

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of February 2020

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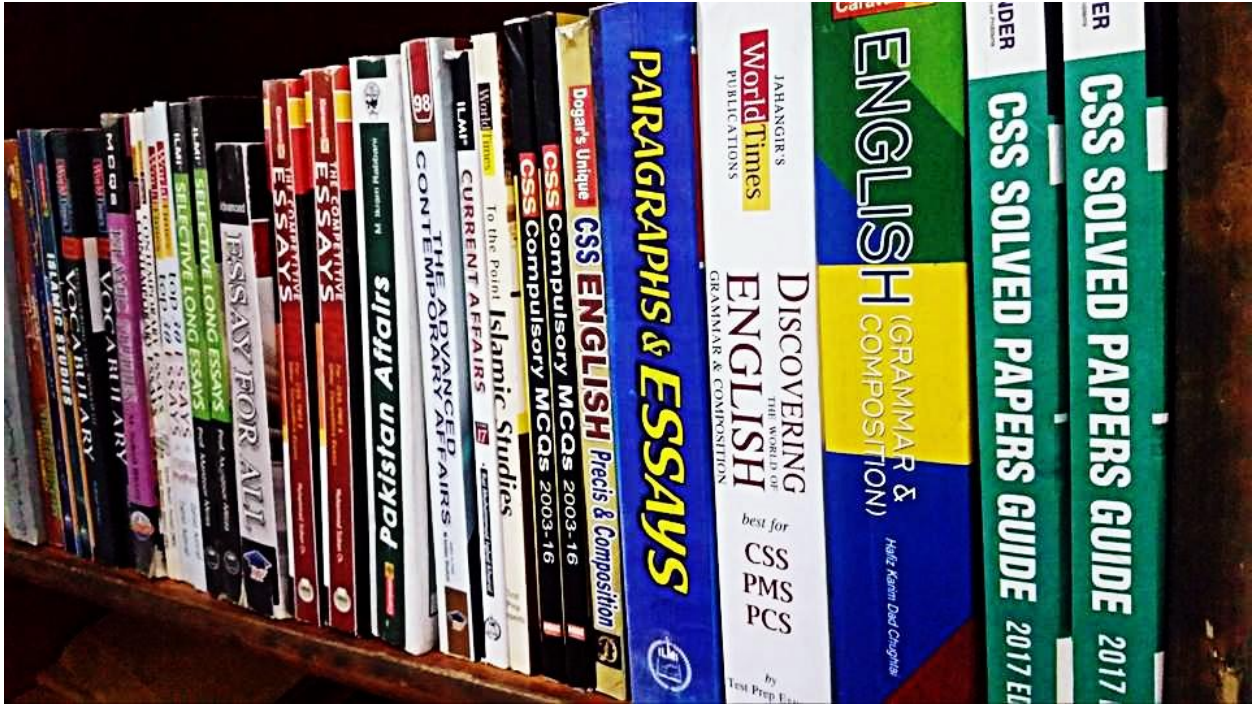
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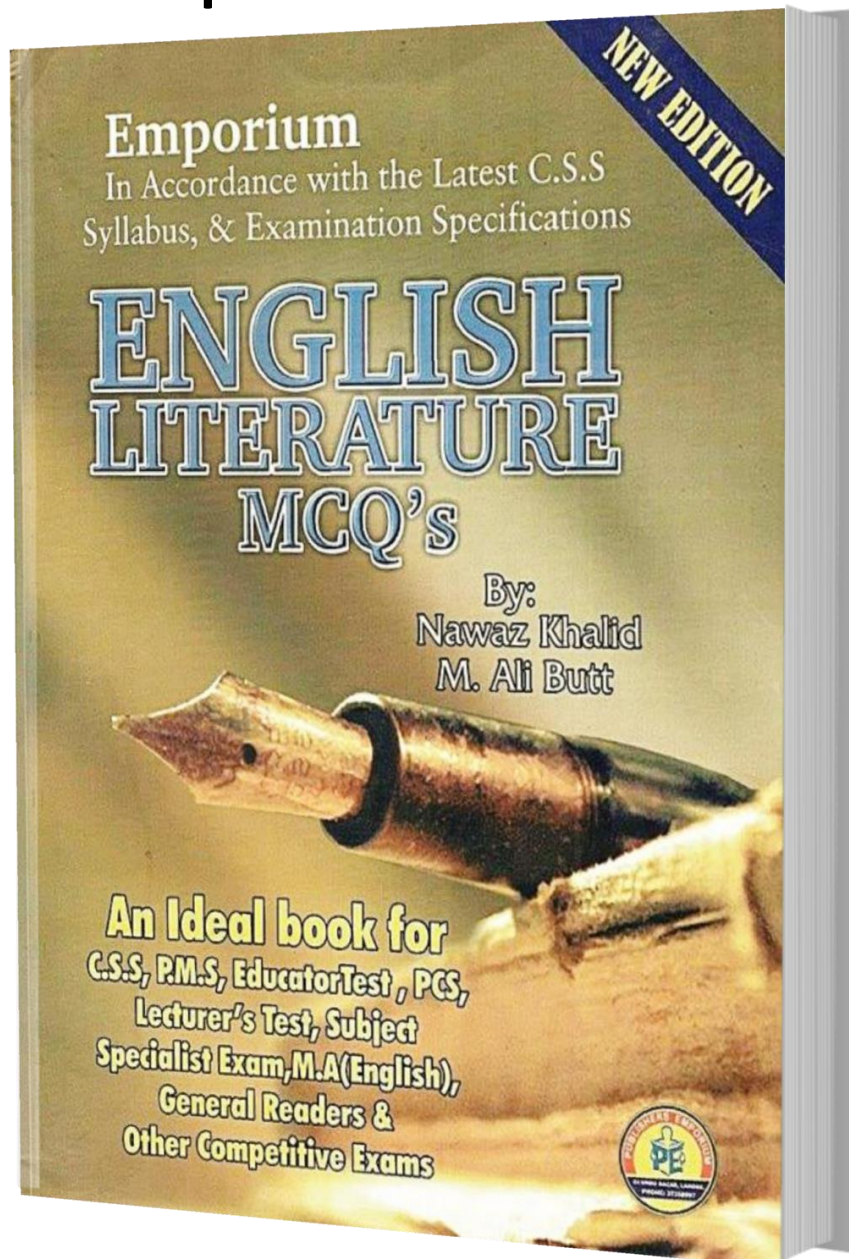
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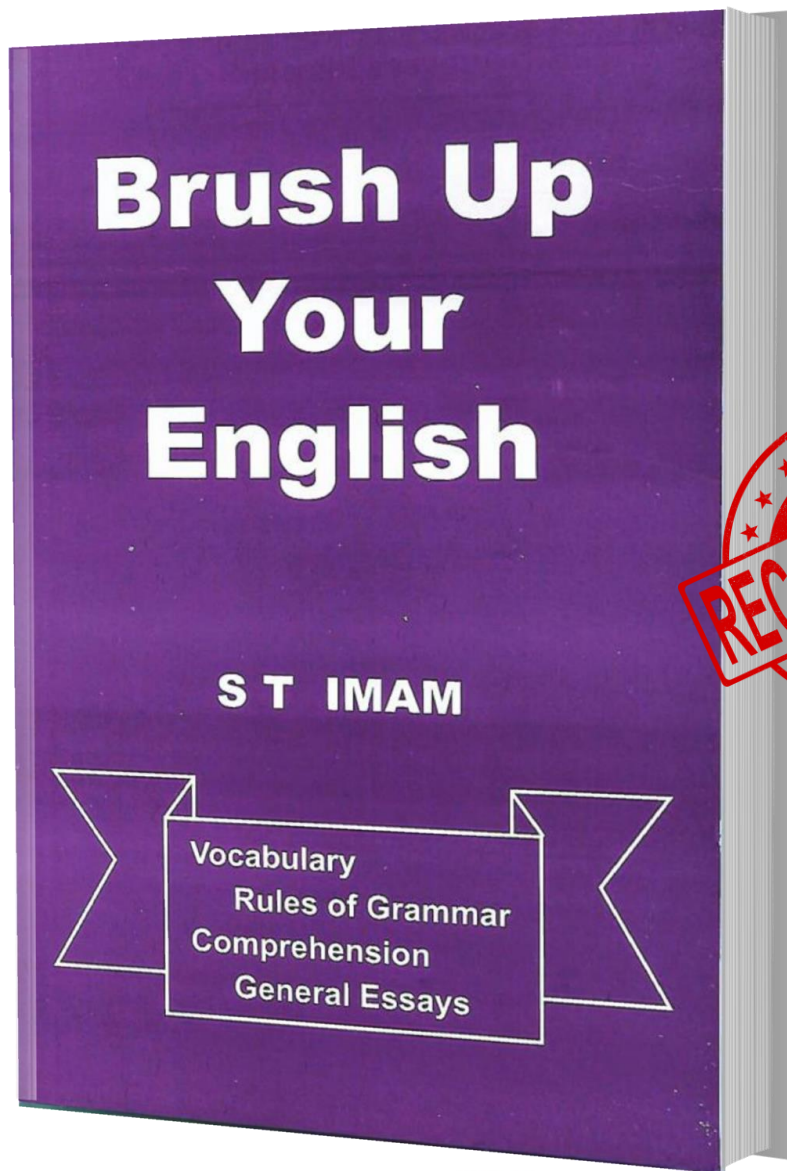


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Contents

FBR leadership crisis.....	10
Locust attack	11
Guarding mangroves.....	12
Stranded in China.....	13
After Brexit.....	14
Making Quetta safe.....	15
Debt and revenues.....	16
Asia Cup row	17
Curbing hepatitis C.....	18
Parliament salaries.....	19
ISPR's role.....	20
CNIC condition	21
Solidarity with IHK.....	22
Basant ban	24
KCR slapstick	25
Cancer risk.....	26
Muslim voice.....	26
Afghan peace process	28
Wheat crisis.....	29
Water woes.....	30
Liver transplant	31
Mini budget anxiety	32
The great escape?	33
Anti-women customs.....	34
Public executions: a bad idea.....	35
Lal Masjid déjà-vu?	37
Coronavirus concerns	38
Law of the jungle.....	39
PTI in a quandary	40
Fixing scandal	41
Additional burden for power consumers.....	42
Idlib confrontation	43

Religious harmony	44
A black law	45
A patched-up job.....	47
Education concerns.....	48
Afghan refugees	48
Empty university chairs.....	49
Price relief	50
Hafiz Saeed's conviction	52
Stopgap measures.....	53
Excessive force in Quetta.....	54
Draconian rules	55
IHK land grab.....	56
Corporal punishment.....	57
Erdogan's visit	58
PM's treason talk	59
National polio drive.....	60
IMF talks.....	61
Torture in custody.....	62
Canary in the coalmine	63
Shooting the messenger	64
FATF meeting	66
Suicide watch	67
Guterres on IHK.....	68
Toxic city	69
Escape confirmed.....	70
Organ Trafficking.....	71
Fit for trial'	73
A welcome invitation	73
Honour' in shame.....	75
Development cuts.....	76
A humanitarian response.....	77
FATF grey list.....	78
Zainab Alert Bill.....	79

Sanitation talk	80
Afghanistan deal	81
Curtailling ordinances	83
Underage marriages.....	84
Trump in India.....	85
Bilawal’s criticism	86
Coronavirus spreads	87
Economic anxiety	88
Justice for Assange.....	89
Tree plantation.....	90
Media protection bill	91
Riots in Delhi	93
Karachi gas leak.....	94
Coronavirus cases	95
Exporter tariffs	96
An act of sadism	97
Controversial NAB.....	98
Indo-US arms deal.....	99
Sexual harassment	100

FBR leadership crisis

ONCE again the Federal Board of Revenue has been left without a functioning chairman — the second time since news emerged that the government’s financial adviser Hafeez Shaikh showed up at the tax authority’s head office to complain about the continuous shortfalls in revenue collection. This time, as with the last, the FBR chairman said that his leave was for health reasons, and there are no prima facie grounds to doubt his word. But a closer look reveals that the chairman from the private sector, Shabbar Zaidi, is running into growing difficulties in the job. He has the most challenging revenue target to meet that any chairman has had to face in decades. The FBR bureaucracy is doing its best to undermine him at the same time, since it has become famous for not accepting outside leadership or change of any sort. Even before Mr Zaidi took charge in May 2019, a court challenge was mounted against his appointment by an FBR officer who claimed in his petition before the Islamabad High Court that he had a “legitimate expectation for promotion to the post of FBR chairperson, which is the top slot in the hierarchy of his service”. That challenge was thrown out by August, but the resentment of the FBR bureaucracy against the appointment of a private-sector individual to the ‘top slot’ in the revenue authority had been registered. Lately, Mr Zaidi faced more critical questioning about his leadership from Prime Minister Imran Khan as well as the Supreme Court.

It would be an understatement to say that Mr Zaidi has found himself in a hornets’ nest. It is only the sheer depth of his experience and knowledge of the rackets that operate around the country’s revenue system that have held him in good stead through all this. And it is this depth of knowledge and experience that the government badly needs to tap and benefit from when drawing up the next budget, preparations for which should be starting soon. Instead, there are complications. At a time when the revenue machinery is supposed to be developing its own vision for reform as well as pursuing one of the largest and most vigorous exercises for documentation of the economy and broadening the tax base, the FBR seems to be entering into a leadership crisis.

It should be clear to the government, and particularly to the prime minister and his finance team, that a leaderless FBR will not help in their efforts to chase an ambitious revenue target and wage the campaign for documentation, as well as draw up the budget for the coming financial year. While one wishes Mr Zaidi

good health at this point, the truth is that he does have something to return to if his stint in government service does not work out. But, as this drama unfolds, what are the government's plans?

Locust attack

PAKISTAN is facing its worst locust infestation in more than 25 years. The crop-eating grasshopper — which entered Pakistan in June last year, attacked Iran and then spread to some Indian districts along Cholistan — has already struck a large area of the country, especially its south-western districts, in recent months, ravaging cotton and food crops. Locust swarms can potentially threaten our food security and economy if left uncontrolled. Farmers from Sindh and parts of KP have already reported significant crop losses caused by the outbreak. The national food security minister acknowledged the severity of the situation for the first time on Thursday. He dubbed the eruption as “unprecedented and alarming” and also hinted at declaring a national emergency to control the threat. His admission that the country is just one step away from entering the most serious category of the pest attack has raised many an eyebrow over the authorities' inaction ever since the swarm entered the country. Addressing members of the National Assembly after the issue was raised by some opposition legislators, the minister sought to allay the fears of farmers, saying the government had prepared a national action plan to stop the further spread of locusts and allocated half a billion rupees to control the outbreak. But he didn't elaborate on the measures so far taken to protect the farmers and their crops.

The outbreak is blamed in part on climate change. If lower temperatures continue and the weather remains wet for a longer time, it will spread even further as a swarm leaves its breeding ground on the Pakistan-India border along Cholistan. Unless the government addresses the situation on an emergency basis, matters are unlikely to come under control until drier weather sets in — and that would be quite late. The outbreak has also exposed how ill-prepared and ill-equipped the authorities are to handle such emergencies. Aerial pesticide spraying is said to be the only effective control. But the government does not have any aircraft for spraying pesticides in areas that are swarming with desert locust, which descended on Karachi in November for the first time in nearly 48 years. According to the United Nations, the timing of pesticide spraying is important to stop the locust from damaging crops, plants and vegetation. The farmers from

the affected areas have decried the inaction of the federal and provincial governments. The rulers must realise that further delay in spraying pesticide could multiply crop losses, especially of the smallholders.

Guarding mangroves

FOR centuries, mangroves have acted as custodians of the coastline: they protected the land from soil erosion, prevented flooding, and moderated temperatures. Additionally, they anchored entire ecosystems that depended on them to flourish; this in turn supported the fishing communities of Sindh and Balochistan. However, some of the discontents of modernity and rapid urbanisation have wreaked havoc on the centuries-old, natural way of life, community and business. Mangrove forests are chopped down for wood by timber and other industries that use them for firewood; they are mowed down by short-sighted land and real-estate mafias; and they are dying an early death from pollution, the lack of freshwater flowing into Sindh and the resulting high levels of salinity in the water. In an age of extreme weather and changing climate patterns, with a greater threat of natural disasters striking the coastal communities, the need for safeguarding mangroves could not be more urgent. After all, Pakistan is among the countries most vulnerable to the long-term effects of global climate change. And yet, according to experts, mangroves continue to be cut down due to the greed or ignorance of some. This is a good time as any to remember and pay homage to two environmental activists — Abdul Ghani and Haji Abu Bakar of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum — who were gunned down when they tried to file a public interest petition against the cutting down of mangroves in their village by powerful groups in 2011.

This week, the National Coordinating Body of the Mangroves for the Future Programme Pakistan underscored the importance of developing a plan to declare Charna Island a marine-protected area. In 2018, the clear waters surrounding the island had been marred by an oil spill. While the Sindh Forest department has taken steps to carry out extensive mangrove plantation drives in the past, there is less effort going into the preservation of existing forests and the biodiversity they support. Much more needs to be done to reverse the damage.

Stranded in China

AN infectious disease snowballing in intensity across the globe and inadequate health facilities at home to prevent its spread — the coronavirus outbreak poses a serious dilemma for Pakistan.

The concerns are centred on approximately 30,000 Pakistanis resident in China, particularly 500-plus students in Wuhan — ground zero for the epidemic — and whether the Pakistani government should evacuate them.

Read: Govt stays firm on decision to not repatriate Pakistanis from virus-hit China

Four individuals among these are diagnosed as being infected with the coronavirus and are under treatment in China. Videos have emerged of frightened students in Wuhan pleading to be reunited with their families in Pakistan. However, the Pakistani government has taken the position that it will not bring these expats home in light of the risk that unwitting carriers of the virus could lead to a spread of the disease in this country.

Certainly, the state has valid reasons to be concerned.

The virus is spreading around the world at an exponential rate: at least 22 countries have been affected, with the total number of patients numbering around 12,000. More than 250 have died.

Granted, the fatality rate is not very high, but this is clearly a transmissible infection.

While acknowledging the distress of the stranded Pakistanis and the fact that they should have been provided government assistance much earlier, pragmatism must dictate the state's response — at least in the short term.

Given our shambolic health infrastructure and far from robust infection-control practices, our high population density and hospitals teeming with people, the conditions are ripe for an infection to spread like wildfire. In the event of such a development, the health system would be overburdened beyond its capacity to cope, leading to knock-on effects in other areas of life.

That said, it is regrettable that facilities in this country are not equal to the task of properly managing quarantine requirements, an important aspect of a well-functioning health system.

There have been a number of global viral outbreaks in recent years; a country that learns from experience would have had quarantine protocols in place at entry points into the country.

Consider that the student who managed to return from Wuhan on his own initiative has been placed in an isolation ward at a private hospital. However, isolation is a public health practice used to restrict the movement of people diagnosed with a communicable disease.

On the other hand, quarantine is meant to separate from the general population those who appear to be well but may have been exposed to an infection, such as the aforementioned student. Moreover, quarantine calls for a dedicated facility — rather than a hospital — where ostensibly healthy individuals can be kept under observation for a period of time so as to ensure they are not infected. In the long run, then, the government must set up such facilities in the event a deadly virus does make its way into the country.

After Brexit

AFTER years of vehemently polarised debates, the United Kingdom exited the European Union on Jan 31, marking the end of an era and the beginning of a new relationship. While there were celebrations among the Leave proponents, many others found themselves reliving the shock of the 2016 referendum result which plunged the future of the two entities into uncertainty. As the clock struck midnight in Brussels, British diplomats were locked out of Brussels' internal databases and prevented from accessing diplomatic cables from 139 EU delegations around the world. Online EU maps were updated to reflect the divorce after a 47-year union, with the UK being marked in grey.

As the UK begins a transition period, little will change immediately. Until Dec 31, 2020, the UK will mainly stick to EU rules. Although British citizens are no longer EU citizens, over the next 11 months, they will be able to travel around the EU as freely as they did before the exit. However, the big challenges will come when the transition period ends and the status quo changes. On the EU side, there are

many who have expressed scepticism about the possibility of a deal being hammered out in just 11 months. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has vowed to do so, but manufacturing lobby groups in his country have urged more clarity. The UK and EU are seeking to secure a free trade agreement that regulates their terms of trade, employment standards and environmental rules and other bilateral issues. The reality, however, is that trade deals are tedious and can take years to conclude and implement. If the two sides are unable to reach a deal by the end of 2020, the UK will have to brace itself for a 'no-deal Brexit' — which essentially means an increase in food prices and disruption to medicines and other goods. Before the formal departure, EU leaders had warned Britain that life outside the bloc would never match the benefits it enjoyed as a member. The EU commission president has said it is up to the UK to decide how close a relationship it wants. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, too, said the differences between the two will widen if the UK diverges from the notion of a single market. In these circumstances, there are serious challenges ahead for Prime Minister Johnson and his government. He will have to convince the people that the Brexit campaign was in the best interest of the British public.

