



# **DAWN**

# **EDITORIALS**

January 2022

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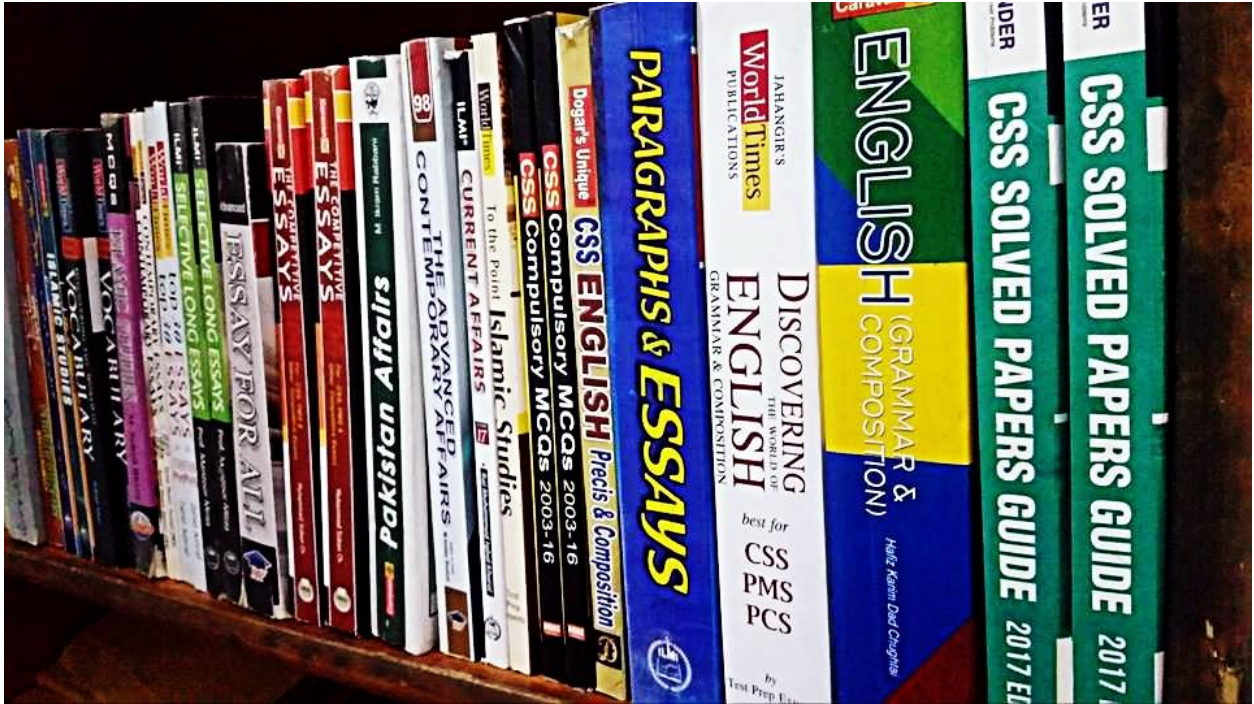
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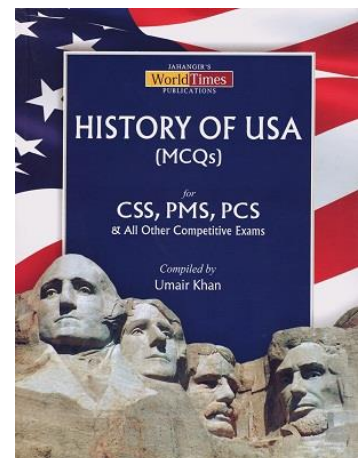
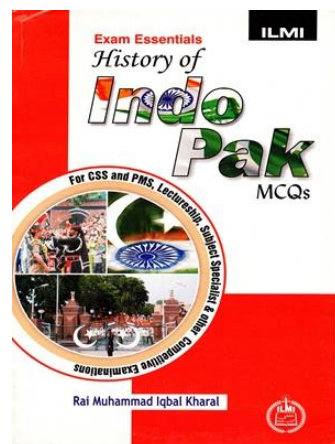
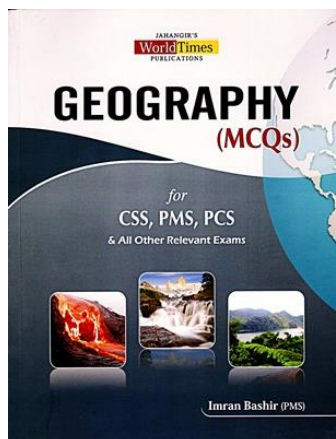
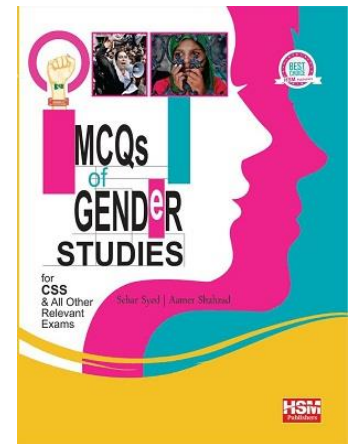
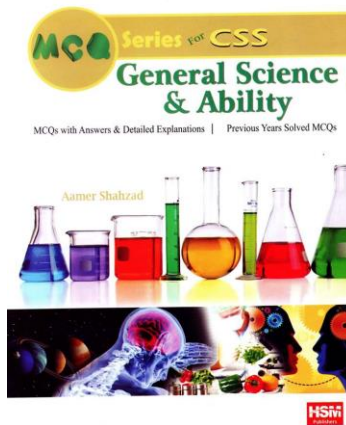
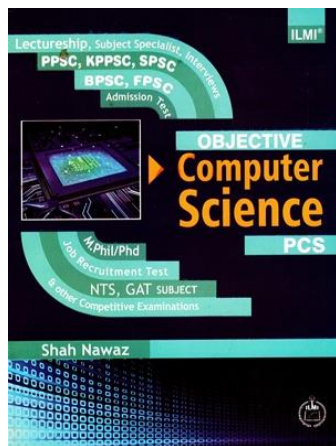
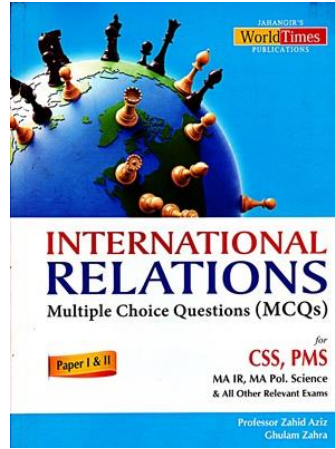
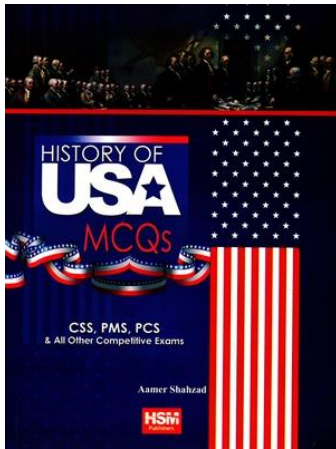
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## **Mini budget: a bitter bill to swallow**

