress at bay is mistrust in public health initiatives. The government must strengthen community engagement through direct dialogue with parents who refuse vaccination, providing them with factual information to counter conspiracy theories. It must also overhaul the compensation structure for vaccination teams, shifting from quantity-based incentives to quality-focused metrics that reward accurate reporting and genuine community engagement. Digital tracking and community feedback systems should be implemented to ensure data integrity. Our success in eradicating polio depends on eliminating these last pockets of resistance. Karachi should not be a weak link in this fight.

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