Making Quetta safe

QUETTA will get its police command and control system in June this year as part of the Safe City Project. Once it becomes operational, the city police will be able to constantly monitor sensitive locations in the city with the help of 400 closed-circuit TV cameras. The project will go a long way in helping police improve their performance and curb frequent militant attacks against civilians and security personnel. Balochistan is facing multiple security challenges, which have adversely affected its people and economy in the last one and a half decades. In some parts, the authorities are trying to suppress the militant Baloch movement; in others, they are struggling to eliminate extremist religious groups involved in sectarian killings, especially in the provincial capital. But violent groups such as the banned TTP are still active along with separatists said to be funded by hostile countries. The uncertain security conditions prevailing in Balochistan have made it a dangerous place in which to live, travel and invest, besides putting a huge financial burden on its coffers because of the steep increase in the expenditure on law and order.

Indeed, security conditions in the province have somewhat improved in recent years because of security initiatives undertaken with the help of the federal government and the army to train police and improve intelligence gathering. But a lot still needs to be done to make Balochistan's cities and towns safe for residents and visitors. In 2019, for example, the province suffered 84 major terrorist attacks, including 22 in Quetta alone, in which at least 151 civilians and personnel of law-enforcement agencies lost their lives along with 20 suspected militants. Though the number of such attacks had fallen by 27pc and fatalities by 52pc from the previous year, the very fact that such incidents have not stopped leaves little room for complacency. Initiatives like the Safe City Project can help avert and curb such incidents. The provincial government as well as the intelligence agencies must remain vigilant and strengthen cooperation for better intelligence gathering in order to make the province a peaceful place.

Debt and revenues

TWO numbers released on Friday told the story of the straight and narrow path this government has to walk. The first was reported in the finance ministry's debt policy statement submitted to parliament, which said the country's overall debt had increased by 40pc in the previous fiscal year, rising by Rs11.6tr from June 2018 till September 2019. This is a massive increase and one is hard-pressed to find a precedent for such a steep rise. The second figure was released by the Federal Board of Revenue, which showed the overall revenue collection to have fallen short of its target by more than Rs100bn in the month of January, taking the overall shortfall in the tax collection target to Rs387bn. This shortfall now needs to be made up in the remaining five months of the fiscal year, or else the level of indebtedness will rise further. High debt contributes to the fiscal imbalance because it increases the cost of debt servicing, which is the single largest expenditure head in the government's fiscal account. This necessitates further revenue measures. The vicious cycle can only be broken if revenues rise and debt levels fall, but for now it seems that we are moving in the opposite direction.

Nor do the figures show signs of abatement, despite the government's claim that it has stabilised the economy by narrowing the key deficits that plagued it from 2016 onwards. In domestic debt, for example, the government accumulated an additional Rs4.3tr the last fiscal year, but in the period from July to September, it

accumulated an additional Rs2tr. This shows an acceleration of the trend rather than its abatement, though in external debt accumulation the rising trend of the last fiscal year does seem to have stopped by September. From that month on, though, the foreign inflows into short-term government debt securities began their climb to reach \$2.9bn by January 2020, so the next such report might show acceleration on the external side as well.

A closer look shows the government is concentrating on building up cash buffers, held as government deposits with the banking system, which show a sharp increase of Rs1.75tr, or more than 55pc, in the period from July to September. Aside from these, though, the fiscal indicators show no improvement in real terms, since revenue collection continues to register an increase of 16pc from the corresponding period the previous year, which is roughly equal to the inflation and GDP growth rate. In real terms, this is no increase, which leads to higher levels of debt accumulation. The time has come to end the spin. The economic situation may have stabilised in the sense that reserves and buffers have been built, but the situation remains perilous and the government continues to drift for lack of policy direction. The results are there in the numbers.

Asia Cup row

THE recent refusal of the Board of Control for Cricket in India to play this year's Asia Cup in Pakistan has yet again exposed our neighbour's questionable penchant for mixing politics and sports. The BCCI has only agreed to participate in the biennial event if the latter is moved to a neutral venue, otherwise it has threatened a boycott. India's repeated refusal to tour Pakistan or even play the team at neutral venues has led to a virtual suspension of bilateral cricket ties since 2008. Hardly any event in world cricket generates as much excitement or viewership as a Pakistan-India match. While Pakistan has, time and again, expressed its willingness to tour India for scheduled matches and has successfully employed cricket diplomacy to break the ice with other cricket-playing countries, India's absurd approach to sports has thwarted such attempts, thus depriving millions of fans of some very exciting contests.

The Asia Cup, in particular, has fallen prey to India's obstinacy. It was as far back as 1993 that the Asia Cup had to be cancelled due to rising Pakistan-India tensions while the fate of several tournaments hung in the balance until such

time that India managed to enforce its conditions for participation. In 2018, too, the Asian Cricket Council was forced to move the Asia Cup out of India because of the political tensions between the two arch-rivals, and it eventually had to be played in the UAE. The kind of clout that India has wielded in world cricket over the past decade or so is no secret. However, it is, indeed, a challenging task for India to alter things in its favour in mega events such as the World Cup that involves almost all the leading cricketing nations. So, India and the BCCI find it more convenient to browbeat the ACC, the main organiser of the Asia Cup. Wasim Khan, the Pakistan Cricket Board's chief executive, has warned that if India does not agree to play the Asia Cup in Pakistan this year, the team may boycott next year's T20 World Cup scheduled to take place in India. This response should be reconsidered as India's unflattering example of mixing sports and politics needs to be shunned. Instead, the ACC — and the International Cricket Council where the larger picture is concerned — should show more spine and put pressure on India to stop putting politics in the way of a game of cricket.

Curbing hepatitis C

CONSIDERING that Pakistan has the second highest prevalence and disease burden of hepatitis C in the world, the Punjab government's decision to reach out to WHO for help in curbing the illness is a much-needed move. Punjab accounts for up to 70pc of all hepatitis C cases in Pakistan and the provincial government has sought technical assistance from WHO to check and prevent what it believes could be a "possible explosion" of the disease. According to government estimates, there are between 8m and 11m people with active hepatitis C virus in Pakistan, while about 240,000 new cases are detected every year. The figures show that as many as 20m people may not be aware that they have contracted the virus. The high prevalence of infectious diseases in Pakistan, including HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C, can be largely attributed to unsafe medical practices and the lack of regulation. Last year, a major HIV outbreak occurred in Larkana district due to the extensive reuse of syringes. The use of contaminated needles and unsterilised equipment for invasive medical procedures, the transfusion of unscreened blood or other bodily fluids and the sharing of razors, a normal practice at barber shops, are among the major reasons for the high prevalence of hepatitis C in the country. In fact, according to WHO, Pakistan has the highest rate of therapeutic injections administered to patients, which is said to be the primary cause for the spread of the virus.

Ironically, Pakistan produces relatively cheaper medicines to treat the hepatitis C infection but since a large number of patients remain undiagnosed, few are able to get treated in time. The current government appears to realise the frightening magnitude of the disease burden. Hopefully, with WHO's help, the prime minister's programme for the prevention and control of hepatitis will be able to increase access for treatment even as it works to reduce unsafe medical practices. This will also help reduce the burden of other infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

Parliament salaries

ALTHOUGH it was rejected by the majority in the upper house, it was a bad idea in the first place to attempt to table three bills seeking a raise in the salaries of lawmakers in the National Assembly and Senate.

The proposed bills came at a time when the government is stridently calling on the rest of the country to sacrifice in the name of stabilising the economy. Indeed, it is difficult to find someone in Pakistan these days who has not suffered a cut in their salary; a recent poll shows that four out of 10 respondents said they personally knew somebody who had lost his or her job. Not only that, people are suffering from higher taxes and rising inflation even as their own incomes drop.

Squeezed from all sides, it is hard to understand why a proposal was made to increase the salaries of the speaker of the National Assembly and the Senate chair by almost 400pc.

It was also recommended that the salaries of the deputy Senate chair and deputy National Assembly speaker be similarly increased, besides upping the pay of the rest of the parliamentarians. Not only that, the proposal also sought 25 business class local airfares to be given to parliamentarians for official travel, and, strangely, to be made available for use to families of the parliamentarians as well.

No doubt, the remuneration of parliamentarians is insufficient as a living — which means only those who have independent sources of money can actually afford to become lawmakers — and at some point these salaries may need to be revised, but this is not the time.

The PTI did the right thing to distance itself from the bill, which was introduced by six senators, four of whom are independent though one serves as chief whip of the ruling party, and one senator each from the PML-N and National Party.

They have a point that the pay structure discriminates against those who are forced to rely on their remuneration to pay their bills, but they must understand that at a time of such tremendous austerity and hardship for the rest of the country, such proposals send out the wrong signal and are unlikely to find support.

Perhaps those lawmakers who are not from rich backgrounds and can't make ends meet through parliamentary salaries alone can find another way to explain their difficulties to the house without making it look like they are capriciously seeking luxuries at the taxpayers' expense. And at a time, when they should be ready to perhaps even relinquish some of the perks they already receive, asking for round-trip business class tickets for themselves and their families is an insensitive demand.

For now, Pakistan's MNAs and senators ought to have no choice but to share the current economic hardship with the rest of the country.

ISPR's role

THE new director general of the Inter-Services Public Relations has taken charge at a time when the organisation has acquired an unprecedented profile in the affairs of the country.

Till the decade of the 1990s, ISPR was a relatively small setup playing a modest role as the media arm of the armed forces.

Over the years, however, it has ballooned into a well-resourced, well-equipped and well-staffed organisation that plays multiple roles within the overall domain of media and communications.

In some ways, the rapid expansion and growth of ISPR was a natural by-product of the information revolution that has speeded up since the advent of the digital age.

The military was perhaps the first institution to grasp the immense power of effective communication at a time when the connectivity of citizens was generating unimaginable empowerment at the individual, institutional and national level.

While the ministry of information and other communication and information outfits run by the government struggled to come to terms with the modern demands of the media, the military invested heavily in ISPR and its capacity to project power through weapons of mass influence.

Under the leadership of Lt Gen Asim Bajwa, ISPR transformed itself into a gigantic and high-profile institution that acquired a large footprint on the national landscape. With greater resources, mandate and reach, ISPR started to wield considerable influence in multiple areas of media and communication including films, documentaries and, of course, formation of a national narrative that reflected the thinking of the military leadership.

It was, however, under the next director general, Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor, that ISPR started to take on a greater political role. In frequent press conferences and media events, the DG began to express opinions on issues that fell outside the purview of the original ISPR mandate.

Gen Asif Ghafoor also acquired a higher profile on Twitter after becoming very active both through his official and private accounts. His spats with people on the micro-blogging site raised many an eyebrow given the fact that he was the official spokesman of the armed forces.

The outsized presence that ISPR acquired ended up landing the organisation in controversies that should not have involved the institution of the military.

With a new DG now heading ISPR, it is hoped that the armed forces' media wing will return to its original mandate to become a powerful voice of the military while influencing the national narrative in a positive manner.

CNIC condition

THE FBR has finally put into effect a key budget proposal that aims to raise taxes. After delaying its implementation, it has started monitoring some transactions across the supply chains to the retail stage. Now every purchaser

will have to produce his or her CNIC in order to make a purchase of Rs50,000 and above. The idea is to document the economy and curb informal or off-the-book transactions to meet tax targets under the \$6bn IMF bailout package, as well as comply with FATF standards. In this way, the government hopes to gather additional data on traders and big spenders, and bring tax evaders into the tax net. Indeed, this will go a long way in recording informal domestic commerce. Since many in the trading community could find a way to dodge the taxman, the FBR needs to stay vigilant.

There still remains a question mark over the FBR's intention and ability to use the data it hopes to collect. The FBR has been claiming for years that it is in possession of reliable data regarding more than 3.5m wealthy individuals who own expensive luxury cars, palatial houses and businesses, and who frequently travel abroad but do not pay income tax or file their returns. However, it has made little effort to tax them. How the new data will help widen the tax base remains unclear. On the other hand, fears abound that the scheme may be used to harass honest taxpayers who are required to produce their CNICs on purchases involving such amounts. It is also unclear if shoppers will need to hand in photo copies of their cards or produce the card itself at the cash counter. Moreover, the authorities will be required to ensure that the CNIC copies are not misused. While documentation measures are necessary to compel evaders to pay their due share, a campaign to create public awareness about the move can help bridge the trust deficit — the main reason why people and businesses avoid the tax system — between the FBR and Pakistani citizens.

Solidarity with IHK

KASHMIR Day has been a regular feature on the Pakistani calendar for the last few decades. However, this year things are different as today is the first Kashmir Day observed after India revoked the disputed territory's autonomous status by tinkering with the constitution in August 2019.

What has followed has been a tale of misery and brutality unleashed upon this beautiful land and its people by the narrow-minded bigots currently running the show in New Delhi.

India has enforced a blockade which has crippled communications as well as commerce in the held region, whereas thousands have been detained since the

crackdown began last year. These have included Kashmiri lawmakers who were at one time staunch allies of New Delhi, but who have now been given the rough end of the stick by those they once served. But it is the ordinary Kashmiri who has borne the brunt of New Delhi's brutish tactics, with security forces frequently conducting midnight raids and torturing unarmed citizens.

The dire situation echoed in the National Assembly on Tuesday, as lawmakers called upon India to "rescind its illegal action" in occupied Kashmir and allow foreign governments and global rights bodies to "assess and report the human rights situation there".

Indeed, ever since India illegally annexed the disputed territory last year, the state and civil society here have been active in raising a voice for Kashmiris. The government has lobbied key capitals, informing them of the atrocious human rights situation in India-held Kashmir, and exposing the real face of Narendra Modi's extreme Hindu right-wing dispensation.

While these efforts have delivered some results — leading rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have spoken out against India's abuses in IJK — it is an unfortunate fact that some of the most powerful actors on the world stage maintain a stony silence where the Kashmir situation is concerned.

Moreover, many of the Muslim states have also preferred to remain silent, barring a few notable exceptions such as Malaysia.

While realpolitik may dominate international relations, those in the global community who claim to be champions of rights and freedom must speak much louder for the voiceless Kashmiris and let India know that its brutal suppression of the held region is unacceptable.

Pakistan must continue its moral and diplomatic support to the Kashmiris. This country has religious, cultural and blood ties with Kashmir and neither the state nor the citizenry will remain silent as India's attempts to crush the occupied region's people continue.

The situation may be depressing at the moment but the Kashmiris must not give up hope and should continue their democratic struggle for rights. And as they continue to resist India's tyranny in their quest for dignity, fundamental rights and

freedom, Kashmiris should know that Pakistan and its people stand with them in their hour of trial.

Basant ban

ONCE upon a time, the skies of Punjab would be speckled with colour to mark the arrival of spring. For centuries, this seasonal shift would be celebrated with great fervour by people across the province as they participated in the festival of Basant, regardless of which religion, caste or class they belonged to. Families would gather with their friends and neighbours to fly kites as music blared from the rooftops. In later years, such festivities would be replicated in other parts of Pakistan as well. But then the authorities started taking note of a string of casualties, and the celebrations were abruptly cut short. Some people fell from rooftops; others would get slashed by the glass-coated strings of fighter kites; or be killed during aerial firing. Then there were the motorcyclists who would get entrapped in strings, leading to a higher number of accidents on the road. In 2007, the Punjab government placed a ban on Basant-related activities, effectively criminalising the festival. While the decision was ostensibly passed to curb the number of deaths and injuries, there are many who believe that the authorities caved in to pressure from the religious right, which loudly proclaimed the seasonal festivities 'un-Islamic'. In 2018, there was anticipation that Basant would make a comeback after the Punjab government announced it would lift the ban, but the move was challenged in the Lahore High Court — with kite-flying being described as a 'blood sport'.

To ban an entire festival rather than addressing the root cause of the problem can only be described as reactionary (at best) and foolish (at worst), especially at a time when the country is eager to promote its tourism potential to the world. Basant is not only an indigenous festival, but a 'happy' occasion that is both family- and community-oriented, but precautions must be in place. Even with the ban, there are reports of people being killed due to glass-covered strings used to bring down rival kites. Last year, a young motorcyclist died after his throat was slashed by one such string in Lahore. Earlier, another young man was killed similarly in Karachi. Instead of banning Basant, the government should criminalise the manufacture and sale of glass-coated strings used during competitive kite-flying, and instead, promote cotton threads without the addition

of dangerous material. This will not only mitigate the risks of kite-flying, it will also save many lives — and perhaps one day the colours will return to the sky.

KCR slapstick

ONE must have a lively sense of humour to enjoy news concerning the Karachi Circular Railway project. As a report in this newspaper says, the Sindh government and the railway ministry have decided to sort out all KCR problems, and agreed to hand over the Karachi Urban Transport Company to the provincial government. However, all that the decision does is to enable the Sindh government to get financial approval from the CPEC-related Joint Coordination Committee, which will meet in Beijing in April. Some progress indeed. The truth is that for decades the KCR has been a media affair. Ministers, bureaucrats, 'experts' and occasionally foreign donors have uttered thousands of words which they never cared to eat but which a gullible media has dutifully focused on. The end-result has been shameful inaction bordering on anti-citizen criminality.

Before independence, Karachi had a mass transit system in embryonic form, with trams connecting residential areas with business centres. This was an adequate transport structure for a city whose population was less than half a million. In post-independence Karachi, the only step towards a train-based transport network was taken during the Ayub era when the KCR was launched. It carried commuters from the suburbs to the industrial area, connecting ultimately with the mainline railway. Its closure in the 1970s now seems to have become permanent. The Japanese offered money and technical help to revive it, and all they wanted was the removal of encroachments on KCR land. No government could accomplish this feat. Last year, on a court order, encroachments were demolished but the project itself remains frozen, even as thousands of families lost their homes. What is missing is political will of the kind we saw in Lahore. Bureaucrats will continue to make plans which will never be translated into action, because there is no one who could consider the KCR his or her own project and show determination to overcome all hurdles to give one of the world's biggest cities a comfortable transport system.

Cancer risk

IN a recently published report, WHO has warned that the lack of investment in the prevention and care of cancer will increase the risk of disease by as much as 81pc in middle- and low-income countries by 2040. The countries in this category have limited resources to spend on battling infectious diseases and improving maternal and child health. They have even more limited systems in place for effective treatment and management of cancer patients. The WHO report was released to coincide with World Cancer Day observed across the globe on Feb 4 every year. The report attempts to highlight the global inequalities of the cancer burden. On the one hand, where the cancer risk was increasing manifold in poorer countries, better treatment facilities in richer countries resulted in a 20pc drop in cancer mortality rates between 2000 and 2015. However, the reduction in cancer mortality rates in middle- and lower-income countries was just 5pc. The report warned that the incidence of cancer across the world would increase by around 60pc worldwide, with the majority of cases being reported from poorer countries.

The findings should raise great alarm in Pakistan; the country's limited resources all too often have to combat outbreaks of illnesses such as dengue fever, AIDS and polio. Besides, there are several other ongoing health challenges such as failure to vaccinate children. Dealing with cancer is much further down on the list of priorities. No wonder then that Pakistan has the highest prevalence of breast cancer in Asia, while there has been a drastic surge in the incidence of oral cancer due to the consumption of harmful tobacco and betel nut products. Before becoming prime minister, Imran Khan had built a state-of-the-art cancer treatment facility. Perhaps he can put his prior experience to use by encouraging health officials to come up with a comprehensive plan for raising awareness about early detection and prevention of common cancers prevalent in the country, and equipping public-sector hospitals to combat and manage this painful disease.

Muslim voice

WHEN Prime Minister Imran Khan laments the absence of a 'Muslim voice' in the world, he raises an issue that demands profound analysis.

Speaking to a Malaysian think tank in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday, Mr Khan referred to disasters that had struck some key Middle Eastern states and regretted the Muslim countries' inability to forge unity.

How can — let us ask frankly — the Muslim world have 'one voice' when there are among the states differences that do not remain confined to the realm of diplomacy but spill over into ferocious multilateral wars?

Precisely at this moment, Muslims are shedding each other's blood in three countries — Syria, Yemen and Libya — with hundreds of thousands killed, maimed or rendered homeless. Some non-Muslim powers are, indeed, involved in these tragedies, but their roles have been marginal, most of the fighting being done by armies and militant outfits which are Muslim.

In Yemen, two major Muslim oil powers have been locked in a devastating four-year-old war, which has pauperised the Arab world's poorest country, leaving over 100, 000 dead — 12,000 of them civilians.

Nothing highlights the extent of mutual hostility more than the Saudi decision to not allow Iran to attend the OIC's Jeddah moot which was to give its reaction to President Donald Trump's 'deal of the century' hoax on Palestine.