THE Finance Supplementary Bill, 2021, that has been popularly described as a 'mini budget' was introduced on Thursday by the government in the National Assembly to loud protests from the opposition ranks. The move is aimed at netting additional revenues to the tune of Rs343bn, or equal to 0.6pc of GDP, and can, in stark terms, be described as a tax on the people.

Though Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin has dismissed every suggestion of the new taxation measures being inflationary in nature, the withdrawal of the tax exemptions and the increase in the sales tax rate on a large number of goods — ranging from iodised salt to pharmaceutical ingredients to baby formula milk to cars and more — is going to push up headline prices going forward. This is the case despite the minister's claim that the measures impacting the common people amounted to just Rs2bn.

However, it must be appreciated that the overall inflationary impact of most measures will be somewhat milder than what was generally being anticipated. While the negative inflationary effects of the bill cannot be overstated, the new fiscal measures were needed to put the country back on the path of stabilisation. These fiscal actions were also required to support the recent actions taken by the State Bank in order to contain money supply in the market to rein in inflation.

The passage of the bill along with the SBP Amendment Bill is one of the key conditions for the resumption of the \$6bn IMF funding programme that the government had ditched in April last year in order to pursue rapid growth and in the hope of the world coming to its aid after the American withdrawal from neighbouring Afghanistan. The bill aims to not only narrow the fiscal gap to help the government achieve primary balance at the end of the present fiscal year as required by the IMF but also to reduce the import growth that has put extensive pressure on the nation's balance-of-payment situation in the last seven months since June.

Pakistan's return to the IMF programme will open up other avenues of multilateral dollars besides leading to the immediate release of the \$1bn tranche from the IMF and assist the country in raising funds from the international bond market to meet its foreign payment obligations in the next six months and beyond. Both bills have been introduced in parliament amid strong pledges from

the opposition parties — which have termed them anti-people and as undermining national sovereignty — to resist their passage. Will the opposition be able to block the passage of these bills? That remains to be seen.