As for India-held Kashmir, not only has the Muslim world — with the exception of Turkey and Malaysia — largely kept its lips sealed, one Gulf country has actually called India's annexation of the occupied territory its 'internal matter', while last year the then Indian foreign minister was invited as the guest of honour to an OIC meeting in the UAE.

While this narration of Muslim frailty is geopolitical, let us not fail to examine the socioeconomic causes which have hindered the emergence of the Muslim world as a powerful force in world affairs.

Today, large sections of Muslim peoples live in a pre-industrial milieu when even many Third World countries have mobilised their national resources to enter the space and digital age. For Muslims, science and technology basically means importing mobile telephones and flying jetliners built in the West.

Muslims have made little effort to take their society forward in education and science, despite the huge financial resources that some Muslim countries command. While very few Muslims have won the Nobel prize, the talented Jewish community has produced nearly 200 Nobel laureates. Thus a community

which constitutes a tiny percentage of the world's population has bagged 20pc of all Nobel prizes, Israel's tally being 12.

If we want a 'voice', then all Muslim countries must first set their house in order, combat poverty and bigotry, create egalitarian and democratic societies and make a determined bid to achieve all-round progress in science. A people who depend on aid hardly deserve a 'voice'.

Afghan peace process

IT is a fact that the tangled knot that is the Afghan conflict will not be undone overnight. Apart from the fact that the country has witnessed decades of instability, starting from the Soviet invasion in 1979 up to the American invasion in 2001 and onwards, the fact that numerous players are involved also complicates matters. For example, on the Afghan domestic front, there is the elected government, which is itself a mixture of the country's numerous tribes, ethnic groups and power brokers, whose interests do not always reconcile. Opposing Ashraf Ghani's government are the Taliban, Afghanistan's principal militant actor — a group that at one time ruled from Kabul before being dislodged by the Americans. Then there are the foreign elements that have played a key role in Afghanistan's internal affairs; the Americans top this list, though other regional players are also involved in the game. But it is a fact that were the Taliban to reach a settlement with the US as well as the Kabul government, they would go a long way towards ending years of conflict and achieving a durable peace. However, the long-running negotiations between the US and Taliban have yet to achieve the ideal results, though at times it has appeared that both parties have been tantalisingly close to an agreement. On Tuesday, a Taliban spokesman accused the Americans of stalling the peace process and "blame-shifting". The statement appears to be a reaction to the US secretary of state's recent comments that the Taliban must reduce violence in order for the peace process to move forward.

The statements from both sides may well be public posturing to put pressure on the other and achieve maximum gains behind closed doors. After all, US officials recently visited Afghanistan and Pakistan to brief both states on the status of the negotiations. Indeed, the Taliban need to shun violence, especially the targeting of non-combatants, to send a signal to all concerned that they are serious about

peace. However, the US must also realise that there is a small window of opportunity here, and if the Taliban are rebuffed they must shun the peace process altogether and return to the battlefield for the long run. This outcome will only spell more misery for the people of Afghanistan. Both sides need to drop maximalist positions and reach a doable agreement, while the Afghan government must be kept in the loop for the peace process to succeed.

Wheat crisis

IT appears that the country's wheat troubles are far from over.

The government's — delayed — intervention through resumption of supplies of the subsidised grain to mills from its stocks may have eased the shortages in parts of the country and helped contain the increase in flour rates, but many consumers still continue to pay exorbitant sums for wheat.

Read: Rate of wheat climbs down but no cut in flour price

The demand for wheat flour as a major staple is inelastic. This means that a hike, no matter how large it may be, does not reduce its consumption, or at least does not effect too much of a change in eating routines. In fact, people will cut expenditure on other items to pay for flour. Little wonder then that it is easier for wheat stockists and flour millers to raise their prices without loss in sales in times of both real and artificial scarcity — even at the risk of causing unrest among the people, especially the poor who spend more than half their monthly income on food.

A debate continues as to what caused the grain's prices to shoot up in the first place.

The usual suspects include corporate greed and/or blunders by the government that allowed the export of wheat and wheat flour between August and October despite a ban imposed on July 30. It is hard to blame a for-profit business for exploiting an opportunity. But governments are expected to regulate the markets in a way that minimises the chances of anyone fleecing the people.

Unfortunately, the ruling PTI has repeatedly proved itself inept on this score.

It all started with a sharp surge in the price of tomatoes because of supply disruptions a few months back, pushing food inflation for the poorest segments of the population to above 20pc.

Just when tomato rates started tumbling, we had reports of wheat shortages pouring in from across the country with forecasts of a significant rise in flour prices.

Even in Punjab, where there was no scarcity of wheat, the price of wholegrain flour shot up to Rs70 a kilo on the back of rising wheat prices.

Following the wheat crisis was a very sharp jump in sugar rates, which have skyrocketed to Rs85 a kilo in the retail market from less than Rs70 a kilo a few weeks ago. Each time the people saw an administration standing on the sidelines, helplessly watching the market batter consumers.

The elevated food rates seem to have entrenched themselves and there is little likelihood of prices dropping back to previous levels. It means the poorer segments of the population will be forced to cut their health, education and other essential spending to meet food expenses.

In a country where more than a third of the population lives under the poverty line, it is painful to imagine how the vast majority is coping with rising food prices rooted in rampant market greed and poor governance.

Water woes

THE Supreme Court-mandated commission formed in 2016 to look into Sindh's water and sanitation issues had a gargantuan task. Not only did it have to identify the problems, it had to make recommendations and oversee their implementation. The Supreme Court has now dissolved the commission, while directing the provincial government to implement the body's suggestions — included in its report submitted to the court in early 2018 — and file a compliance report within a month. One of the commission's recommendations is that the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board conduct a fresh survey of all water supply and drainage schemes and prepare a master plan for water distribution and sanitation in the city. Other suggestions include, among many others, an oversight body to monitor the KWSB, an overhaul of the Sindh Environmental

Protection Agency, a survey of industrial areas by the revamped Sepa, and establishment of appropriately located landfill sites across Sindh.

Official apathy and corruption in the government apparatus — the massive fraud that is the RO plant initiative is but one example — have led to a stage where water and sanitation issues in Sindh are directly responsible for a steep decline in the quality of life. One does not have to travel far in the country's largest urban centre before the consequences of this criminal neglect become obvious. Drains and natural waterways choked with overflowing garbage, roads inundated with sewage water, etc are all part of the 'Karachi experience'. The commission's findings were nevertheless an eye-opener. For instance, it seems there are 750 points of confluence between raw sewage and freshwater bodies — turning the entire 8,000km-long provincial irrigation network into a conduit for faecal material and hazardous organisms. Around 2,000 rural water supply and drainage schemes were found to be dysfunctional largely due to bad governance and the local councils' incapacity to operate them. None of the sewage treatment plants in Karachi were in working order. Therefore, while the government ostensibly spends billions of rupees annually on these schemes, the people are forced to consume contaminated water and endure unsanitary conditions, thus increasingly falling prey to various water-borne ailments eg hepatitis, typhoid, diarrhoea, etc. The commission's recommendations have kick-started work to rectify some of the problems, but the Supreme Court must ensure that the Sindh government does not slip back into its old ways. Moreover, those responsible for the dire state of affairs should be held accountable for their crimes.

Liver transplant

IN an appalling new development, the liver transplant facility at the Shaikh Zayed Hospital in Lahore was shut down when a string of post-operative deaths caught the attention of the Punjab Human Organ Transplant Authority. Most recently, a mother and her donor son passed away after undergoing a liver transplant at the facility. The regulatory body is now carrying out an investigation to ascertain why donors and patients keep dying after being admitted to the institution. In a recent report published in this paper, it was brought to light that the death of another donor in 2018 had led to the facility being shut down temporarily once before, but perhaps if strict action had been taken, many other lives could have been saved. The post-operative period after a liver transplant is

a particularly sensitive phase and all necessary precaution must be taken to prevent infection, bleeding, blood clots and a host of other complications resulting from the surgery or the drugs prescribed. It seems that such preventative measures were not being taken by the unit. Globally, the number of patients waiting for a healthy liver is far greater than the number of people willing to donate, and incidents like this one present yet another blow to the lifelong efforts of campaigners such as the SIUT's Dr Adib Rizvi and the late Abdul Sattar Edhi.

This is especially worrying in the context of countries like Pakistan that have not developed a culture in which live or deceased organ donation is anywhere close to the norm, and the number of transplants carried out legally have resultantly remained very low. These failures of medical practitioners also inadvertently strengthen the presence of a large racket for human organs. For instance, in 2016, 24 donors were rescued by the police from a locked-up apartment in Rawalpindi. They had agreed to sell their kidneys to those desperate to live in exchange for money to escape their own terrible poverty. What a cruel cycle to perpetuate.

Mini budget anxiety

AS the talks with the IMF enter their decisive phase when benchmarks for the next quarter will be set, anxiety in the business community is mounting that the government will end up agreeing to fresh measures in order to plug the growing shortfalls in revenue collection. By January, the shortfall had risen to Rs387bn, and is projected to continue rising. FBR officials, speaking off the record, estimate that the best they can do is to collect Rs4.8tr by the end of the fiscal year, which would still be almost Rs500bn short of the target revised downward. A lot now depends on how the government presents its position to the Fund during the policy phase of the talks that are set to begin on Monday. The FBR has made it clear that further revenue measures in this slowing economy is not the way forward, while the finance adviser to the prime minister, Dr Hafeez Sheikh, is being evasive in his public remarks on the matter even as he tries to point towards non-tax measures as the way to help plug the shortfall.

The Fund programme contains the most ambitious targets that we have seen in a long time. At the moment, the government is swimming upstream to even come

close to those targets. At the heart of those targets are revenues, because failure to meet the targeted amount would mean more borrowing, less spending, and more constriction in growth. It is enough to make one wonder what the prime minister means when he goes around the country promising that 2020 will be the 'year of growth'. The only growth that his finance team is focused on at the moment pertains to revenue.

The temptation will now be before Dr Sheikh to brush aside the FBR's reservations about new revenue measures and seek to plug the gap by resorting to quick-yielding measures such as a hike in the sales tax rate or further taxes on fuels. That temptation must be resisted because it will further fuel inflation and burden an already exhausted population. Instead, he is right to talk about non-tax revenues as the driver for the remaining months of the fiscal year. We await the revenue plan on that side once the talks conclude, but chances are high that we will see the government make a strong push on privatisation in the weeks ahead and try to conduct at least one large transaction before the fiscal year ends. The problem with that approach is that it cannot be counted as involving revenue. Privatisation is and always has been a financing item. Selling state assets to plug the fiscal deficit is also wrong. Eventually, there is little to do but concede that the target agreed on with the IMF was more ambitious than it should have been.

The great escape?

THE claim of former TTP spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan in an audio on social media that he had escaped from the custody of Pakistani authorities some three years after surrendering to them has been greeted by an ominous official silence.

Ehsan was one of the most high-profile members of the banned TTP, having claimed responsibility for the assassination attempt on Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai and rigging a bomb (luckily detected and defused) to journalist Hamid Mir's vehicle, besides being involved in other attempted or actual attacks.

He engaged journalists and critics on Twitter in English, sometimes mocking them, sometimes issuing threats.

In April 2017, the then DG ISPR described his surrender as symptomatic of the low morale of terrorist organisations because of the military operations.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER AD

In a short video statement then, Ehsan distanced himself from the TTP, accusing it of misguiding the youth in the name of Islam and carrying out terrorist acts at the behest of the Afghan NDS and India's RAW security services.

After an interview on Geo TV, which was widely criticised because it provided the former terrorist an effective platform, Ehsan receded into the shadows.

Even when he surrendered no details were released. Nor was it made clear if his surrender was part of a deal.

What was apparent was that his name was not among those terrorists who were tried and sentenced by military courts.

Then on Jan 18, an India-based news website that some security experts here describe as a platform for RAW propaganda reported his escape.

Now his audio has surfaced where he claims he escaped on Jan 11. Talking to The News, he claimed he had reached Turkey with his family.

A report suggests his wife and two children were lodged in the same safe house as him in Peshawar but were able to leave a few days prior to his escape on the pretext of visiting his in-laws.

BBC Urdu asked the ISPR for comment but there was reluctance to confirm or deny the news.

Surely, this official silence will create misgivings and is unacceptable. It is time for a full disclosure.

First is the news true? If so, how did he escape? Have those responsible been held to account? Equally, the people have a right to know if his 'escape' was a massive security failure or part of an immunity deal negotiated before his surrender.

In his audio he has threatened to tell all. The authorities should make their version public first.

Anti-women customs

WHEN it comes to changing patriarchal mindsets that perpetuate practices targeting girls and women, Pakistani society is still stuck in the dark ages.

Practices such as vani, swara and karo kari are rampant across the country, and in fact, are 'legitimised' by jirgas and panchayats. These parallel forms of justice, despite being illegal, wield considerable influence over rural populations and are often patronised by political bigwigs. Yet another disturbing case of vani surfaced in Mansehra recently where the local police lodged cases against 13 members of a jirga that had ordered the marriage of a seven-year-old girl to a man whose aunt is said to have been photographed by the child's uncle. The police took action when they received information from residents of the area, but it remains to be seen if those arrested will actually be punished for taking part in an illegal jirga that bartered a little girl in order to settle a dispute.

Over the years, similar arrests of jirga participants have been reported in the country, but, unfortunately, rarely have these detentions translated into severe punishment for the offenders or led to a change in societal attitudes that continue to condone such abhorrent customs. The question remains whether the passage of laws by the assemblies is enough to curb such practices. The fact that almost 80 people, mostly women, were killed in Sindh in different incidents of karo kari in only the first six months of 2019, shows that declaring something illegal is not enough to deter crime. Moreover, in societies where the law is at best only partially implemented, will attitudes change, especially if anti-women practices receive political patronage? Without taking legal and criminal action against the religious and political heavyweights who commit or condone such deeds, this menace cannot be curbed. The roots of this poisonous mindset run far and wide in our society and it will take a lot more action on the part of the government to address this problem than simply arresting those who violate the law.

Public executions: a bad idea

IN an apparent response to ghastly cases of child sexual assault in the country — including the recent brutal killing of an eight-year-old in Nowshera — the National Assembly on Friday passed a resolution with a majority vote calling for publicly hanging those found guilty of sexually abusing and murdering minors.

Although PTI ministers Shireen Mazari and Fawad Chaudhry later condemned the resolution and opposed its passage, it was approved by lawmakers across all parties, with the exception of the PPP.

In an attempt to justify its passing, Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs Ali Mohammad Khan, who tabled the resolution, asked the PPP: “If our children’s life is unsafe, why should we care about international NGOs?”

It would serve Mr Khan well to know that there is a reason that the death penalty is considered the ultimate cruel and inhuman punishment.

This paper has time and again stated its opposition to the death penalty for the simple fact that, apart from being an inhuman penalty, it does not deliver justice. There is also no evidence that executions act as a deterrent or lower the rate of crime.

Although National Assembly resolutions have no legal effect, they signal the mentality and mood of the lawmakers in parliament.

No doubt, incidents of child abuse must be unequivocally and strongly condemned, but a resolution of this nature is by no means a practical step towards solving the problem. Not only is this resolution high on rhetoric, it also signals the extent to which our society has become brutalised.

Our lawmakers have utterly failed to consider the psychological effects such an act would have on the public. Instead of passing an inhumane resolution that does nothing to accord greater state protection to our children, Pakistan’s lawmakers should fulfil their obligations and enact legislation that strengthens law-enforcement agencies and builds their capacity to successfully prosecute criminals.

The focus should be on what can be done by police and investigating agencies to dismantle child trafficking gangs and strengthen prosecution.

One example of turning outrage into action is the effort the Assembly made to pass the Zainab Alert Bill, which among other things aims to establish a helpline for missing children, set up a Child Protection Advisory Board and take action against police officials who delay investigations.

Therefore, passing a resolution in favour of public executions which defy humanity and logic is a half-hearted attempt at solving a grave problem. There are many gaps in the system where lawmakers can act instead of simply reacting through a resolution.

Through their strongly worded statements denouncing the move, Amnesty International and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan have correctly pointed out that public executions have no place in a rights-respecting society, nor do they absolve the state of its responsibility to guarantee protection to children.

Lal Masjid déjà-vu?

THE Lal Masjid episode of 2007 is one of the darkest chapters of the Musharraf era. The incident, in which the state confronted heavily armed militants holed up in the Islamabad mosque, was a textbook case of how not to handle a crisis. In the bloody aftermath, Lal Masjid became a rallying cry for jihadi groups in this country and beyond. With the passage of several years, one would have assumed that the state and its institutions had learnt numerous lessons, specifically where tactful handling of armed violent actors who challenge the administration's writ is concerned. However, as events in Islamabad over the past few days have shown, this apparently has not been the case. Maulvi Abdul Aziz — former prayer leader of the mosque and a central character of the Lal Masjid saga — is back in the news. As reported, he has occupied the state-owned mosque along with a number of female seminary students. The administration has responded by laying siege to the mosque and the stand-off was continuing at the time of writing.

There are many questions that emerge from this worrying series of events. Most importantly, how has a person with a violent background been able to defy the writ of the state with such ease, and that too in the federal capital? Moreover, Maulvi Aziz has issued a number of 'demands' to the government; he wants his old job back at Lal Masjid, along with Rs250m and a plot to construct a new madressah. This is sheer blackmail and it is not understandable why the state seems to be playing along with such a hardened militant. The 2007 debacle should not be repeated and the administration must act now to handle this situation in a firm but non-violent way before the crisis balloons into something worse. Unfortunately, the state is quick to swoop in on critical rights activists and political workers whom it feels have gone against 'national interests'. However, the response to violent actors who openly challenge the state, mock its Constitution and threaten to take up arms against Pakistan is much more slothful. The message to the Lal Masjid agitators and all others who take the law into their

hands must be clear. Democratic protest is every Pakistani's right. But those who condone and promote violence against the state and its citizens will be tried and punished for violating the law.

Coronavirus concerns

SO FAR, there have been hundreds of deaths from the coronavirus outbreak in China, while some 35,000 others may potentially be infected. Even though the exact source of this new strain of virus remains uncertain, it is believed to have spread to humans from an animal. Most recently, researchers have traced a possible link to the endangered pangolin: a shy creature hunted ruthlessly for its meat and scales, which is used in traditional Chinese medicine. At this point, only this much is certain that the coronavirus is spreading around the world at a pace that exceeds our understanding of it. Away from mainland China, there have been other deaths in Hong Kong as well as in the Philippines. At least 25 other countries have reported that some of their citizens are suffering from the virus. Among them are Japan, Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Australia, Canada, India, and the UAE.

Tragically, the latest list of victims includes the Chinese doctor Li Wenliang, who is believed to have contracted the disease from a patient he was treating in Wuhan city, the epicentre of the storm. In December last year, the 34-year-old doctor had taken to social media to break the news of a deadly "SARS-like" new virus — but instead of paying heed to his warning, the Chinese authorities tried to silence him for "rumour-mongering" and began an investigation against him for having "severely disturbed the social order". Posthumously, the young doctor is now being hailed as a hero, and there is simmering anger towards the way the initial warnings were handled. There is a lesson here: when states do not listen to experts, and instead, persecute them for speaking up, or when they try to control the narrative to such an extent that it glosses over harsh realities, problems do not disappear. They only fester and return in the shape of a bigger monster. Had Li's warning been heard, perhaps more lives could have been saved — including his own.

Law of the jungle

THE cesspool of corruption that is much of Karachi's land sector was thoroughly exposed during the Supreme Court proceedings on Thursday and Friday.

A three-judge bench of the apex court, while hearing a case pertaining to illegal construction and encroachments in the metropolis, pointed out the authorities' brazen malpractices in the disposal of Karachi's real estate.

Chief Justice Gulzar Ahmed took Cantonment Board Clifton to task and ordered it to demolish unlawfully erected buildings within its jurisdiction. Officials of the Sindh Building Control Authority — the provincial body mandated to issue NOCs, approve building plans, etc in accordance with the relevant regulations — were also severely reprimanded for their dereliction of duty. Besides this, the court took note of a number of areas where the land was being put to use for purposes other than those for which it had been allotted and directed that the situation be rectified.

With its much-coveted real estate, Karachi has been no stranger to land scams. Nevertheless, until about two decades ago, there was a modicum of order, an attempt by officialdom to fulfil its responsibility to make the city livable for not only the well-to-do but also the lower-income segments of society. Construction was planned taking existing civic infrastructure into account; green belts and parks were seen as integral to the urban layout.

Now, the law of the jungle has taken over.