The better path for both the government and opposition would be to sit together to take out the controversial parts from these bills that are harmful to the well-being of the common people or that in any way compromise the legislature's authority over the central bank. Despite its inflationary impact, the mini budget does propose some good steps that will help advance documentation of the economy and improve tax revenue collection in the long term.

For example, a massive portion of the pharmaceutical sector stands undocumented. According to official data, only 453 out of 800 pharmaceutical manufacturers are registered with the drug regulator Drap. The input tax should also help curb the menace of spurious drugs in the market. Likewise, the extension of GST at the input stage for bakeries, restaurants, sweetmeat stores, flight food, poultry products, vegetable oil, cereals etc is a step forward in the documentation of the economy. Thus, a wholesale rejection will not serve anybody's interests.

Published in Dawn, January 1st, 2022

## **A year of uncertainty lies ahead**

A NEW year always gives hope for better things. For Pakistan, nothing could be truer. Having braved 2021 through the highs and mostly lows, the citizens of the Islamic republic deserve a break. However, 2022 is being greeted by steep inflation and mounting economic woes. In the process of fulfilling IMF conditions so it can re-enter the programme, the PTI government has little choice but to unleash a new wave of inflation through the withdrawal of numerous subsidies as well as an increase in the price of petrol. These financial troubles will accentuate the level of political instability that is already rampant across the political landscape.

The PDM's long march is scheduled to take place in three months and it is sure to be preceded by all manner of turbulence. People may be glad to bid adieu to a year that saw the ravages of Covid-19 create chaos at a time when the citizenry was burdened by falling purchasing power, but they may need to brace for

another year of uncertainty and political warring as local government elections take place within this charged atmosphere.

The key factor in these combustible mix will be the relationship between the establishment and the government. It is no secret that the PTI government benefited from the full support extended by the establishment in all areas of governance for the last three years. However, this cosy relationship was jolted by the controversy surrounding the appointment of the DG ISI. By all accounts, it has not recovered from the jolt and there are visible indications that the establishment has stepped back from its active facilitation of the government. This will be a determining factor in how the political landscape develops this year and whether the opposition can muster up enough support to attempt an in-house change.

Opposition leaders acknowledge that if any change has to take place, it will do so before the presentation of the budget in mid-year. This means the opposition will need to assess whether the establishment will step back from the political process enough for the PTI to face a fresh attack on its own. With a limited time frame available to them, the opposition will need to make a call fairly soon.

A similar call will need to be made by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif about his return to Pakistan. Ever since he hinted in a speech in December that he would see his colleagues soon, there has been feverish speculation that he is ready to come back to face jail because he senses an imminent change. His return, if it takes place this year, will mark an important political milestone because it will provide his party an opportunity to create a momentum that it would want to translate into the ouster of the government.

However, such an outcome will also depend to a large degree on how the establishment sees Mr Sharif's return. If indeed there are no obstacles laid in his way, then it would be regarded as yet more evidence that the establishment has learnt the right lessons in the last few years and wants to extricate itself from the cut and thrust of politics.

There is, however, another aspect to this scenario. The appointment of the new army chief is due in November this year and it is a decision that has always impacted the political lay of the land. Given the tension in the relationship with the government, the establishment would be eyeing this moment warily.

The domestic situation therefore remains unstable and has an adverse impact on the quality of governance. The last few years are witness to how the PTI has struggled to govern the country. Improving governance in the year before the elections will therefore be the central challenge for the PTI. At the same time, the regional situation, and especially Afghanistan, will continue to present a central challenge to Pakistan. The year 2022 promises a rocky ride.

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## **Arab-Israeli meeting**

THE Arab-Israeli peace process is largely dead, thanks mainly to Tel Aviv's intransigence and refusal to deal with the Palestinians as equals. Therefore, in the present circumstances, only a miracle can deliver a just solution. However, anyone looking for such a miracle in the recent meeting between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz will be disappointed. On the surface it appears to be a positive development, with both sides meeting after a considerable gap. But go into the details of the meeting and it is mostly window dressing. The peace process has been frozen since 2014, and it is unlikely the recent meeting will lead to a thaw. Some observers are of the opinion that the meeting only took place due to American pressure. According to a Palestinian minister who attended the meeting, "the importance of creating a political horizon that leads to a political solution" was discussed. This actually means that nothing of substance emerged from the event, while the minister added that "tense conditions on the ground" created by settlers were brought up. Expecting any significant progress on illegal settlements is naïve, as Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett is a major champion of settlements. Moreover, referring to the peace process, the Israeli leader commented earlier that "there won't be one".