Increasing population and the huge, unmet demand for housing has made the real-estate sector doubly attractive in this teeming city. Building and town planning regulations, and environmental concerns, have been swept aside; anything is possible — and on a scale unthinkable before. All it takes are builders with the backing of rapacious elements among the power elite, and, if need be, some ruthless henchmen/local police to provide the muscle. Corrupt revenue officials are of course an integral part of this racket.

However, with officials from regulatory authorities themselves colluding in unlawful real-estate ventures instead of cracking down on them, residents of Karachi often have no idea of the legal status of the land they occupy.

Even if they do, what options do they have? No major, credible low-cost housing scheme has been launched for two decades, giving rise to a mushroom growth of katchi abadis and squatter settlements.

In an inequitable society like ours, it is always those at the bottom of the totem pole who are deprived of shelter and means of employment when officialdom wants to implement court orders “whole-heartedly” — as promised by the Sindh local minister on Saturday.

Consider that while the Empress Market shops were torn down, illegal constructions — particularly commercial ones — backed by powerful quarters remained untouched.

The only durable solution to this free-for-all is to punish to the fullest extent of the law all those complicit in this pernicious racket. The impunity with which Karachi’s precious resource is plundered must end now.

PTI in a quandary

THE PTI-led ruling coalition is under tremendous strain. Hastily patched together in the aftermath of the 2018 elections, the combination of the PTI and the MQM, PML-Q, GDA and BNP-M enabled Imran Khan to form a government and occupy the office of prime minister. The dynamics of this coalition suffered from inbuilt instability because without keeping its allies on board, the PTI could not survive at the centre. All knew this would entail a price in terms of cabinet positions, local patronage and power as well as a share in the official gravy train. This train chugged along merrily until a few weeks ago when it hit many roadblocks. After almost all the coalition partners publicly expressed reservations about unfulfilled commitments, the PTI formed committees to smoothen ruffled feathers and keep them within the coalition. So far nothing concrete has come out of these meetings that followed.

In fact, whatever give and take is happening behind closed doors has not produced anything conclusive. Of the manifold problems that the PTI continues to face, the matter involving the PML-Q seems to be the most serious. The Chaudhries and their colleagues say that the PTI had made very specific commitments to them which had led to the PML-Q joining the coalition. To date, despite repeated meetings, the promises remain unfulfilled as per the PML-Q. A

reshuffling of the negotiating committee, in which Jehangir Tareen was dropped, also raised many eyebrows. The PTI is in a tough spot. Already bruised and battered by its own poor governance and close to losing the war of perceptions, the ruling party now has to compromise again with its allies in order to save the coalition. This means its already cramped political space will shrink even further. The divisions are exacerbated by growing incidents of fighting within the party. The prime minister's economic team, led by his adviser on finance Dr Hafeez Sheikh, is under tremendous strain due to skyrocketing inflation and plunging key indicators. A blame game is reported to have already started with party members finding refuge in their respective camps. These are dangerous signs for a leader who is increasingly finding himself on the defensive. Political mismanagement exemplified by growing fault lines within the coalition, and the party itself, is fracturing the political will that is so essential to combating major problems. The prime minister should focus on cementing these ruptures in order to achieve the level of teamwork necessary for a result-oriented performance.

Fixing scandal

THE 17-month sentence handed out to former Pakistan opening batsman Nasir Jamshed by the Manchester Crown Court on Friday for his role in a fixing scandal is a stark reminder that the menace has not been completely eradicated. Jamshed, who represented Pakistan in two Test matches and 66 limited-over games, was jailed alongside British nationals Yousef Anwar (40 months) and Mohammed Ijaz (30 months), after the trio admitted they were part of a conspiracy to fix elements of the Bangladesh Premier League games in 2016. They pleaded guilty to the allegations last December after they were officially charged. Jamshed had previously said he was innocent. In fact, in August 2018, he had been banned for 10 years by an anti-corruption tribunal for his role as middleman in a spot-fixing scam that rocked the Pakistan Super League in 2017. Needless to say, the Nasir Jamshed episode has once again tarnished Pakistan cricket. Since the mid-1990s, when the fixing spectre first reared its head in the world of cricket, several players have succumbed to the temptation. Subsequently, the ICC and its member boards set up anti-corruption units to put in place stringent measures to curb the practice.

In countries such as Pakistan and India, where a majority of the cricketing talent come from backward areas, there is an urgent need to educate players so that

they are able to discern between their fans and the scheming lot. The subcontinent has witnessed the largest number of fixing cases over the past three decades, simply because players' aspirations to go from rags to riches quickly are often exploited by unscrupulous elements. With the fifth edition of the popular PSL set to kick off in four cities of the country later this month, the PCB is faced with, perhaps, its stiffest challenge to date. It not only has to guard the league against any untoward security incident, it will also have to be equally vigilant to prevent players from succumbing to corruption instead of bringing joy to a cricket-starved nation.

Additional burden for power consumers

IT seems that the government is preparing to abandon all effort at reform of the power sector.

The new power policy it has drawn up opens up all sorts of doors to recover money that the bureaucracy cannot access on its own from sources like provincial governments' NFC award transfers and consumers.

Going by the draft of the National Electric Power Policy 2020, the "full cost recovery" formula will now allow the federal government to attach whatever surcharges it wants to power bills and pass through the cost of power-sector projects to paying consumers as well.

In short, the policy acknowledges that under this government's leadership the power bureaucracy cannot be reformed and the costs of its ineptitude and inefficiency must be borne by provincial governments and paying consumers in the country.

If the draft policy is finalised in its present form, it would drain all incentive from the power bureaucracy to improve its performance; in fact, it would give the latter the authority to hand over the bills it could not collect to the federal government for direct deduction at source, provided the provincial dispensations agree to the amount being billed.

Likewise with transmission and distribution losses — if the bureaucracy cannot rectify matters, the cost can simply be passed through to the consumers. The government will also be allowed to convert the billing and recovery system of the power sector into a surrogate revenue-collecting machine by getting the authority to attach any surcharge it wants to power bills. In short, acceptance of the powers that the policy wants to create is tantamount to surrendering, with the bill handed over to those consumers who are law-abiding and pay their bills on time every month.

In the fancy parlance of the power sector, this is called ‘full cost recovery’. But the rest of the people can aptly refer to it as ‘legalised robbery’.

Since the current dispensation was elected to rule, it has presided over one of the sharpest hikes in power and gas tariffs that the country has seen in recent times, all the while blaming the increasing cost on the legacy of the previous administration.

Thus far, power consumers have had to bear the additional burden and accept the reasons they are given. But now, it seems the government wants to inscribe into law the authority to pass through such costs at whim.

It has more than Rs1tr worth of circular debt to bring down, something that requires improving governance and the performance of the power sector.

The present move then appears to be a shortcut, and passing the burden on to the consumers is the preferred route.

This is what happens when bureaucrats call the shots in matters of governance. It is the common citizen who is forced to pay for the ineptitude of the rulers.

Idlib confrontation

THOUGH the Syrian conflict is far from settled, the level of violence seen in earlier years — especially after the uprising against Bashar al-Assad sparked the civil war in 2011 — has come down in the last couple of years. The primary reason for this is that the Syrian Arab Army now has the upper hand, helped in no small measure by its external allies Iran, Russia and Hezbollah. Meanwhile, many of the opposition’s foreign friends, such as the Americans, Europeans and the Gulf Arabs, seem to have lost interest in the Syrian imbroglio and left the

rebels to mostly fend for themselves. However, a fresh conflict is brewing in the northern Syrian province of Idlib, pitting Mr Assad's forces against the Turkish military and its Syrian rebel allies. There was an exchange of fire on Monday and several Turkish troops reportedly lost their lives, while similar clashes a few days earlier had resulted in casualties on both sides. Idlib borders Turkey, while Ankara has said it has taken offensive action to "stop migration and human tragedy". As always, ordinary people have been the most affected in the clashes, with the UN saying nearly half a million have been displaced. Turkish President Recep Erdogan has said Syrian forces must vacate Idlib's 'de-escalation zone' by the end of the month, or else "Turkey will be obliged to do so itself".

Up till now, Syria had been a proxy battlefield between the US-led bloc and what has been termed the 'axis of resistance', basically bringing together Iran and its allies. However, with the growing hostilities between Turkey and Syria, the threat of this conflict becoming a regional conflagration has increased manifold. Ankara had already sent troops into Syria last October to battle semi-autonomous Syrian Kurds, whom the Turks felt were providing sanctuary to the PKK. However, the situation in Idlib is very different as the militaries of two sovereign states are trading fire. While Ankara's relationship with Damascus has been strained ever since the start of the Syrian conflict, it has retained cordial ties with Russia and Iran — Mr Assad's primary foreign backers. In fact, the Astana and Sochi processes have involved all these players to try and peacefully settle the Syrian question. These channels of communication need to be reactivated to prevent the situation in Idlib from spiralling into something bigger. A new front in the Syrian war will only benefit militant actors, and increase the people's miseries.

Religious harmony

IN a heart-warming example of tolerance and interfaith harmony, a 200-year-old temple in Balochistan has been returned to the local Hindu community. Located in Zhob, the temple had been used as a government school for the last 30 years. More significant, however, is the fact that the keys of the historic temple that is carved out from a mountain were handed over to the leader of the local Hindu panchayat by the khatib of Zhob's central mosque, Maulana Allah Dad Kakar of the JUI-F. According to local authorities, the maulana had fully supported the decision of returning the temple to the Hindu community that had been praying in a dilapidated, dangerous mud structure. On the occasion, the deputy

commissioner of the area also apologised to the local Hindu community for the 70-year delay in returning their place of worship to them. Though a majority of the Hindu population living in Zhob migrated to India in 1947, around 50 families still live in the area.

The local authorities in Zhob deserve praise for this commendable effort. Their actions — along with the symbolic apology — will help restore the lost sense of security among minority communities residing not just in the area but also in other parts of the country. But while the return of the temple is a positive move, the local authorities must now fulfil their promise of restoring the place of worship to its original state for the benefit of the worshippers. Here the role of Maulana Kakar is significant. Being a religious and political leader, his enthusiastic support for protecting the constitutional — and also religious — rights of a minority community is very reassuring. Not only has he set an example for other religious and political leaders of the country, his actions send the message that those fanning and patronising acts of intolerance and violence towards minority communities, citing religious ‘reasons’ are doing their faith a great disservice. Religious leaders across the country would do well to understand the importance of this message.

A black law

SEDITION seems to be the ‘crime’ of the times — even as the demand for the state to respect fundamental rights is growing increasingly louder.

During the last few months alone, charges of sedition have been filed against a number of rights activists in the country, including student leaders, academics, etc.

Last month, 23 people were booked for the offence after being rounded up at a peaceful protest calling for the release from custody of PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen, who had himself been arrested for sedition among other charges.

Civil society, however, is pushing back.

On Monday, student rights activist Ammar Ali Jan filed a petition in the Lahore High Court asking it to declare the section of the Pakistan Penal Code dealing with the offence as being contrary to constitutional rights. Meanwhile, the

Islamabad High Court has demanded an explanation from relevant quarters as to why “peaceful protesters” had been booked on sedition charges.

The PPC defines sedition as an act that “brings or attempts to [cause] hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection” towards the government, a crime for which the accused can be sentenced to life imprisonment.

The statute is a holdover from the British Raj, when ‘natives’ had to be kept ‘under control’ lest they incited rebellion against their colonial masters.

To understand the impetus behind the law, one need only glance at the names of some of the historical figures who were charged with sedition or put on trial for the offence. Among these were Maulana Mohammad Ali and Maulana Shaukat Ali — indeed, Gandhi himself — individuals who called for the liberty of an oppressed people and, along with others, led the freedom struggle that ultimately gave birth to this country.

And yet, that arcane law which long ago served a brutal occupying power so well is being employed with increasing regularity for the same purpose: to crush political dissent and intimidate the citizens into unquestioning obedience.

The overly broad language of the statute lends itself to capricious and selective application against human rights defenders of all stripes; even members of the journalist community have been targeted for upholding the freedom of expression.

However, the relationship between the rulers and the ruled is no longer one of master and subject; those in power disregard the fact that this nation’s collective consciousness has been shaped by resistance to tyranny.

‘Affection’ for the government cannot be coerced or regulated. It arises as a natural consequence of the state’s respect for individual freedoms and its capacity for governance.

The PTI government should heed the words of Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari who recently criticised the sedition law as “an anachronism in an independent, democratic state”.

Indeed, it is a black law, based in a sordid past — and it should be done away with, lest it blight this country’s future.

A patched-up job

THE ruling PTI has averted one crisis for now. Facing the cameras in Lahore, members of the government and PML-Q teams said they had been successful in resolving their differences and all was well. This meant that the alliance would hold for the moment and the danger of the PTI losing crucial numbers in parliament had receded. If the ruling party members heave a sigh of relief — which they most probably will — they would be missing a crucial point: political agreements come at a price; renegotiated political agreements come at a renegotiated price. The PTI may be relieved it has saved the coalition, but within the coalition it has weakened its own position. This point will reveal itself once the details of the renegotiated settlement come to light. The PML-Q will most likely get most of its demands including greater political and administrative powers in districts where it wields influence, possibly in addition to some cabinet positions. While these concessions might have their own political repercussions, especially in PML-Q-dominated districts in Punjab, they have also exposed the PTI's own political vulnerability and the party's dependence on its coalition partners. As long as the fissures were obscured from public view, the PTI could flaunt its electoral mandate, but now its swagger shall surely be replaced with a certain level of nervousness which would hint at creeping weaknesses.

The tension with its coalition partners is indicative of the larger set of troubles that is plaguing the PTI government. Political firefighting may enable the government to paper over the cracks but each blow saps the political strength of the ruling party. The pressure of rising inflation coupled with the government's inability to come up with any concrete solution to combat it is bleeding the party's political capital faster than it would like to acknowledge. This is generating a perception that the government is on the ropes and unable to defend itself from these rapid-fire blows that are coming its way. The prime minister will need to provide firm and decisive leadership at this point to halt the slide. He would do well to be seen on top of things and in step with the sentiments of the electorate. He cannot afford to be seen as an aloof figure in these trying times. This means he will need to enhance his public engagement activities instead of being pictured sitting in his swivel chair in the plush prime ministerial office.

Education concerns

EDUCATION may be the constitutional right of every individual between the ages of five and 16, but actually getting children to school has proven to be a consistent challenge for the state. Millions of children never see the inside of a classroom or are forced to drop out early for a host of reasons. These include: the sheer scarcity of public schools in the country, particularly secondary and tertiary-level institutions; having to travel long distances to reach their destination; inadequate infrastructure within the schools such as bathrooms and running water; the lingering problem of 'ghost teachers' who do not show up to perform their duties but still collect their salaries; corporal punishment, bullying and the abuse of power that those in authority abet or turn a blind eye to; and an array of added expenses ranging from uniforms to stationery and transport which can prove to be a burden for many parents, especially those with several children. Given all these issues, a less frequently asked question is, once at school, what are the children learning?

In the Annual Status of Education Report, researchers found that 41pc of the fifth-grade schoolchildren they surveyed in the rural districts could not read a second-grade-level story in Urdu, while 45pc were unable to read English sentences. The perceived poor quality of education in government schools is also one of the major reasons parents across the country dream of sending their children to private schools, which have popped up across the country on a significant scale to facilitate the demand for quality education that the state is not providing. And yet, despite this desire for private school education, many parents cannot afford the tuition fees of such institutions, let alone all the other expenses that add up. It is imperative then that the government not abdicate its responsibility of providing free, quality education to the children of this country. The effects of doing so are already very visible and will be severely compounded in the years to come.

Afghan refugees

NEXT week, Pakistan will host a conference along with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on the status of Afghan refugees in the country as a timely reminder to donor nations and international aid agencies to live up to their

promises. The event will be attended by the UN Secretary General António Guterres and UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi. Last year, several donor countries (including the US) had taken a pledge to do all they could to help in the repatriation of Afghan refugees — with all the dignity and respect that these displaced families deserve — and yet, it seems as if the global community keeps forgetting about the plight of the second-largest refugee population in the world, along with all the promises it has made to them. The issue is especially relevant given the current talks taking place among Afghanistan's various stakeholders since one cannot help but wonder: where do the millions of Afghan refugees fit in this so-called peace plan? Given that the world, including the former and present superpowers, have contributed to the countless challenges faced by the Afghans it is only fair they play their part to help solve their problems now. The Afghans have suffered multiple wars, invasions and militarisation, and have seen foreign actors fight for their own vested interests through the use proxies over the years, resulting in a steady stream of refugees escaping violence and poverty to seek sanctuary in other lands. For decades, Afghanistan has been described as 'war-torn'. This has remained its greatest tragedy and given rise to a host of other malaises.

In 2019, the BBC reported that an average of 74 Afghans were killed per day in the month of August alone — three times higher than in the more recently declared 'war-torn' countries of Syria and Yemen. As long as Afghanistan is wrecked by violence, terrorism and religiously inspired militancy, there is little hope that any solution carved out for its refugee population will prove long-lasting. Till last year, there were an estimated 1.4m documented Afghan refugees living in this country. Despite various repatriation programmes, their numbers have been consistently high and many of those who live in Pakistan are still undocumented. In accordance with the laws, those born in the country are supposed to be awarded citizenship, yet this has often not been the case and millions are forced to live a life of uncertainty.

Empty university chairs

TO say that successive governments — including the current setup — have squandered several opportunities to project a positive image of Pakistan would be an understatement. For instance, a report published in this paper says that 14 Pakistan chairs in various international universities have been vacant for six to 10

years. These universities are located in Germany, Egypt, Turkey, China and the UK where scholars from here would have dealt with subjects pertaining to history, the Urdu language, and the political and social sciences. Five Pakistani scholars were nominated by this government after scrutiny, but their appointments have hung in the balance. In fact, one of the best ways for scholarly minds in Pakistan to share their analyses would have been through academic ambassadorship. The scholars would also have been able to bring home new ideas to enrich local learning. The matter does not seem to concern the government which has more often than not displayed a lackadaisical and sometimes suspicious approach towards intellectual pursuits. This can only reinforce shallow, international impressions of Pakistan as a terrorism-hit, oppressive country. By comparison, India has around 300 academic chairs in a number of foreign universities and these positions are used to promote local and international academic and people-to-people interactions.

It is not as if the government does not realise the importance of improving international perceptions; after all, it is trying to dispel the negative image of the country by discussing the potential of tourism in Pakistan and inviting vloggers to come and record their impressions. It can do the same in other areas, especially if opportunities are available, for instance, by sending scholars abroad. Had these university chairs been filled by now, it would have helped the world see the country through myriad lenses ie history, culture, politics etc and not just through the prism of militancy and instability. The government should not be reluctant to send scholars, perhaps fearing that certain academic viewpoints may not echo its own.

Price relief

RATTLED by the public censure of its harsh economic and fiscal policies in the wake of the recent surge in food prices, the government has finally leapt into action to try and mitigate the extreme pain of inflation. The district administration in Punjab swung into action against alleged hoarders and a relief package has been approved by the federal cabinet. The package has several planks, some of which may have been motivated more by political considerations and aimed at deflecting criticism of poor governance and harsh economic policies than easing the suffering of the common man.

The relief plan puts on hold, at least for now, a decision to further increase electricity and gas tariffs, a major contributor to price escalation along with the sharp currency depreciation in recent months. A scheme to reintroduce ration cards for the 'deserving' before Ramzan begins is also expected. And in order to provide immediate relief to the people, the government intends to dig out Rs10bn from its pro-poor Ehsaas programme for providing food items such as wheat flour, ghee, rice and lentils at marginally reduced rates for the next five months through its network of utility stores. Few expect this arrangement to help slash food expenditure for the targeted population though. Given the tainted reputation of the Utility Stores Corporation, it is feared that a big chunk of these funds could be stolen or get lost on its way to store shelves. That is not all. The plan effectively excludes from its ambit the rural poor and a substantially large number of urban lower-middle-class households that don't have access to these stores. The subsidy is more likely to end up in the pockets of some USC elements or in the kitchens of those who probably don't need it.

With food prices escalating by over 20pc last month and headline inflation numbers more than doubling to the nine-year high of 14.6pc from a year ago, the government needs to realise that its policies are squeezing the economy and impoverishing the middle class. The cost of living has rocketed manifold because of rising utility prices, higher indirect taxation and steep devaluation. After cutting their other daily expenditure, middle-class households now have no option but to slash their food budgets. Economists project anaemic growth and high inflation that will push at least 1.8m people into poverty during the present fiscal year. The solution to this hardship is not to be found in short-term, myopic policies or knee-jerk responses to criticism. The situation is tough and calls for out-of-the-box solutions that look beyond ineffective, meagre price subsidies. Implementing policy measures to ease inflationary pain doesn't necessarily have to involve a rollback of the stabilisation programme. The answer to the country's economic problems lies in initiating a debate on the government's current policies, and tweaking them to control inflation and grow the economy. The use of subsidies to influence the markets rarely works.