The fact is that if foreign powers, particularly the US, are serious about the Arab-Israeli peace process, they must bring Tel Aviv to heel. Israel must be clearly told that there can be no more illegal settlements, and that the regular butchery of the Palestinian people is out of the question. Do the supporters of Israel in the West have the courage to tell their ally such plain truths? The experience of the last few decades tells us they do not. Until Israel is made to understand that it will have to make major concessions to secure peace — primarily giving the

Palestinians a just deal, not scraps from the table — the peace process will remain in deep freeze.

Published in Dawn, January 2nd, 202

## **Foreign funding case**

THE end of 2021 marked yet another year that the ruling PTI's foreign funding case remained without a conclusion. Filed by a founding PTI member Akbar S. Babar in November 2014, it has been over seven years since the case — which should have been concluded within months if not weeks — has dragged on due to the behaviour of the party, a sluggish judicial process and a slow-moving ECP (that is also looking into the source of funding of other parties including the PPP and PML-N). The allegations range from financial irregularities in party accounts and questions about funding sources to concealment of bank accounts, money laundering and the use of private accounts of party employees as a front to receive illegal donations from the Middle East. If proven, they could have serious consequences for the PTI, as the annual consolidated statement of accounts submitted by it bears the PM's certification. Unfortunately, this test case for political finance, which on paper is regulated by the robust Elections Act 2017, has dragged on and exposed the failings of the key stakeholders. Transparency in political finance goes to the heart of democracy, as it promotes fair political competition and curbs the influence of money over political parties. If implemented in letter and spirit, the legislation would limit the influence of powerful lobbies and interest groups on the functioning of parties that chart the country's economic future.

Sadly, the case has laid bare how poorly this law is applied. More than 70 hearings have been conducted by the ECP in the last seven years; over two dozen orders, too, have been passed by it, some of which have not been followed. A scrutiny committee set up in 2019 to audit the PTI's accounts submitted its report six months after the deadline. This committee, too, has met over 75 times. The PTI itself has challenged the ECP's jurisdiction to probe the case in courts numerous times, showing its lack of appetite for transparency when it comes to political finances. Not only has it approached the courts, it has changed its lawyers and sought dozens of adjournments. The case raises questions about the ECP's ability to manage such a critical issue, as well as the

ruling party's resistance to get to the bottom of the matter. As the case lingers on, there are slim hopes that there will be any resolution — an unfortunate reality that shows how much work must be done before we can hail the strength of our democracy.

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## **Assembly politics**

THE National Assembly session was prorogued on Friday for an indefinite period without passing the crucial finance bill that is a requirement for Pakistan to re-enter the IMF programme. The Fund's board is scheduled to meet in Washington, D.C. on Jan 12 and it was expected that the government would ensure the bill is passed before then. However, this seems difficult now since officials say the National Assembly session may be called by the middle of the month.

This would imply that the government aims to persuade the IMF either to postpone its meeting or approve the programme on the commitment that the bill will be passed in the next session of the Assembly. The information minister has explained the delay by saying the bill has been sent to the Senate which can take two weeks to either add its recommendations or reject it.

However, it is also being reported that the government's allies are still not on board with the bill. Most agree that if passed, the bill will trigger another round of inflation and extract a steep political cost for the government and its allied parties. With the second round of LG polls in KP and also in Punjab due in the coming weeks, there is genuine concern among the ruling parties about a backlash from the voters. This concern is not misplaced if the results of the first round of KP's LG polls are anything to go by. If the allies dither, the government could have problems with parliamentary numbers. The proroguing of the National Assembly may be aimed at buying time so the government can muster the strength to get the bill passed. A failure to do so could trigger existential concerns for the government. The opposition too may use this time to woo the allies in a bid to defeat the bill.

The government has never been shy of bulldozing bills when it has had the requisite numbers. The passage of nearly three dozen bills through a joint



session of parliament recently is a case in point. The government did not bother to allow a debate on the bills and preferred to use its brute majority to bulldoze them through the House. The fact that it is going slow with the finance bill may therefore indicate a degree of nervousness about the numbers.