Hafiz Saeed's conviction

THE verdict on the terror financing cases involving Jamaatud Dawa supremo Hafiz Saeed on Wednesday is a major development as this country tries to dismantle the active militant infrastructure.

Saeed was, of course, the driving force behind Lashkar-e-Taiba — before dissociating from it when it was banned to go on to establish JuD. Formed as the US-backed Afghan jihad was winding down in the late 1980s, the Kashmir-centric Lashkar became one of the most violent and well-organised militant groups in South Asia.

The lawyer of the veteran jihadi leader, who along with an aide was convicted by an antiterrorism court, says they will appeal the judgement in the Lahore High Court.

Saeed's counsel argues that his client was convicted for no other reason than due to FATF "pressure" ahead of its upcoming meeting. Whether FATF was a consideration, it does appear that there is a growing realisation in the government and security establishment that nurturing or ignoring such violent actors was a dangerous policy, and that the time had come to put an end to their activities.

The fact is that using militant actors as tools of foreign policy is a failed strategy. This seems to be the understanding at the top in Islamabad.

While world powers, including those who are now asking Pakistan to 'do more', were at one time proponents of using religious militants against state or non-state opponents, today they have publicly ditched this strategy.

Moreover, using such proxies has brought nothing but problems for Pakistan, with the UN listing Hafiz Saeed as a terrorist.

Besides involvement in foreign theatres, and the ensuing opprobrium this has brought Pakistan, the fact is that LeT/JuD fighters have also contributed to instability within the country. The organisation has maintained links with the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda, as well as with elements that evolved into the Punjabi Taliban. Considering these precedents, it can only be welcomed that Saeed has been sent to prison.

Another major point that the conviction of the JuD chief raises is that, in Pakistan, militant groups are proscribed while their leaders and cadres continue to operate as per routine.

Perhaps the sentencing of Hafiz Saeed will help change this situation.

For example, in the aftermath of 9/11, the Musharraf administration outlawed a host of jihadi and sectarian groups, but they continued to operate without hindrance and merely changed their names.

The fact is that this country's jihadi infrastructure — built under Gen Ziaul Haq's watch with American 'guidance' and Saudi money — should have been dismantled a long time ago.

While the mistakes of the past cannot be undone, a new course can surely be charted by ensuring that no armed groups espousing violence within or outside the country are allowed to operate in Pakistan. This will help improve the country's standing externally, and help keep the peace domestically.

Stopgap measures

WITH the country's politics beset with allegations and handwringing over food inflation across the country, the prime minister himself appears to be desperately in search of a way to bring down prices. His detractors argue that this is because the political costs of high inflation have put him and his government in a tight spot. Conversely, his supporters say that he is driven by a genuine concern for the suffering of the poor, who have been hit the hardest. But whatever one's perspective, it is difficult to know whose advice the prime minister is acting upon. He has prohibited his government from exporting sugar and ordered the Competition Commission to move against flour millers. Some reports are emerging in major metropolitan centres that flour millers have begun to bring down prices, and if this trend continues, we could see inflation tapering off, perhaps even declining by next month. Perishables are a different story and could present a more complex challenge. But with the government moving into high gear to rein in inflation, ideas that might have been considered extreme in recent years seem to be returning to the table for discussion.

One example is the return of the ration card scheme, which presents new possibilities with biometric technology and the National Socio-Economic Registry

database that the Benazir Income Support Programme created and operates on. A few months ago, as food inflation embarked upon its upward spiral, the prime minister ordered an increased allocation of Rs7bn for the Utility Stores Corporation. This time, they are planning an allocation of Rs10bn to expand the base of USC coverage by another 5,000 stores in the hope that they can reach a larger number of poor and deserving people in this way. But while such efforts might be lauded, they are not likely to go far in shoring up the government political fortunes if inflation continues to rise. The NSER contains data for 27m households across the country, and this can be augmented further by adding government employees in grades one to six. But tackling inflation through targeted subsidies carries its own risks. These are little more than stopgap measures, and given the amount of government attention and time they are soaking up at the highest levels, it would be better if such energy were invested instead in providing the kind of leadership that the economy needs in order to ward off the inflationary spirals that are breaking out.

Excessive force in Quetta

ON Wednesday, videos of the police baton-charging unarmed protesters near the Balochistan Assembly in Quetta began circulating on social media. The protestors — men and women, old and young alike — were employees and students at the Bolan Medical College and the All Pakistan Clerks Association. These citizens were simply exercising their right to peaceful protest and for a chance to be heard by the powers-that-be who could bring change to their lives. After all, ‘change’ was this government’s motto — not shielding themselves from the words of the very constituents whose votes they needed to come into power.

A protest is simply the manifestation of a people’s grievance and desire to be heard. It is very much part and parcel of a culture of healthy debate, human rights and tolerance. And as long as it adheres to constitutional guidelines, it should be welcomed — or tolerated, at the very least. Instead of listening to their grievances, however, we once again witnessed the heavy-handedness and overreaction of state authorities towards a peaceful gathering. Over a hundred of those protestors were taken into custody. It is baffling how law enforcement continues to exhibit such brutality and suspicion towards those simply demanding their rights, thereby criminalising them, and yet barely lifts a finger against the many groups that threaten others with direct acts of violence and hate speech,

particularly when it is directed against marginalised or minority groups. But this is not the first time we have seen such blatant abuse of power and, unfortunately, it is unlikely to be the last. From using batons against protesting teachers to water cannons against nurses in Sindh — both our distant and recent past is filled with examples of police excess against unarmed professionals. This bullying behaviour and inability to simply listen to some of the most powerless segments of society will only prove to hurt us all in the long run.

Draconian rules

IN an exercise which bears all the telltale signs of a clampdown on the freedom of expression, the government has approved a set of rules through which it plans to regulate social media. Under these directives, social media giants such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and others will be required to establish a physical presence in Pakistan, register an office in three months, set up database servers here in the coming year and oblige the government when it requests user data and content. The rules also dictate that the tech companies remove content deemed ‘extremist’ by the government — failure to do so will result in a Rs500m fine. What is most troubling is how broadly these rules define extremism, as “violent, vocal or active opposition to fundamental values of the state including the security, integrity or defence of Pakistan, public order, decency or morality, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs”.

Government spokespersons have offered various justifications for these measures. Fawad Chaudhry says the move is an economic decision which will increase advertising revenue. The PTA suggested these rules are a statutory requirement to initiate official engagement with these tech giants. Firdous Ashiq Awan revealed that the regulations will help protect ‘national integrity’. Some also point out that it is, in fact, the PML-N-sanctioned Peca which formed the legal basis for these rules. But without the scrutiny of parliament or input from digital rights groups, these rules raise serious questions and are yet another reminder of how eager the state is to gain access to encrypted citizen information. No doubt, authorities have legitimate concerns about the presence of hate speech, terrorism and child pornography on these forums. The government has also voiced its reservations against the selective editorial discretion of these platforms when it comes to the Kashmir issue. While there are genuine concerns, there is

also the reality that Pakistan has a history of controversially invoking notorious euphemisms such as ‘morality’, ‘security’ and ‘integrity’ to justify its control of free speech. Activists and journalists have been harassed under similar pretexts. The recent trend of the state pursuing sedition cases against those critical of alleged state excesses is an example of the authoritarian approach to dissenting voices. In this environment, the manner in which these ominously worded rules were hurriedly released is cause for deep concern and are rightly being criticised.

The Asia Internet Coalition , which is an industry association of tech companies, has categorically stated that the rules appear to erode the personal safety and privacy of citizens and that they also undermine free expression. They have urged the government to ‘reconsider’ them. If the government wishes to engage with these companies and is sincere about a digital economy, it would be better off adopting a less hostile and more transparent approach.

IHK land grab

NOT content with the suffocating conditions prevailing in Kashmir ever since the BJP-led clique in New Delhi annexed the occupied region last year, India’s rulers have now decided to rub further salt in Kashmiris’ wounds. India, it seems, has decided to organise a business summit later this year where investors will be persuaded to put their money in the troubled region; around 6,000 acres have reportedly been made available for this purpose by the Indian state. Though the proposal has been dressed up as an effort to bring jobs and prosperity to India-held Kashmir, no one should be fooled; this is a shameless land grab, an affront to the Kashmiri people where their land is being snatched away from them without their consent to be given to outsiders. In fact, New Delhi seems to be playing from the old colonial playbook, where external forces move in, expropriate land from the locals and then distribute the spoils. Is this how a self-proclaimed democracy functions? Have the Kashmiris been consulted? Obviously not, as the region has been under lockdown since last August. In effect, what the BJP is doing is changing the demographic makeup of Kashmir by settling people from outside. This insidious plot to erase the Kashmiri identity must not be allowed to succeed. Clearly, New Delhi is jittery, as it is offering investors tax breaks and insurance in return for putting their money in IHK. It is obvious that most entrepreneurs would not wish to invest in what is a giant open-

air prison, something that has seemingly not occurred to the Indian establishment.

If India is serious about ending the Kashmiris' suffering, it must lift the siege of IJK, give back Kashmir its autonomous status and start a meaningful dialogue involving the people of the region as well as Pakistan. Cosmetic measures — such as organising a business conference — that are only intended to enhance New Delhi's stranglehold over IJK will only increase the alienation of the Kashmiris. Unfortunately, the bigoted dispensation at the centre is unlikely to heed sane advice on Kashmir and will continue on its destructive path. This will only add to the misery of the Kashmiris and further vitiate the atmosphere in South Asia. Yet the international community seems to have become numb where this threat to global peace is concerned, as the voices that can censure India's brutish behaviour, with a few notable exceptions, are silent.

Corporal punishment

ON Thursday, the Islamabad High Court suspended Section 89 of the Pakistan Penal Code, a provision that allowed for the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary tool on children by parents, teachers and other guardian figures. The high court issued a reminder that the use of violence against children went against the values of inviolability and dignity as enshrined in the Constitution, and was also contradictory to the many international treaties Pakistan is signatory to, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits all forms of corporal punishment. Article 19 (1) of the convention clearly states that member nations must “take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child....”

And yet, corporal punishment continues to be culturally accepted in large sections of our society that justify its use as being ‘good for the child’ and will benefit them in the long run by instilling discipline and making them ‘well-adjusted’ members of society. People tend to resort to violence when they lack the vocabulary and reasoning skills to settle conflict, and many parents may resent being told how to raise their children — which may indeed come from a

well-intentioned place. However, scientific research on such forms of punishment for children actually differs from the age-old myths about disciplinary action that are passed down the generations and accepted without question. Instead of raising healthy human beings, the vast majority of research on the topic finds instances of greater aggression, antisocial behaviour and mental health issues in children raised in households that practise corporal punishment, where they internalise feeling of mistrust, fear and humiliation at a vulnerable age. It is time to break free from the cycle of abuse.

Erdogan's visit

THE visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that wrapped up on Friday was marked by warmth and consensus on a number of key issues with Pakistan, as this country's top brass heard the Turkish leader address a joint session of parliament for the fourth time. Indeed, in the international arena Ankara is one of Islamabad's closest allies, and the AKP-led dispensation that leads Turkey has consistently supported strong ties with this country. Mr Erdogan raised his voice for the oppressed people of India-held Kashmir, noting that New Delhi's brutal approach to the region "aggravates the situation" and "does not bring any benefit to anyone". Apparently the Turkish leader's frank comments stung those calling the shots in New Delhi, as the Indian external affairs ministry called upon "the Turkish leadership not to interfere in India's internal affairs". Far from interfering, Mr Erdogan was actually calling India out for its brutality in occupied Kashmir, something that many others in the international community have failed to do. The Turkish president also hailed Pakistan's efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan, along with supporting this country's stance on the FATF issue.

It is a fact that the people of the subcontinent have had emotional, cultural and religious ties to Turkey for centuries. In the modern era, both in the pre-Partition years and after independence, the Muslims of the subcontinent, and later the people of Pakistan have felt a sense of kinship with the Turks. In the Cold War era, both states were bound together under the American umbrella, though ties have matured further over the decades. Like Pakistan, Turkey too has seen long patches of military rule, as the generals overthrew one elected government after another in Ankara on the flimsiest of pretexts. However, under the AKP, civilian supremacy has been largely established, though there has been valid criticism

that Turkey has been moving in a more authoritarian direction, especially in the aftermath of the aborted 2016 coup.

Both Pakistan and Turkey should work to enrich their relationship bilaterally as well as at multilateral forums. Mr Erdogan raised valid concerns about the plight of Palestinians during his speech, and Pakistan's other Muslim friends should not feel threatened by the efforts of Ankara, Islamabad and others to strengthen the ummah. The Turkish leader also thanked Pakistan for its support for Ankara's operation against the Syrian Kurds last year, while Prime Minister Imran Khan has been quoted as saying that this country stands with Turkey regarding recent hostilities in Syria. If the prime minister was referring to clashes between Turkish forces that have entered Syria and troops loyal to Damascus in the province of Idlib, then there is a need to proceed with caution. Pakistan values its cordial relationship with Turkey, but must not become a party to any bilateral dispute involving Damascus and Ankara.

PM's treason talk

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has triggered another controversy by saying that JUI-F leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman should be charged for treason under Article 6 of the Constitution.

Speaking to journalists, the prime minister said that Maulana Fazlur Rehman had admitted that he had been given a signal to come to Islamabad to topple the government. He said he wanted to know who had given the maulana such a signal.

The maulana had ended his dharna last year saying that he had been given a guarantee that the government would be sent packing in 2020 and fresh elections would be held. The prime minister argued on Friday that this amounted to treason. The opposition has reacted strongly to his statement and the JUI-F leadership has dared the prime minister to charge their leader with treason.

It may all turn out to be a storm in a teacup. However the statement does raise some disturbing concerns about the line of thinking that prevails in government quarters.

The casual use of the word 'treason' and Article 6 — and all that it implies — undermines the gravity of the actual charge.

It is not meant to settle political scores and make life difficult for opponents and therefore when it is used for such a purpose, it demeans the actual intention.

It is ironic that the prime minister is accusing Maulana Fazlur Rehman of treason for his dharna when Mr Khan himself, along with his party, has staged a much longer protest in Islamabad in the past.

Standing on his container everyday for months on end, Mr Khan would call for the overthrow of the then government. The people who had gathered for the dharna attacked parliament and the PTV headquarters and attempted to storm Prime Minister House till they were stopped by the law-enforcement agencies.

It is therefore rather surprising that he chooses to ignore these events and accuses the maulana of treason when the JUI-F leader camped in an open ground and his men did not resort to violence of any kind.

The prime minister might want to brush up on his knowledge of Article 6 in order to put it in the right context. When we have not been able to apply this article to those who abrogated the Constitution, it is rather unfair of him to brandish it so casually. Talk of treason should not be taken lightly by anyone, including the prime minister.

National polio drive

AFTER the emergence of 13 polio cases from across the country in less than a couple of months this year, the first five-day national vaccination drive commences tomorrow to immunise around 40m children of the country. Maximum effort is required to make this campaign a success considering that the tally so far this year is already more than the total number of cases reported in 2017. In contrast, there were 12 and eight cases in 2018 and 2017 respectively. Given the managerial blunders and organisational mishaps that occurred last year, polio cases in the country rose to a devastating 144. The alarming increase resulted in a three-month polio-related travel restriction by WHO; it is crucial that the same mistakes are not repeated in the ongoing immunisation efforts. There were allegations of corruption which resulted in the ouster of the prime minister's focal person on polio; there were also multiple incidents of the accidental use of expired vaccine which is said to have led to the re-emergence of the wild poliovirus type 2 that had been eradicated in 2014. Besides, flawed vaccination

drives resulted in a significant number of children not being administered the vaccine. The situation was exacerbated when health officials stooped to playing politics by blaming past administrations for their own incompetence. This was in addition to their failure to share details of the actual coverage of the vaccination drives.

As recently as December, health officials had happily declared polio eradication efforts to be back on track with 100pc immunisation coverage. This claim was made despite the fact that expired vaccine had been administered to scores of children in Rawalpindi and at least 30,000 children had not been immunised in Sindh. The health of the country's children is not a matter to be taken lightly, as it is by our political and bureaucratic systems. The national polio authorities need to immediately get down to work if they want to even begin controlling the monster they let out.

IMF talks

IT looks like the recent round of talks with the IMF have gone quite well, perhaps better than expected.

It is true that they ended without a staff-level agreement, in which the targets and benchmarks for the forthcoming period are finalised, but all indications suggest that this is now a mere formality.

Read: IMF mission gives sunny outlook of Pakistan's economic situation as review ends

With such a ringing endorsement of the government's performance in the first six months of the programme, there can be little doubt now that an agreement for the next quarter is just around the corner.

The statement released by the Fund on Friday must come as a relief for the government, especially its economic managers, who have been taking a serious battering in recent months with the relentless march of inflation and the lingering slowdown in the economy. The Fund clearly says the economy has stabilised, inflation is now set to trend downwards, and the fiscal and external sectors have performed admirably, in some cases surpassing expectations.

But the moment of relief must be short.

It should be remembered, for one, that the IMF routinely gives positive reviews to Pakistan during programme implementation, especially when ties with the United States are strong or on the mend.

Second, it should also be remembered that the programme is a long one, and the first six months may have brought hard-won gains in the fiscal and external balances, but the road ahead is treacherous and the economy and populace are exhausted under the burden of the sacrifices they have been called upon to make in the name of this adjustment.

The other thing that the same statement makes clear is that much more is yet to come, and the government is soon likely to be reminded that ultimately it is the people of this country who will decide whether or not its performance has been good, and not the IMF.

Against this background, some sobering facts came to light on the same day that the glowing IMF statement was released.

The country's circular debt has risen to a staggering Rs1.78tr, up by 34pc since September 2018. Over that time period, it has risen by an average of Rs38bn per month, or more than a billion rupees per day. At some point, the growth of this circular debt will need to be arrested, and then reversed.

There is also the question of maintaining the fiscal balance going forward, which will require further taxes or expenditure cuts.

These are some of the loose ends left to be tied up before an agreement can be signed by both parties. But the costs of these measures will be borne by the people of the country, in the form of higher power tariffs, more taxes, and fewer jobs. The IMF's words of praise will not help as this journey continues. Dedicated focus on running things will.

Torture in custody

THE broken bodies that surface now and then from the opaque recesses of the law-enforcement system in Pakistan are, one can be sure, only some of the most extreme cases of custodial torture. The vast majority of such instances, especially those that involve sexual violence, seldom come into the public eye. The result is numerous convictions every year based on false confessions

extracted under torture, some of which send innocent people behind bars for years, if not to the death row. Last week, PPP leader Sherry Rehman presented a bill titled the Torture, Custodial Death and Custodial Sexual Violence (Prevention and Punishment) Act, 2019, in the Senate. The proposed legislation, as explained by Ms Rehman, seeks to define the various permutations of this crime and bring domestic law in conformity with the UN convention against torture, which Pakistan ratified in 2010.

Despite this country having become party to several such international treaties, custodial torture is yet to be criminalised in Pakistan and remains ingrained in our policing culture. A number of horrific incidents that have come to light recently are yet another reminder of the scale of the problem. Last October for instance, a private torture cell operated by some Punjab police personnel was unearthed in Gujranwala; one of several victims rescued from captivity later succumbed to his injuries. A few months before that, a mentally challenged man died as a result of the savage beating he had been subjected to by cops during his detention for alleged theft. Inflicting pain and suffering is a discredited method of interrogation; information gleaned through such means is highly unreliable. But lack of accountability mechanisms and resources means that torture is seen as a convenient alternative to undertaking substantive investigation; it is also used by law-enforcement personnel to settle personal scores. Moreover, political interference in police appointments and postings results in 'favoured' law-enforcement personnel brutalising citizens with impunity in the course of serving their benefactors. There are a number of steps that must be taken to eradicate the practice of custodial torture. Firstly, those who perpetrate it must be severely punished; secondly, police should be trained in modern investigative methods and equipped with the forensic tools that can help them solve crime without recourse to sadistic, yet ineffectual methods. If passed, the legislation will only be applicable to the Islamabad Capital Territory, but it may offer a template that the provinces can, and should, replicate.

Canary in the coalmine

DEEP inside the caves of KP and Balochistan, thousands of coal miners toil in search of 'black gold' day in and day out. Often wearing only helmets with torchlights, the poorly trained miners have little safety equipment and are at risk of contracting various illnesses from constant exposure to coal dust, heat, noise

and chemicals. While some lose their eyesight, develop musculoskeletal disorders or cannot work because of injuries from accidents, others die from inhaling toxic fumes or from suffocation or burns when the mines collapse on them after an explosion. They receive little to no compensation by their employers, many of whom are connected to power and who exploit the miners' poverty and lack of voice in society for a meagre wage. On Friday, members of the Pakistan Central Mines Labour Federation gathered outside the Quetta Press Club to demand better working conditions and safety equipment. Just a few days earlier, four miners had been killed when a landslide struck a mine in Dukki. According to the union, there have been around 16 deaths of miners in the past two months alone. In 2018, over 160 coal miners were killed, while approximately 300 others suffered serious injuries.