The opposition finds itself in a convenient position. If the government fails in passing the bill, that would be considered a no-confidence move and the government would have to prove that it still enjoys the support of a majority. If it passes the bill, the political fallout would be devastating. This may be one reason why the opposition does not appear to be in any urgency to gather the numbers required to stop the bill. Politics in parliament is now being played for high stakes.

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## **A misplaced remedy**

THIS is a shakeup Pakistan's ailing public health sector can do without. Prime Minister Imran Khan announced on Friday that his government would shut down all district headquarters hospitals where government doctors are reluctant to serve and facilitate the private sector to provide healthcare through the Naya Pakistan National Health Card to people in far-flung areas of the country.

Mr Khan was speaking at Governor House, Lahore, on the occasion of a ceremony to launch the health card when he made the surprising declaration. Pointing out that DHQ hospitals were lying deserted because of a lack of doctors, he asked, "why should the government spend money if doctors were not going to the DHQ hospitals to serve the masses?"

The prime minister's resentment over the wastage of precious resources is valid, but the remedy is misplaced and short-sighted. It would amount to an abdication of the government's duty and make primary healthcare even less accessible to lower-income families, thereby defeating the very purpose of such a move.

The PTI government's endeavours in the public health sector, specifically the Sehat Sahulat Programme, are commendable. It is clearly an aspect of the party's manifesto that it has put some thought and planning into. The card was first launched in KP in 2016 during the PTI's first provincial government and is being gradually rolled out in the rest of the country.

The latest expansion in the scheme, to mark which the event on Friday was held, makes the health card available to deserving families in the Lahore division from the beginning of this year, with the facility to be extended to all of Punjab by March 2022. Describing it as a major step towards the creation of a welfare state, the prime minister said the government would be spending Rs400bn to offer health insurance to 30m families in the province. According to Mr Khan, the private sector would be incentivised in various ways to come forward and set up hospitals even in areas far from urban centres.

However, to do away with DHQ hospitals or any other part of the government's primary healthcare system, including Basic Health Units, Rural Health Centres and Tehsil Headquarters Hospitals, would likely create more problems for the underprivileged. For one, the health card covers mainly inpatient procedures.

Primary healthcare facilities cater to the outpatient requirements which form the bulk of healthcare needs; where will patients requiring outpatient care go, especially in rural areas? Secondly, there are thus far around 450 empanelled hospitals in the entire country, making access to them an expensive proposition for many people until and unless there is an empanelled hospital in each and every tehsil. Moreover, if health professionals are absent from duty in public-sector facilities, it is the failure of the government and one it should rectify instead of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Published in Dawn, January 3rd, 2022

## **Electoral process**

THE claim made by the federal science minister that the controversial electronic voting machines have been modified to make them more user-friendly somehow does not inspire much confidence. The minister told Dawn the other day that the battery life of the EVMs has been extended from 24 hours to 72 hours and that the device can now automatically drop the ballot paper for the voter into the ballot box. "Now this device also allows a voter a second chance to tick the party sign before casting the vote," he said. The modifications, he added, have been made to satisfy the critics of EVMs who continue to oppose the use of technology in elections, which the ruling party says is the only way to make the electoral process fair and transparent. Whatever these improvements mean, it is wrong to

automatically link electronic voting with fair, free and transparent elections in the country.

Electoral fraud here is not restricted to the actual polling process. Vote manipulation starts long before polling day and continues till the government is formed. Surprisingly, there have been less complaints of vote fraud during polling. And we have a system to address them. The government needs to only ensure the expeditious judicial redressal of such complaints, which currently takes years. That said, it must be pointed out that in a country where electricity supply and internet connectivity is erratic it is naïve to expect the ECP to put EVMs to use everywhere in the next elections even if it is fully satisfied with the machine's performance and accuracy. Many other nations have already abandoned or limited the use of EVMs owing to multiple reasons, including technical glitches. Hence, it is not surprising to see the opposition parties and the ECP object to the hasty deployment of EVMs. In view of such issues — and the huge upfront and recurring costs involved in the maintenance and storage of EVMs — a committee on the use of voting machines had recommended a decade ago that electronic voting should be adopted in a phased manner. That was a sound recommendation given the issues involved. Indeed, the science ministry's effort to continuously work on and improve the performance of EVMs is praiseworthy but the government should listen carefully to the ECP's reservations and address them to the commission's satisfaction if it wants to make elections less controversial. Electoral reforms work only when the government, the opposition and the ECP are on the same page.

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## **KP minorities project**

THE Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government's decision to build and restore 109 worship places and residential areas of minority communities in the province is commendable. The details, scale and estimated cost of the project, Rs513m, indicate that officials concerned have done their homework and are not shooting from the hip. However, considering how easy it is in this country to whip up extremist sentiments, especially against members of the minority communities, and the influence of religious and far-right groups on society, the KP government has set itself an ambitious target. A number of recent incidents have

demonstrated that it takes only a few mischief-makers to vitiate communal harmony. The burning of a temple in Karak, KP, and the desecration of another in Bhong, Punjab, are recent examples of this phenomenon.

The project earmarks the highest number of sites — 19 — in Peshawar. A sum of Rs20m each has been set aside for the construction of Biba Singh Gurdwara and the Saint Michael Catholic Church in Peshawar Cantt, while Rs9m has been allocated for the rehabilitation of Durga Mandir. Sizable funds have also been reserved for conservation projects in Lower Chitral valley which will benefit the Kalash community that is often at the receiving end of the worst of our compatriots' xenophobic tendencies. While all this sounds promising, community engagement and approval is key for the successful completion of these projects. Given that minorities in the country perpetually live in a state of fear and uncertainty, this is a task easier said than done. Unless the authorities make a conscious and consistent effort to rein in extremist elements and punish those involved in attacks on members of minority communities and their places of worship, the sense of insecurity they have to contend with will not be adequately addressed. Moreover, the authorities must also ensure adequate security arrangements for these sites. The religious lobby may frown upon the project and present specious arguments against it. One hopes the KP government remains steadfast in its cause.

Published in Dawn, January 3rd, 2022

## **Maulana's march**

JUI-F CHIEF Maulana Fazlur Rehman has said that the PDM's 'Mehngai march' on Islamabad will take place as scheduled on March 23 and will not be postponed due to the second phase of the LG polls in KP. Speaking to the media on Sunday, he also acknowledged that the establishment played an impartial role in the first round of LG polls and that this was one reason why his party showed such impressive results.

The PDM has not been very impactful in the last few months and therefore the maulana's emphasis that the scheduled march on the capital means that the opposition wants to keep the threat of street pressure alive on the government while it focuses on launching an attack via the parliamentary route. Maulana Fazl was the most vociferous proponent of resigning from the assemblies but he has

now also said that PDM is no more interested in that option, and instead, wants to leverage the strength of parliament to oust the PTI government. This is also a major development as it signals that the PDM member parties have finally come around to accepting the viewpoint propagated by the PPP early last year.

All these developments come in the wake of reports that former prime minister Nawaz Sharif may be planning a return from London. His senior party colleagues have started dropping broad hints in this regard, as a result of which the government has also become vocal in saying that it will approach the court to force Mr Sharif to return to Pakistan and serve the rest of his prison sentence.

The government is facing added pressure from the finance bill that it must pass through parliament in order to re-enter the IMF programme. Its thin parliamentary majority in the National Assembly could undergo significant stress when the bill is voted upon. In this respect, it makes political sense for the PDM to keep the threat of a march on the capital alive even though the extended date given for it suggests that the PDM may be more interested in using this threat as a bargaining chip as opposed to actually going through with it.

If the opposition plans to follow the parliamentary route to bring down the PTI government, as the maulana has suggested, then the success or failure of this endeavour will become apparent in the coming few weeks. However, if for some reason this does not work out, the PDM may use the long march as an added pressure point against the government at a time when inflation would be peaking due to the withdrawal of subsidies in the finance bill. The government finds itself with very few good options while the opposition appears to be gaining confidence. The period between now and the scheduled march will determine where national politics is heading.

Published in Dawn, January 4th, 2022

## **Cybercrime complaints**

THE FIA chief claimed this week that people's confidence in law enforcement was increasing as cybercrime complaints in the last year topped 100,000. This appears to be a misplaced claim, as the number of complaints is just a fraction of Pakistan's internet penetration which at about 18pc amounts to 36m people, and cellular use, too, which clocks in at over 180m users. The fact that the average number of complaints per month has doubled over four years points to this

growth in internet and cellular coverage, and is more a testament of how fast the digital landscape is expanding rather than improved confidence in the force.