Unfortunately, the death of a coal miner — or even hundreds of deaths — rarely makes headlines or leads to any concern amongst the vast majority of people or their elected representatives. Instead, it is passively accepted as being the nature of the work. The tragedy of coal miners simply illustrates how greed triumphs over human life and dignity. At a time when much of the world is moving away from coal due to its disastrous implications for the environment, successive Pakistani governments have been showing greater interest in this sector. As a result, coal is one of the largest industries in the country. It is a good time as any to remember this is only made possible on the backs of the miners.

Shooting the messenger

TO shoot the messenger is the go-to tactic for authoritarian leaders; facts are anathema if inconsistent with the airbrushed version of reality they choose to project. When the government demonises the media as the 'enemy', it creates a buffer against the public being informed of inconvenient truths and against poor governance or corruption being exposed.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister Imran Khan's diatribes against the press have become increasingly frequent and hostile. On Saturday, during a chat with journalists, he claimed he had endured "media attacks" over the past two years, singling out the Dawn and Jang media houses as having, in his words, published "false stories" against him and his government.

In the same breath, he rightly described the media as “an important pillar of democracy” — which makes his discrediting of the press all the more ironic. Presumably, in the prime minister’s eyes, only a media uncritical of his government’s performance is a pillar of democracy; only a media that fawns over him, as it did during his long dharna in 2014, is tolerable. Now in the ‘hot seat’ himself as the country’s chief executive, Mr Khan — his well-documented aversion to criticism on full display — has even advised the people to refrain from watching TV talk shows and reading newspapers.

Democratic dispensations do not have the luxury of a victim narrative; they must defend their performance before the public on the basis of facts. However, Mr Khan demonstrates a woeful lack of understanding of the media’s function as a conduit of information — whether favourable or otherwise to the government of the day — and, if it acquits itself well, as a watchdog for the public interest.

Certainly, it is possible that inaccuracies may have crept into some coverage, and a few newspaper columns may not have been to the government’s liking. But to accuse the media of having some ‘agenda’ against it is ridiculous and smacks of rising frustration in PTI ranks. The government should not hide behind wild accusations, such as those by Mr Khan’s media aide that 20 “baseless news” had appeared in Dawn and Jang in the recent past.

Which stories were these? The publications concerned have a right to know and defend themselves.

The state’s desire to bring the media to heel is most clearly manifested in its arbitrary, unacceptable and illegal strategy since last December of denying government ads — as have done some previous administrations — to certain outlets that refuse to be dictated to. While the approach is being tacitly applied at the federal level, and KP and Punjab too have resorted to unannounced bans, there is no doubt the orders have come from the very top. The prime minister must rethink his short-sighted approach, immediately lift the ban and engage with media leaders. Power is ephemeral, and Mr Khan should consider that one day he may once again need a free press.

FATF meeting

THE Financial Action Task Force meeting is under way in Paris and its agenda includes a decision on Pakistan's status.

It was in 2018 that Pakistan was put on the grey list and asked to crack down on terror financing and money laundering.

Pakistan initiated a series of reforms in this respect but in 2019, FATF declared that Pakistan had still not fulfilled the requirements and therefore was given more time.

In the worst-case scenario, if Pakistan was found to have failed in undertaking all the steps demanded by FATF, it would be put on the blacklist.

This would translate into extremely grave consequences in every sense of the word.

Since 2018, Pakistan has, however, displayed significant progress and FATF appears to have recognised this.

Among many steps, Pakistan has also legislated laws that will strengthen efforts to curb terror financing.

In addition, there has also been commendable headway in tightening the noose around terror outfits and prosecuting them successfully through the criminal justice system.

The recent conviction of Hafiz Saeed, leader of the JuD, has been recognised by the United States and other countries as a major achievement by Pakistan.

There is little doubt now that Pakistan is displaying utmost seriousness in cleaning its stables and laying a financial, legal and administrative infrastructure that would comply with FATF standards for squeezing terror funding.

No one would disagree there is still a lot that needs to be done.

However, Pakistan has proved through its actions that it has the will and determination to see through these reforms till the end.

What the FATF needs to recognise and acknowledge is the enormity of the task at hand and the sincerity with which Pakistan is going about it.

It is no secret that India has tried its best to push Pakistan onto the blacklist.

However, Pakistan's substantive performance in fulfilling FATF requirements has blocked such Indian efforts.

Friendly countries have also played a positive role in ensuring that FATF looks at Pakistan's case purely on merit and is not influenced by Indian mischief.

Based on this, it is high time that FATF reward Pakistan for its commendable efforts and remove its name from the grey list.

This would incentivise Pakistan to expedite its efforts and also send a strong signal to the world that the country means what it says.

The Paris meeting should make the call. Pakistan deserves to be off the grey list.

Suicide watch

RECENTLY, the Sindh police released its province-wide data on the number of suicides that took place in the past five years. According to their findings, nearly 1,287 people — including 586 women — took their own life, with the vast majority between the ages of 21 and 40. The highest numbers of suicides were recorded in Mirpurkhas, with a total of 646 cases; nearly half of them were women. This was followed by Hyderabad, which recorded a total of 299 suicides, including 116 women. The apparent reasons behind the suicides varied: some were caught in the cycle of poverty and unemployment; others were trapped in unhappy marriages or suffered domestic abuse; and then there were those addicted to drugs. Many would have suffered from mental health issues, but it is difficult to know the nature or details of it. In Pakistan, the issue continues to be heavily stigmatised. As a result, many suffer silently and are reluctant to speak about their ailments to those around them out of fear of judgement or cruelty. This has created a climate where people repress, deflect or deny their psychological struggles. For the vast majority of citizens, mental health treatment remains pricey, inaccessible and out of the question.

Even with all these other issues facing the mental health debate, what is most shocking is that a high number of these suicides were committed by members of the Hindu minority, according to police, which form only a fraction of the total population. Whether suicide is to be attributed to a history of severe mental health issues that are neglected, or as a means of escaping oppressive structures — patriarchy, poverty or religious and caste-based discrimination — people have little to no control over high rates of suicide, reflecting a failure of society as a whole. Before we tell other countries how to treat their marginalised communities, we should perhaps take a hard look at what it means to be a minority in Pakistan.

Guterres on IHK

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, after his arrival in the country on Sunday, made some bold and principled comments regarding the situation in India-held Kashmir.

However, the UN chief's words have elicited an expectedly rigid, arrogant reaction from the powers that be in Delhi, indicating that perhaps the dispensation that rules India is not interested in a peaceful resolution to the Kashmir question, and is intent on raising the geopolitical temperature in South Asia. Mr Guterres called upon India to ensure that the people of IHK are given their fundamental rights.

Unfortunately, since August of last year, occupied Kashmir has been turned into an open-air prison, not unlike Gaza, where a crippling communications blockade has made the lives of locals miserable.

The UN head added that he has “offered my good offices in relation to the situation” while noting that the relevant Security Council resolutions must be implemented. However, Mr Guterres was quick to add that good offices only work when accepted by both sides. Sure enough, the Indian external affairs ministry replied to the UN secretary general's offer by saying that “there is no role or scope for third party mediation” where the Kashmir issue is concerned — essentially reading from its old script.

It is frankly appalling that Delhi has snubbed a respected multilateral office such as that of the UN secretary general. It shows that under the veneer of democracy

and respect for international law, the Indian ruling clique plays by its own rules and throws international conventions to the wind.

It is an internationally recognised fact that Kashmir is a disputed issue, and no amount of legal and constitutional subterfuge by India can change that. It is also quite shocking that Indian officialdom has the gall to lecture the UN's head on what is a bilateral issue, and what is not. Pakistan has long welcomed efforts by the international community to help resolve the thorny Kashmir issue, while India has consistently shot down such efforts by invoking the principle of bilateralism. If bilateralism had worked in this case, Pakistan and India would not have fought numerous wars over Kashmir, and the issue would have been long settled.

Antonio Guterres deserves kudos for having the courage to raise the Kashmir issue despite India's bullying and intransigence. Unfortunately, many other world players prefer to keep silent or at most offer mute criticism of Delhi's brutal treatment of Kashmiris. And anybody who dares to speak up for the besieged people of Kashmir is harangued by Delhi for 'meddling' in its 'internal affairs.' For example, Turkish President Recep Erdogan also raised the issue on his recent trip to Pakistan. In response, India lodged a protest with the Turkish ambassador in Delhi. However, despite India's bullying, people of conscience must continue to raise the issue of Kashmir the world over, and press Delhi to end its campaign of brutality in IHK.

Toxic city

ON Sunday evening, residents living and working close to Karachi's bustling port noticed a strange smell in Keamari and its adjoining areas.

Read: Mystery gas leak death toll doubles amid blame game

Then came the news of several deaths as hospitals' emergency wards began flooding with people complaining of dizziness, stinging eyes, itchy throats, chest tightness and breathing problems.

Since then, schools and offices close to the site have shut down for an indefinite period of time.

Last evening, the total number of confirmed deaths rose to over a dozen, which may unfortunately rise in the coming days.

Heartbreaking videos of family members weeping over the loss of their loved ones were being circulated, as Keamari's Jackson Market erupted in protests, with residents demanding answers from the authorities. And yet, two days on, the government still cannot trace the source of the noxious fumes.

In a press conference, the chairman of the Karachi Port Trust denied that the poisonous gas originated from the areas within its jurisdiction, but the city's commissioner has speculated that a ship offloading soybean or a similar commodity could be behind the string of deaths — which was then strongly contested by the federal minister for maritime affairs.

While various authorities such as the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency and police have launched probes to ascertain the cause of the supposed leakage, the chief minister has issued evacuation orders from the affected areas, and private bodies have released safety precautions for residents over what they should do in such times. But explanations are still not forthcoming.

In the absence of information and clarity, multiple theories have arisen, with responsibility then being shifted from one authority to another, which seems to have now become the default mode each time tragedy strikes the metropolis.

Amidst all this confusion and panic, one thing is certain: Karachi is seriously unequipped and underprepared to deal with a crisis of this scale.

This leads to the inevitable conclusion that the authorities are not prepared to handle a disaster of a larger magnitude, let alone relatively simple tasks of having functional monitoring systems in place that would help mitigate future disasters.

Chemical or industrial leakages such as these are usually the result of human negligence caused by not following proper risk assessments or implementing safety standards. At the very least, the concerned authorities must ensure that emergency protocols are in place

Escape confirmed

WHAT was an open secret for weeks has finally been officially confirmed, and in the process reopened wounds that had never fully healed. Ehsanullah Ehsan, former spokesman of the banned TTP and later its splinter group, Jamaatul

Ahrar, has indeed escaped from the security agencies' custody. However, there was no formal statement by the government; instead, Interior Minister Ijaz Shah acknowledged the veracity of the reports about Ehsan's flight from detention during the course of a chat with journalists. And the public was given the bare minimum: "The news is true, it is true," he said. No details were offered as to how such a high-profile prisoner — one that most would agree is the very definition of a 'jet black terrorist' — manage to evade stringent security measures in a red zone.

On Feb 6, a short audio message purportedly by Ehsan emerged claiming he had escaped on Jan 11, lending credence to a report by an Indian publication a few weeks earlier that had first made the startling disclosure. The news was met with shock and outrage in Pakistan. For those closely touched by terrorist violence, grief has been compounded by injustice. An individual who, in his capacity as the mouthpiece for bloodthirsty terrorist outfits, had claimed responsibility for acts that have destroyed so many lives, now roams free. In fact, a group representing the families of the APS massacre victims has filed a petition in court seeking contempt of court proceedings against a number of government, security and intelligence officials for the development. Despite Ehsan's whereabouts being discussed in parliament, in the media, and on the street for several weeks, there was a deafening silence from the government and the security agencies. Now, there is only the most casual of confirmations, which belies the seriousness of the issue. Worse, it trivialises the people's anguish. They deserve better. They deserve to know how Ehsan escaped; whether he actually escaped at all, or was released as part of some opaque deal.

Organ Trafficking

AFTER a considerable time, organ trafficking is once again in the spotlight, illustrating the fact that any laxity on the part of the criminal justice system provides a lifeline to this racket.

The daughter of well-known comedian Umar Sharif died on Monday evening from complications resulting allegedly from an illegal kidney transplant.

Acting on a written complaint by the victim's brother, the next day a joint team of the FIA and the Human Organ Transplant Authority raided the residence of the surgeon accused of carrying out the operation, Dr Fawad Mumtaz.

The doctor however, had already absconded in order to evade arrest.

The case is typical of how the illegal organ trade has adapted to increased vigilance against it by law-enforcement authorities in the last few years.

Apparently the patient was not operated on in Lahore where the surgeon has his practice — that too in one of the city's foremost government hospitals — but in Azad Jammu & Kashmir.

Until recently, most illegal transplants took place in Punjab.

But in the wake of raids carried out by the FIA since 2017 that busted several organ trafficking rings, the theatre of operations has — quite literally — moved into KP and beyond.

There was never any doubt that unscrupulous individuals would try to find ways to keep this lucrative racket alive; only a consistent and unrelenting drive against it could have prevented them from succeeding.

What has transpired in the present case indicates we are nowhere close to that.

Dr Fawad was implicated in the very first case registered by the FIA Lahore after organ trafficking was included in the agency's schedule, and under circumstances that should have made it an open-and-shut case.

Instead, a shockingly lax criminal justice system has apparently enabled, and emboldened, the surgeon to resume the illegal practice.

According to the organ transplantation law, a conviction for playing any role in this racket carries a prison sentence of up to 10 years.

It also stipulates that registered medical practitioners found guilty of the crime for the first time will see their licences suspended for three years; subsequent conviction will result in permanent loss of licence.

The courts must show no leniency towards those charged with the crime, and law enforcement should work to anticipate the various ploys that trafficking rings use to stay a step ahead.

Pakistan must never regain the shameful reputation of being a thriving market for vended organs.

Fit for trial'

ON Sunday, the lifeless body of journalist Aziz Memon was retrieved from an irrigation channel in Mehrabpur in Naushahro Feroze district. Faithful to his professional duty of holding the powerful accountable, he naturally ruffled feathers through his reporting for the Sindhi-language Daily Kawish and TV channel KTN. Now he has been killed, potentially in retaliation for his work. Prior to his murder, the visibly rattled journalist released a video in which he spoke of the ordeal he and his family were put through since reporting on allegations that crowds had been paid to attend rallies during the PPP's train march in 2019. He said that he had travelled to Islamabad in order to meet with PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and implore him to take notice of the threats he was allegedly receiving from officials, who were making his life "a living hell". In the video recording, he stated plainly: "I am neutral. I have no connection to any political party... I am merely a journalist."

Sadly, the culture of impunity for attacks against journalists continues unabated as the list of unsolved murder cases piles up. According to a report by Freedom Network, 33 Pakistani journalists were murdered in the line of duty between 2013 and 2019. Out of these, only 60pc of cases were deemed 'fit for trail' by the courts, while only 18pc went on to trial. In a press conference yesterday, Mr Bhutto-Zardari said that his party condemned Aziz Memon's murder "in the strongest terms possible". Sindh's ruling party must ensure an impartial and thorough investigation, especially since allegations have been raised against some of its own members. One can only hope his family receives justice, as far too many others have not. These silenced journalists include Hayatullah Khan, Irshad Mastoi, Javed Naseer Rind, Janullah Hashimzada, Mohammad Khan Sasoli and Saleem Shahzad. The journalist community and the state must never forget the names of the fallen — their families will not be at peace until justice is served.

A welcome invitation

BETTER sense has thankfully prevailed, with Prime Minister Imran Khan calling for broader consultation with all stakeholders on the controversial Citizens Protection (Against Online Harassment) Rules, 2020. Though this concession

has come after widespread criticism by international media bodies, technology and business firms, rights groups and social media users alike, it is nonetheless a positive step, especially in the face of considerable misrepresentation of facts by some federal ministers about the purpose and efficacy of the new rules. It is hoped that the consultation process is not just a mere formality, and that subsequent recommendations are genuinely considered and incorporated into any new policy, rules or legislation governing online spaces — unlike the passage of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, by the PML-N government, in which almost all suggestions made by the stakeholders were discarded.

In fact, it is the deeply-flawed Peca — which is often frivolously put to use to silence dissent — that the government claimed provided the legal grounds for this set of rules, which was quietly approved by the cabinet last month. If the government is truly committed to holding a consultation process in good faith, this would prove an opportune moment for it to open up discussion on revisiting Peca, in order to introduce amendments to address its many shortcomings and safeguard citizens' personal rights. Section 37, for example, which defines unlawful online content in the vaguest of terms, has allowed for the widespread and arbitrary removal of social media content as well as blocking of entire websites, while Section 20 concerning the dignity of persons has been misused to silence criticism of government institutions and ministers. Other aspects of the law, which give extensive and virtually unchecked powers to law-enforcement agencies to obtain internet users' data and block any content, also need to be revised. Another pressing issue that should be addressed during this process is the matter of personal data protection — or rather, the current lack thereof. There is a dire need for legislation that safeguards the personal information and privacy of Pakistanis. Besides threatening citizens' fundamental rights and risking their digital safety, the ill-conceived social media policy has other serious implications. Contrary to Science and Technology Minister Fawad Chaudhry's claims, according to the Asia Internet Coalition, "these rules would severely cripple the growth of Pakistan's digital economy", thus also jeopardising the prime minister's own Digital Pakistan campaign launched in December.

From where things stand, the inclination for the PTI government to manufacture a singular public narrative to its liking might be a strong one. But attempting to do so will only frustrate them even more, while in the process alienating its urban middle class support base, as well as having serious long-term repercussions for

an economy in desperate need of modernisation. However, it is not too late. There is still time to turn things around.

Honour' in shame

A RECENT report by the Sindh Police has put into perspective the extent to which our society — including the criminal justice system itself — continues to justify, condone and encourage violence against women under the guise of tradition and faith. According to the report, in the past five years, 510 women and 259 men have been murdered in cold blood on the pretext of 'honour' across the province. Out of the total number of cases, 649 reached the police. However, only 19 cases — a paltry 2pc — resulted in awarding of punishment to perpetrators. The courts acquitted the suspects in 136 other cases, while the remaining 494 cases still await trial. Though these figures might reflect only a fraction of the actual number of such murders, they are enough to expose our hypocrisy. We have laws but little to no implementation. Those who make these laws are often found advocating for or even participating in the very 'traditions' that violate women's right to life and bodily autonomy. Members of the public want rule of law, yet many end up pardoning family members who murder female relatives. Worse still are those who twist a religion that considers murder as among the greatest of sins in order to justify killing women.

It is hardly surprising, then, that this dissonance reflects in the anti-'honour' killing law enacted in 2016. Though a major achievement in symbolic terms, as a legal instrument, it represents only an incremental step towards justice for those killed in the name of 'honour'. The criminal amendment still permits family members of victims to 'forgive' their killers, while leaving it at the courts' discretion to award punishment despite such pardons. Such a loophole — one among many — allows for the subjective interpretation and application of the law by police officers, prosecutors and judges alike. The report highlights these legal lacunae, along with faulty investigations, as well as collusion between prosecutors, witnesses and suspects, as being the main reasons behind the low conviction rate in 'honour' killings.

Besides, passing legislation is hardly enough to effect change in societal attitudes and break the vicious cycle of gender-based violence. Apart from improving the law and sensitising agents of the justice system, there is a dire

need for comprehensive community outreach to combat the tacit acceptance of such ‘traditions’ in our society. In this regard, the media — particularly the Sindhi media — has played a commendable role, first by exposing and then continuing to shine a spotlight on such grotesque crimes. But the media’s job is only to inform, and change is only possible if the state proactively assumes its responsibility to vigorously prosecute and punish perpetrators as well as their abettors. Continued apathy in this regard only serves to endorse anti-women practices such ‘honour’ killings, which are in total violation of fundamental rights enshrined in our Constitution.

Development cuts

THE austerity measures imposed by the government for the current fiscal year has compelled it to significantly slash already reduced public development spending. According to the published data, the federal government and provinces have spent less than a third of the Rs1.6tr budgeted development expenditure during the first half of the present year. In a rapidly slowing economy, development cuts mean more misery and fewer jobs for the people. It also means less money for public services like education, healthcare, clean drinking water, sanitation, etc — which has a direct impact on low-income groups as well as on the country’s economic infrastructure. The cuts have been necessitated by what is described as arguably the most crippling economic downturn in the country’s history, with the FBR’s failure to broaden its net and meet revenue targets only further complicating the situation. The rationale of austerity is to slash the country’s massive public debt, which has now grown to 85pc of the GDP, and bridge the fiscal deficit, which stands at 8.9pc. Yet so far, the government’s finance managers seem to be struggling to get a firm grip on their fiscal troubles. Even if they do manage to succeed, pressures on the budget are likely to continue for the next few years. In other words, going forward, public development expenditure may be slashed further — at the expense of public welfare.