There are a number of ways in which the FIA can gain the public's trust in its cybercrime operations. But this involves true improvement in the FIA's processes and inductions rather than mere cosmetic changes or numeric milestones. First and foremost, it is not enough that the FIA is inducting more women officers as part of its investigation teams. Though it is undoubtedly easier for female victims of cybercrime to interact with women officers, without quality and consistent gender-sensitive training, a gender-based increase alone in the workforce will not improve the experience of those who report crimes in the face of blackmail, pressure and guilt. Second, the FIA's process for handling cybercrime complaints must be set in stone and be transparent, similar to police reports where the public know that FIRs precede court cases. The steps that follow after a complaint is lodged must be clearly defined, especially on their website. Of the approximately 100,000 complaints filed last year, only about 15,000 passed the criteria for initiating inquiries. This means that the FIA has work to do when it comes to educating people about which complaints make it to the next step and how things proceed from there. It must also be clear that the process cannot be arbitrary and cannot be altered if there's a change at the top in order to ensure justice and continuity. A critical component of Peca stipulates that the agency submit a half-yearly report to both houses of parliament for consideration. It is not clear whether parliamentarians are receiving these reports and performing their function of scrutinising them. It is not enough for the FIA to make big announcements about new wings and milestones, as the agency must strive to deliver justice and security to citizens in a transparent and consistent manner.

Published in Dawn, January 4th, 2022

## **Forlorn generations**

LET it not be said that Prime Minister Imran Khan is unaware of the pressing needs faced by the population over the welfare of which he presides. What the government chooses to do about them, however, is another matter. Consider the challenges and severe long-term risks to the citizenry's health posed by malnutrition, nutritional deficiencies and childhood stunting. Several nationwide surveys, including the National Nutrition Survey 2018, indicate that some 40pc of



our children are underweight, and over half are stunted. Before that, a World Bank study compared the situation in Pakistan with that prevalent in Chad and Niger. The issue was quickly taken up by the prime minister. In his first address to the nation, he pledged that his government would prioritise child health and nutrition, thereby doing its best to counter stunting, malnutrition and the resultant physical and cognitive deficiencies. Fast forward three years, and the government has decided to impose a 17pc sales tax on locally manufactured infant formula and baby food — which, before this tax, were priced at half that of their international competitors. In one stroke, nutritional supplements that are considered beneficial to infant health have been rendered so much more expensive. And the silent sufferers, as usual, are the most vulnerable in society: women and children.

There is no argument that every medical study puts breastfeeding, that is considered the ideal nutrition for children, far above manufactured foods including formula milk. However, the fact remains that in many cases formula milk is recommended by doctors, for a multitude of reasons — ranging from low supply of mother’s milk to a general reluctance to breastfeed. While promoting breastfeeding is a topic for another debate, and is not linked to the 17pc sales tax, the decision to raise the cost of formula milk and baby food will be an extra burden on families with newborn babies and toddlers. Few will be able to afford it in these times of inflation, and will have to see their offspring suffer.

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## **LG bill controversy**

THERE continues to be a lack of political consensus on Sindh’s local government law, as the PPP insists on keeping the legislation as it is without listening to the opposition’s criticism. The opposition parties in Sindh, meanwhile, remain adamant that the bill is unfair and fails to address the problems the third tier faces in the province. While speaking in Karachi the other day, Federal Minister Asad Umar termed the Sindh Local Government Amendment Act, 2021, a “black law”, adding that his party would take legal action against the legislation. Some other parties, including the Jamaat-i-Islami and PSP, have already gone to court against the law. Meanwhile, supporters of the JI have been camping outside the Sindh Assembly building for several days in protest against the passage of the

law. The PPP, on the other hand, says the law will be amended within the House, and not on the streets.

The fact is that a matter as sensitive and essential to democratic governance as the provincial local government law needs the input and consensus of the maximum number of stakeholders. Unfortunately, the PPP has failed on this count, choosing instead to bulldoze the law through the assembly last month after the Sindh governor had sent the bill back without giving assent. Interestingly, the PPP has criticised the centre's similar penchant for bulldozing laws and ordinances through parliament. The PPP has alternated between promising to listen to the opposition's views and using its numbers in the Sindh Assembly to rush through legislation.

There can be little argument that the PPP's earlier 2013 LG law, which replaced the Musharraf-era system, failed to deliver in urban Sindh. Karachi is in a shambles where civic services are concerned. Hyderabad, Larkana and Sukkur are not faring any better. Infrastructure is dilapidated, while water and sewerage services, as well as solid waste management systems, have virtually collapsed. This is largely because the 2013 law introduced a bureaucratic, top-heavy LG system in Sindh where the mayor's office as well as the union councils had minimum powers, while the provincial government served as a glorified municipality. This LG system has failed manifestly, therefore the PPP should not be stubborn; it should incorporate the valid suggestions of the opposition in the new law, especially as Sindh's ruling party does not have significant representation from Karachi. All parties, led by the PPP, must go back to the drawing board and make further amendments in the LG law acceptable to the majority of stakeholders. The mayor should be empowered politically and financially, while basic civic services need to be overseen by the mayor's office. Legal challenges to the law may result in a lengthy battle in court, so it is in the best interests of all parties to rework the law within the House and come up with progressive legislation for Sindh.