As the government seeks to deliver on its commitments under the ongoing IMF programme, it must ask itself whether it is really a good idea to axe development spending in order to reduce public expenditure. The IMF itself has recently advised Pakistan to fully utilise its development funds in order to prop up the faltering economy. The public development stimulus has acquired greater

significance given the fact that measures put in place to stabilise and document the economy have effectively sucked liquidity out of it and led to stagnation in private investment. The economic growth rate is feared to contract to below 2pc — potentially wiping out 1.2m jobs and plunging 1.8m more Pakistanis into poverty by the end of this fiscal year. It is true that the cash-starved government is in a bind considering the enormous fiscal challenges it is faced with. But there is still the option of slashing unproductive expenditure and diverting funds for development in order to support growth and lessen the impact of its stabilisation policies on ordinary people.

A humanitarian response

WHEN news of a dangerous new virus — now named Covid-19 by the World Health Organisation — first broke, governments around the world rushed to evacuate their citizens from the epicentre of the outbreak in Wuhan, China.

In contrast, Pakistan requested the many hundreds of its citizens studying in Wuhan to stay put until further notice.

Read: Families of Pakistanis stranded in China reject govt briefing, demand students' return

At the time, it was thought to be the right decision, as little was known about the disease and how it spread, and as the already burdened health facilities here were deemed ill-equipped to treat infected patients, let alone manage a potential outbreak. But many weeks have since passed, with the students and their families growing increasingly anxious, desperately beseeching the government to allow them to return home — only to, at best, receive noncommittal responses or, at worst, have their cries fall on deaf ears.

The situation is not just a health issue but also a humanitarian one. The government must allow these citizens to return home, while simultaneously ensuring that appropriate quarantine protocols are implemented upon their arrival.

China, which has constructed hospitals virtually overnight to manage its outbreak, can even be asked to lend its expertise and support.

Besides, has the government taken serious, substantive steps to ensure treatment of infected patients were the virus to emerge in this country, despite efforts to keep Pakistanis in China at bay?

Nearly all our neighbouring countries have recorded cases of Covid-19. This week, two elderly people in Iran died from the virus. India confirmed three cases in Kerala; all have fully recovered due to timely medical intervention.

Earlier this month, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health Dr Zafar Mirza said that Pakistan now had the ability to diagnose Covid-19 — so why is the government still dithering? How it plans to address a potential outbreak has not been made clear yet. What is clear, however, is that citizens cannot just be abandoned in a foreign land indefinitely. A plan for their repatriation must be announced soon.

FATF grey list

IT seems that, despite the seriousness with which Pakistan had committed itself to complying with FATF standards, the global financial watchdog is still not convinced of its progress and requires more action on some of the targets that it says have not been achieved.

For now, then, Pakistan remains on the grey list.

The taskforce has indicated that Pakistan will have to satisfactorily address all 27 points of the action plan by June, otherwise stricter action could be taken. For a while, there were government officials who were hopeful that Pakistan would be removed from the grey list, although some ministers did strike a cautious note, reminding people that the outcome of the February talks was not a foregone conclusion. It turns out that the optimists did not win the day.

Certainly, the task before Pakistan has been gargantuan, and the fact that it has still met several FATF conditions should be appreciated. But the difficult part is clearly not over; the top tiers of government must now take a hard, honest look at all the hurdles in the way of meeting the global body's expectations and ensure that these are removed quickly.

A perception had been created that the arrest of UN-designated terrorist Hafiz Saeed, would pave the way for Pakistan to be removed from the list but this has not happened.

Clearly, the gaps in the implementation of the action plan have overshadowed the progress that the government wished to project. Now the country needs, and deserves, clarity on exactly what is happening on the FATF front.

The FATF statement released after the deliberations in Paris contains language more specific than did previous statements.

It says Pakistan needs to make “significant and sustainable progress especially in prosecuting and penalising” terror financing, and should such progress not be made, the watchdog would take action “which could include the FATF calling on its members and urging all jurisdiction to advise their [financial institutions] to give special attention to business relations and transactions with Pakistan.”

The question for the country’s economy in the next four months is: what does “special attention” mean here? What are its ramifications?

Despite having touted all the progress that has been made thus far, including a high-profile arrest on terror-financing grounds, and despite that fact that Pakistan enjoys the confidence of the US in delivering a peace plan for Afghanistan and has an ally in China that is the president of the watchdog body, it is obvious the danger of blacklisting has not gone away, and the authorities are still struggling to implement the entire action plan.

The stakes are higher, as are the challenges confronting the government. It is time to for the government to make clear where the operational difficulties lie and expedite its efforts to satisfy FATF demands. Without this, Pakistan’s progress will never be viewed as enough.

Zainab Alert Bill

REALISING the extent of child abuse in the country, the Senate has done well to review and attempt to improve the Zainab Alert Bill that was passed last month by the National Assembly. During its deliberations, the Senate Functional Committee on Human Rights decided to incorporate the jurisdiction of anti-terrorism courts in the bill in an attempt to make its provisions applicable across

the country. Earlier, the bill could only be implemented in the federal capital. Meanwhile, in its last meeting, the Senate Special Committee on Child Protection asked for details of child abuse cases from all over Pakistan, while also calling for an analysis of child protection laws in other Saarc countries in an effort to improve the bill. The committee also called for consistent coverage of the issue of child abuse by the media in order to expedite the policymaking process.

That the senators understand the criticality of the issue is a good sign. However, Pakistani legislators must admit that a number of months elapsed between the introduction of the bill and its passage by the National Assembly. The bill was passed in January this year, two years after the gruesome rape and murder of young Zainab Ansari and eight long months after its introduction in the lower house by Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari. The delay, apparently, was caused when a parliamentary committee deferred the bill's passage in August 2019 due to a controversy over the originally proposed maximum punishment of rigorous imprisonment. Though the issue now stands resolved with the revision of the punishment clause in the bill passed by the lower house last month — life imprisonment with a fine of Rs1m and a minimum sentence of 10 years — one wonders how many other innocent children might have faced abuse at the hands of predators during this time. The senators, with all their good intentions, also need to acknowledge the urgency of the matter. The little boy who was raped more than 100 times by his madressah teacher in Mansehra (December 2019), the second-grade student violated by the school watchman in Charsadda (October 2019) and another girl who was raped and killed by two men in Nowshera (January 2020) might have been spared their ordeal had there been a strict law in place. It is now time to finalise the bill so that it can be passed and enforced as the law. The children of the country depend upon it.

Sanitation talk

AT a recent gathering at Parliament House, speakers highlighted Pakistan's challenges with regard to sanitation — particularly the lack of toilets, clean hygiene practices and waste management which gives rise to a host of illnesses and infections in the population. Due to the absence of even basic infrastructure, open defecation is not an uncommon sight in cities, towns and villages across Pakistan, often close to waterways; this poses a risk not only to public health, but also to the environment. Additionally, poorly constructed sewerage lines can lead

to human waste seeping into irrigation channels, which contaminates the water used for drinking and growing crops. Water-borne ailments such as diarrhoea threaten the lives of mainly young children. According to Unicef, over 22,000 children around the world die each year from diarrhoea, and it remains one of the leading causes of death among infants and children in Pakistan. This country also has one of the highest rates of stunting in the world, which is partly attributed to the mismanagement of waste disposal and the lack of awareness of safe hygiene practices within households. Then there is the widespread issue of flies that collect over open sources of waste and transmit the filth to food items, leading to cases of cholera in the population.

According to data shared by the Salman Sufi Foundation — which plans to launch Saaf Bath, a much-needed initiative to provide clean public toilet facilities to the people — approximately 79pc Pakistanis lack proper toilet facilities. The situation is worse for women, with over half of them not having access to proper sanitation in male-dominated societies that so easily overlook, ignore or are openly hostile to their right to exist and move about freely in public spaces. Unfortunately, the lack of toilets is a major governance oversight which has direct implications for the country's economy. According to the SSF, nearly \$2bn are flushed down the toilet each year due to this rarely talked about issue. What a waste, indeed.

Afghanistan deal

AFTER a series of hiccups and near misses, it appears that a deal between the Afghan Taliban and the Americans is finally on the horizon.

On Friday, both sides announced that a weeklong partial truce would take effect from Saturday, and if all went well the rival sides would sign a longer-lasting agreement in the Qatari capital of Doha on Feb 29.

If things go as planned, this could indeed be a historic opportunity to end bloodshed in Afghanistan and start the process of rebuilding the battered country.

After all, the Americans have been in Afghanistan since 2001, in the aftermath of 9/11, and dislodged the Taliban which were then ruling Kabul.

Since then, the US and its foreign allies have become the biggest power brokers in Afghanistan, in actuality underwriting the government in Kabul, whereas the Taliban hold considerable territory and in places wield more power than the Afghan government.

Therefore, any peace deal between the US and the Taliban would transform the Afghan equation considerably, and hopefully pave the way for an intra-Afghan dialogue.

It is quite clear that Washington is ready for a deal; after all the recent op-ed by Sirajuddin Haqqani — who leads the Haqqani Network, a part of the Taliban and an organisation branded as a terrorist outfit by the US — in The New York Times indicates that the American establishment has accepted the Taliban as a legitimate player.

Interestingly, not too long ago the US had put relentless pressure on this country for ‘sheltering’ the Haqqanis. This only shows that in the fluid world of international politics, perceptions and designations can change very, very quickly.

“Everyone is tired of war,” wrote Mr Haqqani in his florid op-ed, while US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also said that following the partial truce the “US-Taliban agreement is expected to move forward”.

Indeed, the Taliban, though no strangers to violence, are in nature quite different to militant groups such as Al Qaeda or IS, mainly because the Afghan group has a nationalist outlook and wants the exit of Americans from their country, while the latter outfits have grander, pan-Islamic designs.

It is also a welcome sign that the Taliban have pledged to talk to the Afghan government if the deal with the Americans succeeds. In fact, any lasting peace in Afghanistan is unlikely to succeed unless the process is Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, and the multiple ethnic and tribal stakeholders in that country are all on board.

However, if the Kabul power elite is to hammer out a successful deal with the Taliban, it needs to put its own house in order.

There has been much acrimony following the Afghan presidential election, with Abdullah Abdullah not accepting the results and questioning President Ashraf Ghani’s victory.

If there is another power struggle in Kabul, it is unlikely that a lasting peace agreement in Afghanistan can succeed.

Curtailing ordinances

FORMER Senate chairman Raza Rabbani has sought an amendment to the law dealing with the power of the president to promulgate ordinances. The PPP senator has, through a private member's bill submitted to the Senate secretariat, sought to add two provisos to Article 89 of the Constitution which allow the president to promulgate ordinances when parliament is not in session or where circumstances emerge that a law becomes imperative. The opposition has been severely criticising the government for its excessive use of ordinances but the rulers have not relented so far. The argument that the government is peddling is that the opposition is not interested in reaching across the aisle in order to legislate on important issues. The opposition, however, maintains that the government has, through its hostile and non-serious attitude, made parliament dysfunctional and therefore resorts to issuing ordinances to cover up for its own inadequacies.

The arguments may carry weight to some extent, but what is undeniable is that the government's excessive dependency on ordinances is going against the spirit of parliamentary legislation. The law very clearly explains this spirit by stating that presidential ordinances should only be issued when there is an urgent requirement and the normal route of legislation cannot be followed for a genuine reason. The issuance of an ordinance deprives the members of parliament of the opportunity to thoroughly debate the issue at hand, bring in suggestions and recommendations and improve upon the legislation if possible. This also enables a wider public debate and discourse so that the issue can be weighed on the scale of wider public interest. This is how a transparent democratic system is supposed to work. However, while we are all enjoying the trappings of such a system, the substantive part remains weak. This is why the premise of Senator Rabbani's amendment is correct. The excessive and undue use of ordinances needs to be curtailed, and if this can be done through certain amendments in the existing law then that possibility should be explored with seriousness. The government should take this in the spirit that the amendment is proposed and be ready and willing to debate it with utmost earnestness. Ordinances may be a convenient tool for the government of the day but parliamentarians are expected

to think beyond their electoral terms and prioritise the improvement of the democratic system as a whole.

Underage marriages

IN a reassuring move, a court in Jacobabad recently upheld the law by nullifying the marriage of 15-year-old Naniki Kumari, who reportedly converted to Islam from Hinduism, after declaring her to be under the age of marriage as per the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013. The judgement was given under an inordinate amount of pressure, and amidst tight security, as religious hardliners had been issuing threats to the girl's family who asked that their daughter be returned to them. Meanwhile, the Hindu community of Jacobabad had been holding demonstrations against the marriage of the girl, which they feel comes in a long line of similar cases of girls and young women being kidnapped, forced to convert and then married against their will. For instance, in 2017, a 14-year-old from Thar was taken away from her family by armed men, converted, and married off to a Muslim man. In each instance, influential seminaries insist that the girls convert of their own free will. Whatever the details of this particular case may be, it is clear that the child is too young to make life-altering decisions such as marriage.

Child marriage continues to be a rampant evil practice in this country, which deprives the girl child of the right to complete her education, and exposes her to a host of health-related complications, rape, domestic abuse and exploitation. Unicef estimates that Pakistan has the sixth highest number of child brides in the world, with approximately 21pc being married off before reaching the age of 18; and 3pc before the age of 15. And yet, apart from Sindh, no other province has increased the age of marriage to 18 years for girls, despite the fact that not doing so is a blatant violation of the fundamental human rights of children inscribed in the many international conventions that Pakistan is signatory to. But each time the issue is brought up there is great opposition from religious groups and male politicians. It is time these critics themselves grew up.

Trump in India

DONALD Trump and Narendra Modi are alike in many ways.

Both are political outsiders who have managed to reach the top of their respective systems through a blend of right-wing populism and maverick ideas.

Both have pushed majoritarian agendas at the expense of minorities.

Perhaps this explains the bonhomie and back-slapping between them, which was on vivid display at a cricket stadium in the Indian city of Ahmedabad on Monday, where Prime Minister Modi pulled out all the stops for the 'Namaste Trump' event.

Gaudy and full of clichés — much like the politics of both men — the event was seen reciprocating the 'Howdy Modi' episode in Houston last year, where a crowd of non-resident Indians eagerly lapped up what Messrs Modi and Trump had to offer.

Mr Modi and company have taken other steps to ensure President Trump only gets to see 'shining' India, covering up the warts and all that make up the 'real' India.

For example, a wall has been built to hide an Ahmedabad slum from the US leader's view, while monkeys in the Gujarat city have also been rounded up. A report says some 45 simians have been bundled off to parts unknown to ensure they don't appear in front of Mr Trump's aircraft.

On a more serious note, Mr Modi the politician has come a long way since he was barred in 2005 from entering the US for his role in the anti-Muslim Gujarat pogrom of 2002, when he was the state's chief minister.

Today, the president of the US calls him a "tremendously successful leader"; never mind the fact that the demons of Gujarat have been summoned again by the Sangh Parivar to terrorise India's Muslims, this time as Mr Modi sits in the prime ministerial chair.

The fact is that the anti-Muslim atmosphere in India — epitomised by the passage of divisive legislation, as well as the stifling situation in held Kashmir —

will largely be ignored by the US as what matters the most is the market, in this case a market of over a billion people.

Moreover, despite all the glib talk of two 'great democracies', the fact is that Washington indulges New Delhi as an Asian bulwark against China, America's rival for great power status.

Mr Trump also mentioned in his speech that he had a "very good" relationship with Pakistan, and that he hoped for peace in South Asia.

If Mr Trump really wishes to see stability in the subcontinent, he needs to tell his Indian friends that they must reduce their hostile posture where Pakistan is concerned.

This country has offered numerous times to open channels of dialogue with New Delhi, only to be rebuffed by the other side.

Also, the US leader should communicate that the situation in occupied Kashmir is unacceptable, and peace in South Asia will not be possible until a just solution to the issue has been found.

Bilawal's criticism

PPP CHAIRMAN Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has caught the PML-N by surprise. In a loaded statement, he said Nawaz Sharif was also 'selected' when he became the prime minister in the 1990s after Benazir Bhutto was ousted from power. Mr Bhutto-Zardari then trained his guns on Shahbaz Sharif and criticised the leader of the opposition for his long absence from parliament. This unusual criticism by Mr Bhutto-Zardari has received a muted response from the PML-N so far and as per reports, the party has communicated its reservations to Asif Zardari. The timing of the statement has raised many eyebrows. The PML-N and PPP had been cooperating with each other inside and outside parliament to build pressure on Prime Minister Imran Khan's government. The PPP leader recently announced that his party would be launching an agitation against the government in March while JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman has also threatened another dharna next month. PML-N leader Rana Sanaullah, meanwhile, has said that Shahbaz Sharif would return from London next month and revive his role as leader of the opposition. It remains to be seen whether the opposition will forge a common front against the government and step up the pressure. Given individual

party interests and political compulsions that have often led to divisions among them, the question that many have been asking is whether the PML-N, PPP and JUI-F are capable of joining hands against the government in a sustained manner.

However, if the intention is indeed a united front against the government then Mr Bhutto-Zardari's criticism of the Sharifs is puzzling. It could have been driven by the PPP's local political interests in Punjab but the larger cost of such remarks does not appear to have been factored in, otherwise there might have been an attempt at damage control to maintain the loose unity of the opposition. It is possible though that the PML-N has viewed the criticism as a one-off statement that could be brushed aside for larger gains. While the timing of Mr Bhutto-Zardari's statement is baffling, its substance is not off the mark. It is no secret that Nawaz Sharif was supported by the establishment against Benazir Bhutto and he was the direct beneficiary of her ouster. Similarly, Shahbaz Sharif's long absence from parliament also deserves to be criticised as an abdication of his duties as leader of the opposition.

Coronavirus spreads

IT is distressing to note that the new strain of coronavirus is spreading across countries at an alarming speed, at a time when the Chinese premier had reassured the world that the virus would be under control soon. Instead, even more deaths are being reported from mainland China, where the total number of cases has swollen to over 77,000 — a massive uptick since the virus was first reported in December 2019. Meanwhile, South Korea and Italy have seen a sudden increase in the number of cases in recent days. Especially worrying for Pakistan, all four of its neighbours have now recorded cases of Covid-19 within their borders, with the Afghan health ministry confirming its first case in Herat yesterday, after three men who returned from their travels from Iran were tested and placed under quarantine. Iran itself is struggling to contain the outbreak of the virus, particularly in Qom. A global health catastrophe that has claimed more lives than the previous SARS scare of the early 2000s, the news will unfortunately continue to be peppered with a generous dose of xenophobia and politicking, but fear of the virus is not irrational.

As the death toll in Iran keeps increasing — though the exact figures continue to be debated — Afghanistan, Turkey, Armenia and Pakistan have now imposed travel restrictions and closed their borders with the country, fearing that the outbreak will spiral out of control without strict measures in place to restrict the movement of people crossing boundaries. In fact, it is a rather remarkable fact that, so far, Pakistan has yet not reported a single case, despite fears being expressed by some that the virus may already be here. If such a contagious illness were to enter the country, one can only imagine the toll it would take on the already overburdened and under-resourced healthcare system. It will be a massive challenge for the government to combat the virus, as Pakistan is already struggling to end diseases which the rest of the world eradicated many years ago such as polio.

Economic anxiety

THE government is now showing visible signs of aggravated anxiety at the economic situation, with daily meetings between the prime minister and his cabinet and demands for freezing power and gas tariffs for the remaining months of the fiscal year.

Read: Pakistan has come out of economic crisis: Imran

In addition, strenuous attention is also being paid to food price hikes, with law-enforcement action ordered against alleged ‘hoarders’.

It is good to see this government finally stepping up to the responsibilities of rule, but it is crucial to acknowledge what the finance ministry itself said a few days ago.

The path of macroeconomic adjustment is rarely easy, but it must be walked in the absence of credible alternatives. The ministry warned that “it is imperative to continue with the adjustment” in its Mid Year Budget Review report released on Feb 20, and pointed to “lingering vulnerabilities in the economy and the chronic nature of structural challenges” that remain.

The words are strong and they point in the opposite direction from the one the government seems to be taking these days.

There should be no doubt that the adjustment has to continue.

The economy has shown some encouraging signs, or perhaps more specifically it should be pointed out that government finances and the foreign exchange reserves situation have shown improvement.

But the wider economy continues to groan under the burden of rising inflation and high interest rates, with the populace weighed down by greater unemployment as well.

The impact on the poor, as well as the lower middle classes, is undoubtedly stupendous, and elected governments cannot withstand the pressures that usually accompany such developments.

Finding ways to mitigate this impact, to target the mitigation efforts where they are most needed, is indeed a crucial priority. But abandoning the adjustment at this stage, when the first fruits of the sacrifices made along the way in the form of rising reserves and a meagre but undeniable surplus in the primary balance have begun to emerge, would be near suicidal.

With the buffers built thus far, the government may be able to bring about a fleeting moment of respite. But it will pass very soon and an even more painful adjustment will need to be undertaken afterwards to compensate for the folly.

Besides the mitigation efforts, the prime minister would be well advised to focus on the second part of the two warnings sounded by the finance ministry: the structural reforms.

This is key.

The moment opened up by the return of macroeconomic stability would be best utilised if the foundations of future growth were to be laid during this time.

Simply revving the engines of growth at this point, without any reform to address the underlying dysfunctions of the economy, will cause the deficits that necessitated the whole exercise to re-emerge.

Justice for Assange

JULIAN Assange, the controversial founder of WikiLeaks, is back in the spotlight this week with the commencement of his extradition case in London — a landmark hearing which is

being viewed as a test case for press freedom and the public's right to know. The US wants Mr Assange extradited to face 17 charges under the American Espionage Act as well as one hacking charge. The charges broadly relate to WikiLeaks' publication 10 years ago of thousands of US diplomatic cables and data, including information on alleged American war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the use of drones and other military strikes in Pakistan. The Australian is also accused of working with former US military intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning to leak classified documents and could face a 175-year prison sentence if found guilty. During the first hearing, his lawyers told the London court that the Trump administration was targeting Mr Assange as "an enemy of America who must be brought down" and that his life could be at risk were he to face trial in the US.

There is no doubt that Mr Assange is a contentious figure whose publication of classified documents laid bare America's abuse of power and human rights violations as well as the corrupt behaviour of other countries. While media and rights groups hailed him as a hero at first, his decision to publish unredacted documents later was strongly opposed even by those who championed his earlier publications. The subsequent controversy in which Mr Assange was at the centre of a sexual assault investigation — as eventually dropped — added to his notoriety and made him even more unpopular. However, the extradition case today has nothing to do with who Mr Assange is and how well liked or otherwise he is. Instead, it is connected to the idea of a free press which enables the accountability of those in the highest echelons of power, at a time when authoritarian figures are relentlessly muzzling and undermining the media. The case against his extradition is strong. His indictment is an effort to criminalise activity which journalists and whistleblowers engage in around the world: the publishing of important information given by people who are not authorised to share it — information which is true and which the public has a right to know. The Trump administration's disdain for the media is no secret. Extraditing Mr Assange would be a major blow to media freedom, which is an essential component of a healthy democracy, across the world.

Tree plantation

ON Sunday, Prime Minister Imran Khan kicked off his spring tree plantation drive from the place he launched his political career many years ago: Mianwali.

Planting new trees is part of the ruling party's manifesto; it has promised a '10-billion tree tsunami' to be carried out in its five-year term, and the prime minister has repeatedly brought up the priority he attaches to protecting the environment at a time when climate change, pollution and poor air quality are disrupting life and livelihoods. During his most recent trip, Mr Khan spoke about his desire to see tree plantation drives introduced in school curricula to ensure a better future. Unfortunately, destructive forces move at a far quicker pace than good intentions, and Pakistan continues to have one of the highest deforestation rates in the world — estimated to be between 0.2 pc and 0.5pc annually — due to expanding urbanisation, industrialisation, a growing population, and the continued threat from a powerful timber mafia that is often politically connected. The mafia has also been accused of using violence against environmental activists that stood in its path in the past, while authorities turned a blind eye to or abetted its ruthless ambition. For short-term gains, the long-term well-being of the environment, the many ecosystems these forests host and the livelihoods attached to them are put at stake in an exercise that can only be described as criminal, and which is rarely, if ever, prosecuted.

The prime minister has now directed his government in Punjab to come up with a strategy to counter the timber mafia in the province. His heart may be in the right place, and he may think that the arrest of those who cut down trees will be a deterrent, but unless he successfully tackles the real criminal forces head-on, his desire for creating long-lasting change will remain only that. It takes many years for a sapling to grow into a tree, and only a few minutes for a fully grown tree to be chopped down. This trend needs to be reversed.

Media protection bill

BRIEFLY, it appeared there may be light at the end of the tunnel for Pakistan's beleaguered journalist community. However, the outcome of the cabinet's deliberations on the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill, drafted by the human rights ministry, has been discouraging. For it seems the government representatives have decided to club this comprehensive effort to create an enabling environment for an independent media with another media-related bill previously drafted by the information ministry. Such a conflation, one may be sure, is likely to culminate in a watered-down piece of legislation.

The bill drawn up by the human rights ministry is worth adopting on its own for several reasons; a few are particularly worth citing. One, it premises the importance of ensuring journalists' safety on their fundamental and inalienable rights as citizens, rather than being an 'indulgence' that can be withdrawn at will. Second, the bill unflinchingly lays out the real problems that journalists in Pakistan face, and addresses the critical issue of impunity by setting up a seven-member commission — led by a former Supreme Court judge — with wide-ranging powers of investigation and redressal. The statutory body would be duty-bound to investigate and prosecute within 14 days all forms of harassment, coercion and violence against media professionals — including forced or involuntary disappearances, kidnapping, abduction, etc. Third, the draft stipulates that counterterrorism or national security laws shall not be used arbitrarily to detain journalists or hinder their work. In a repressive environment where the 'national security' argument has been speciously used to slap treason and cyberterrorism charges on media workers, this is an important consideration. Moreover, when journalistic work crosses the line into defamation or incitement to violence, the bill says the penalty must be based on "principles of legality, necessity and proportionality". In sum, it is a well-considered piece of proposed legislation, marked by clarity and conducive to achieving tangible results.

The media in Pakistan is reeling under unprecedented pressure. Various quarters including political actors, security agencies, etc, seek to censor information they perceive as damaging to them — and they will go to any length to achieve their objective. There is thus a dire need for substantive legislation to 'protect the messenger'. In the last 10 days alone, two journalists have been murdered in Pakistan, quite possibly on account of their work. Their deaths underscore the perils that members of the press in this country must contend with if they cross powerful vested interests. Pakistan ranked eighth on the Committee to Protect Journalists' Global Impunity Index 2019, with 16 unsolved murders of media practitioners over the past decade. Since 1994, only three out of over 60 such cases have seen any success in terms of prosecution. The government now has a golden opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to press freedom. The question is, will it venture into this uncharted territory?

Riots in Delhi

THE images coming out of the Indian capital are truly chilling.

In Prime Minister Narendra Modi's India, the country's much-trumpeted claims of being a secular republic have been thoroughly exposed as the storm troopers of the Sangh Parivar have rampaged through New Delhi. At the time of writing nearly 30 deaths had been reported in the rioting that has been going on for the past few days, ostensibly between those who oppose the new Indian citizenship law — who are predominantly Muslim — and those who favour the divisive legislation — who are mostly Hindu.

There are reports of mosques being set afire, goons barging into Muslim homes, and police officers forcing injured protesters to chant pro-Hindutva slogans. It would be naive to ask where the administration is in all of this; it is clear that the state — the Hindutva state — is part and parcel of this ugly situation. The Delhi chief minister, who belongs to a party opposed to the ruling BJP, has asked for the army to be called in and curfew to be imposed to control the situation.

At the moment, the Indian state's primary duty should be to control the violence and prevent it from spreading further. This, of course, is not the first time India has been rattled by spasms of communal bloodletting; the slaughter of thousands of Sikhs in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination; the violence following the razing of the Babri Masjid by Sangh Parivar zealots, and the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, when Narendra Modi was chief minister of that state, are grim reminders of India's history of religious violence.

But this time things are different mainly because the dispensation that rules New Delhi has amidst its ranks some virulently anti-Muslim elements, while hate material can spread like wildfire through social media.

Therefore, the capital needs to take stringent steps to ensure religiously motivated violence does not spread, and specifically that India's minorities are protected from bloodthirsty mobs. It is a tad ironic that the violence in the Indian capital was happening around the same time that US President Donald Trump was being feted at an official banquet at Rashtrapati Bhavan. What is more ironic is that Mr Trump praised Mr Modi for his commitment to religious freedom.

If the BJP government's brutal record in India-held Kashmir, its divisive legislation, and soft corner for Muslim-baiting Hindu zealots are anything to go by, this praise is wholly unearned and the global community must have the courage to call out the Indian state for its bigotry.

Karachi gas leak

MORE than 10 days have passed since what appeared to have been a mysterious gas leak claimed 14 lives and affected hundreds of others near Karachi's port. Questions have been raised, multiple inquiries launched, and various far-fetched and probable theories floated, both in private circles and in the public domain. And yet the absence of clear answers from the concerned authorities and provincial government is baffling. With no new patients being admitted to hospitals, the incident may soon be forgotten, but it has exposed massive governance lapses. Even now, we have not ascertained the source or type of gas that led to the deaths of so many and caused some 250 people to fall sick. If the authorities cannot provide answers to questions raised by a concerned public — or worse, if they are involved in some sort of a cover-up and deliberately concealing information — it only leaves citizens vulnerable to future environmental and industrial threats, as they will be forced to make sense of one tragedy after another. One cannot help but wonder what — if any — system of industrial checks is in place, and what would the government do if an even bigger tragedy were to unfold? Or are we supposed to live according to the law of the jungle, with each citizen looking out for themselves?

Industrial accidents and gas leaks pose a constant threat to workers and the general public, and there is no room for negligence or ambiguity in such matters of life and death. Memories of the Bhopal disaster — when in 1984 a gas leak from a pesticide plant endangered the lives of 600,000 people, killing around 15,000 of them — were awakened once again. Even decades later, residents of the city continue to suffer from the aftereffects of the toxic fumes, its residue left behind in the environment and groundwater. It is not clear if any lessons from the most recent tragedy in Karachi have been learnt. Welcome to the jungle.

Coronavirus cases

IT was perhaps only a matter of time before Pakistan joined the ranks of countries hit by the coronavirus.

On Wednesday, the federal health ministry confirmed the first two cases of COVID-19 — in Karachi and Islamabad — prompting the authorities to close schools in parts of the country.

The national health authorities had been vigilant over the last few weeks, for instance, by shutting off the border with Iran (where the number of cases has risen to nearly 250) and checking international flight passengers at airports for symptoms.

Now that the highly infectious virus is in the country, they must double their efforts to contain its spread — a huge challenge indeed.

For one, state-of-the-art quarantine and treatment facilities are needed in virtually all districts with special instructions to healthcare staff on how to manage COVID-19 patients.

At present, there are only five quarantine facilities in the country — two in Islamabad, two in Rawalpindi and one in Karachi. This is clearly not enough to deal with a potential outbreak.

Suspected patients being transported to these facilities from the rural areas will have plenty of time along the way to transmit the virus to others.

The pace of diagnosis should also be speeded up, while equipping at least some of the more reputed health facilities to test patients for COVID-19 would ease the burden on the National Institute of Health that is currently conducting most of the diagnostic tests.

It is true that the situation does not call for panic, as the special assistant to the prime minister on health has said. But whether “things are under control” can only be assessed in the days to come, as Pakistan grapples with the virus in the midst of a dilapidated healthcare system.

To contain the virus and discourage the public from believing in conspiracy theories, the authorities would have to run a robust awareness campaign about

the infection, give updated information about new cases, and share its plans to combat the illness.

The fact is that the government cannot afford to slacken its efforts.

According to WHO, COVID-19 has affected over 80,000 people in approximately 40 countries. New cases may be on the wane in China, where the virus originated, but the infection continues to spread in other countries, with South Korea reporting the most cases outside China.

The global outbreak should put even more pressure on the authorities here to mobilise all layers of the public health system to address the situation.

This means that all levels of the healthcare system — national, provincial and district — will have to work in tandem under a clear, comprehensive, globally accepted strategy. Anything less could be a recipe for disaster— and Pakistan, with its myriad health challenges, such as the resurgence of polio, has so far not proved itself adept at tackling crises.

Exporter tariffs

IN yet another volte-face, the government has announced that it will be withdrawing the reimposition of surcharges and taxes on the power tariffs of exporters. The announcement comes after the prime minister took stock of the situation. He decided he did not wish to stand by the decision of his power division through which not only was the power tariff concession given to exporters last year reversed, or reimagined in a way that amounted to a withdrawal, but the move was also made retroactive. Exporters were asked to start paying the surcharges applicable to their power tariffs, as well as reimburse the power utilities for all the months that these charges were not billed to them. Last year, the government had announced a relief measure for exporters only and fixed their power tariff at Rs7.5 per unit, inclusive of taxes and surcharges.

What we have, therefore, is one U-turn followed by another. No doubt the exporter community will hail the step, but it is nearly certain that the power division and even the finance ministry will view it with dismay. More importantly, the markets are watching and this sort of vacillation signals weakness. The weakness is two-fold. First, there is flawed decision-making, since the power and finance divisions both gave contradictory accounts of how the decision to

withdraw last year's tariff incentive was made. Also the government's inability to live up to the financial implications of its own announcements has been made apparent. The second weakness that has been signalled is the inability of the government to stand by its own decisions. If an incentive is announced today, withdrawn tomorrow, then announced again a short while later, it betrays confusion and lack of ownership behind the scenes. It is now clear what is happening. The power sector is unable to meet its liquidity requirements from its own recoveries, despite massive power tariff increases over the past year. The finance ministry is unable to contribute the resources to tide over these liquidity problems. The result is the continued rise of the circular debt to arrest, and the Fund is demanding further tariff hikes that the prime minister is unwilling to sanction. The government is stuck in this situation now, and how the logjam is eventually broken will reveal a great deal about the way it is managing the stresses and strains of the Fund programme.

An act of sadism

MAN'S cruelty to man can strain credulity. That is especially so when the target is more vulnerable than most. In a recent incident reported from Lahore, three individuals grabbed hold of a deaf beggar and allegedly, "for the sake of amusement", pumped air into his body with a compressor at a petrol station. The unfortunate man lost consciousness from the excruciating pain, and was rushed to hospital by the management when they were informed of what had happened. Doctors diagnosed massive internal bleeding from the damage done to his large intestine as a result of the abuse. Thankfully, the victim's condition is improving. Not so fortunate was a blind beggar who died in last November, also in Lahore, after a group of men subjected him to the same inhumane act.

Bullying is unacceptable; left unchecked, the tendency can evolve into the form of egregious cruelty on display in the incidents cited above. Indeed, it is mind-boggling how people can pick on individuals who have to navigate so many challenges in their daily life — poverty, mental and/physical challenges, etc. Most Pakistanis see themselves as being compassionate and generous to those around them, often rightly so. Nevertheless, in a society where 'might is right', those with power are far too often seen as lording it over the comparatively weak. Leave aside Lady Health Workers or government teachers protesting peacefully for their rights, even rallies by handicapped people have been set upon by the

police. Moreover, we can be exceedingly judgemental, quick to ridicule or denigrate those who do not conform to what is considered 'normal'. Witness the taunts and degradation often meted out to trans people in public places, not to mention the violence they are subjected to. And it is not only human beings at the receiving end of sadistic treatment. Caged animals in zoos, already kept in miserable conditions, are often pelted with stones and other objects by visitors. Compassion does not seem to be part of our national character.

Controversial NAB

IF the National Accountability Bureau has earned anything since its creation by a military dictator two decades ago, it is public censure and mistrust. The anti-corruption watchdog has over time become perhaps the most disliked agency in the country. Although the law was amended slightly last year, NAB still retains its powers to arrest people on mere complaints and allegations of corruption and financial wrongdoings. The truth is that NAB has hardly any 'success' to its credit to prove that it is adept at investigating white-collar crime — the task it has been entrusted with and that is the justification for its existence. Had the accountability law not provided for 'plea bargain' deals with the suspects and allowed NAB investigators to adopt a controversial, highhanded approach, it would have nothing to flaunt.

The recent hearings of two corruption cases against former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and former planning minister Ahsan Iqbal are evidence of how flawed the accountability law is. The politicians' cases amply demonstrate that NAB does not open corruption inquiries on the basis of solid proof. Nor do its investigators care about actual probes. Little wonder then that most cases continue to linger in the accountability courts for want of proper evidence for years. In granting bail to the two former public representatives the other day, the Islamabad High Court laid bare the many faults in NAB's investigation process. Chief Justice Athar Minallah raised some important questions about the bureau's policy regarding the arrest of individuals — even when they were fully cooperating with the investigators in the probe against them — and blatant violations of the suspects' constitutional rights. Apparently, NAB investigators have made no headway against Mr Abbasi who was arrested almost seven months back in the controversial LNG case. Officials involved in the case also have shown little understanding of how international business deals are done.

Nor could they satisfy the judge on why it was necessary to arrest suspects, especially if they happened to have been elected public leaders.

The NAB actions against opposition politicians in the last couple of years, on the basis of flimsy evidence, has reinforced the belief that the agency is being used by the powers that be to make them fall in line. One can recall the way in which Pervez Musharraf used the body to carve out the 'Patriot' group from the PPP after the 2002 elections. That is not all. Recent NAB cases against bureaucrats and businessmen and the alleged pressure on them to turn approver against previous rulers have probably damaged investor confidence more than the government's flawed policies to stabilise the economy. It is because of these reasons that many are calling for the reform of the accountability law and anti-corruption watchdog. In fact, NAB lost its credibility quite a while back and needs to be shut down.

Indo-US arms deal

ONE of the more troubling outcomes of US President Donald Trump's just-concluded visit to India is a multibillion-dollar arms deal reached between Washington and New Delhi. According to media reports, the deal is said to involve attack helicopters and is reportedly valued at \$3bn. While the deal will no doubt be music to the ears of the American arms industry, for those who want peace in South Asia this is an unfortunate development. Pakistan has voiced concern over the deal, with the Foreign Office spokesperson commenting that "we have alerted the international community several times about India's aggressive designs. ..." Indeed, the Balakot misadventure last year — foiled due to the alertness of the PAF — was just one example of India's bellicose posture towards this country. As the military spokesman told the media on Thursday, India has violated the Line of Control nearly 400 times last year. Certainly these are not actions responsible states indulge in, and it is unfortunate that the US is pampering India as a counterweight to China, without considering New Delhi's bullying attitude in South Asia.

At the height of the Cold War, India was a firm Soviet client, buying Moscow's arms and following its geopolitical lead. However, with the fall of communism and with the US establishing itself as the world's sole superpower, India saw it fit to make inroads with the Americans. That development, coupled with Washington's

intense rivalry with Beijing, has resulted in the US cultivating India as an Asian counterbalance to China. However, while both the US and India champion their status as 'great democracies', as the events over the past few days have shown, those who run India today are wedded to thoroughly undemocratic principles. Not only is the Hindutva-inspired administration bent upon demonising and oppressing India's minorities, particularly its Muslims, the fanatical elements in New Delhi have also threatened Pakistan numerous times in the recent past. Such threats have come from senior Indian military as well as civilian officials. Hence, in such a scenario, when the US chooses to empower the Indian war machine, Pakistan has very legitimate concerns. The deal will only further spur the arms race in South Asia and scuttle any chances for peace. The US should take a more responsible and balanced approach in this region, especially when two nuclear-armed states are involved, and India must not be allowed to bully and browbeat neighbouring states using American weapons.

Sexual harassment

IT may be too early to say the tide is turning when it comes to penalising sexual harassment, but ripples have certainly been created. How far these ripples extend and whether they can lead to a cultural shift can only be judged in time, but setting precedents and drawing clear lines regarding what is and is not acceptable behaviour at the workplace is an important start. This Thursday, the Sindh ombudsman for the protection against harassment of women at the workplace imposed a fine of Rs100,000 on one employee of the Sindh health department, while promotions for another have been stopped for three years. The two men were found guilty of harassing a colleague of theirs. Similarly, just a few days earlier, three government employees were fired from their jobs for harassing the women they worked with.

As more women enter the job market, employers will need to ensure that they are upholding the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act in letter and spirit. Many women struggle to even step inside organisations and are forced to fight battles both within and outside their homes just to be 'allowed' a chance at financial independence — only to be dissuaded by a needlessly hostile and sometimes dangerous work environment. According to the law, all workplaces must prominently display the code of conduct; set up an inquiry committee of three members, consisting of at least one woman; proceed with an

investigation within three days of receiving a written complaint; and then submit their findings within 30 days. For years, women have remained silent about the harassment, abuse and intimidation they have had to put up with, fearing that speaking out will only make them more of a target, or they will be made to leave their jobs, or be subjected to character assassination that will haunt them beyond the workplace. That some are now speaking out and receiving support is encouraging for others, and will help pave the way for a more equitable society in the long run.'