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## **Entrenched inflation**

THE trend has caught on. That's exactly what the new CPI inflation numbers, the broadest measure of what people pay for the goods and services they consume

or use, show. Headline prices jumped by a whopping annual rate of 12.3pc — the highest level in 22 months — in December 2021, according to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics data. But people do not need these numbers to be reminded of the rapidly increasing cost of living. They have to deal with this pain every day when they purchase groceries, fill up their vehicle tanks and pay their electricity, health and education bills. The prices of perishable food items have recorded a decline. However, this is only a temporary phenomenon that does not bring any meaningful respite for low-middle-income families that have been struggling to cope with the high prices of daily essentials for over two years. If the trend of the last two months continues, and it will, headline inflation is likely to stay around 11pc to 12pc over the second half of the present fiscal year to June. Another measure of inflation, the so-called core rate that removes the more volatile food and energy prices from the CPI mix, also rose at an annual rate of 8.5pc; it is up by 1.1pc month-over-month from November. Like CPI inflation, the trimmed core is also in the double digits. That illustrates how entrenched inflation has become in the economy.

Price stability has been the biggest challenge facing the Imran Khan administration as well as the central bank. Regrettably, the government's repeated pronouncements regarding the rising prices do not reflect any seriousness, with minister after minister telling the public that it is just a temporary phase. The official line on the soaring prices in the country has been inconsistent, sometimes blaming 'hoarders' or the 'flawed economic policies of the PML-N government' and sometimes the current 'global commodity boom' caused by Covid supply disruptions. In defending their government, the PTI ministers conveniently disregard the impact of their plans to push economic growth by increasing money supply in the economy and handing out generous fiscal incentives without considering the ill effects of such policies. Yet people who are increasingly finding it harder to put food on the table and pay their energy, education and health bills remain unimpressed. Inflation is a real issue for the public. Telling them that it's not, or that it's transitory, amounts to insulting their intelligence.

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## **Shooting the messenger?**

THAT the Islamabad High Court may proceed to indict journalists among others in a case involving an affidavit signed by a former Gilgit-Baltistan chief justice sets an unfortunate precedent for press freedom. Named among the seven individuals who may be indicted next week are publisher and editor-in-chief of Jang Group Mir Shakeelur Rehman, journalist Ansar Abbasi and resident editor Amer Ghouri.

The Association of Electronic Media Editors and News Directors and the Pakistan Broadcasters Association have rightly expressed concern over the order issued by the high court in the contempt case, as the media workers were merely reporting on an affidavit after confirming its existence and authenticity.

Allegations of impropriety against the senior-most judge of the Supreme Court by another senior ex-judge, are indeed alarming. It is no surprise that the affidavit's claim that former chief justice Saqib Nisar attempted to influence the judiciary in the Nawaz Sharif case has been taken so seriously and is being seen as having 'scandalised' the judiciary.

But indicting the media workers in question in a contempt case for learning about the story and then confirming it with the former GB judge Rana Shamim — and also contacting Mr Nisar — is a move that may prove detrimental to the cause of press freedom.

Such news stories are very much in the public interest, and taking action against those who report and publish it is akin to shooting the messenger. Mr Abbasi reported what he had learned and verified the existence of the affidavit.

While the claims of the latter have raised questions about the higher judiciary, the reporter cannot be punished for reporting on it. Indicting him will be viewed as a blow to press freedom, and may be seen as a warning to reporters to self-censor and to think twice before reporting on a matter even if it is true and in the public interest. Against this backdrop, the judiciary's signal that it may indict the media workers will set a questionable precedent.

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## **Report on PTI funds**

THE report compiled by the Election Commission of Pakistan's scrutiny committee on the ruling PTI's funding has once again put the spotlight on the murky fundraising of our political parties. The report says the party received funding from foreign nationals and companies, under-reported funds, concealed numerous bank accounts and refused to divulge details of large transactions.

The fact that the panel struggled to get details of PTI's foreign accounts and its funds abroad is troubling, given that the PTI has campaigned on the pledge of 'clean' and 'transparent' governance. Also, that the party has dragged its feet to such an extent on the scrutiny of its foreign funds, resisted accountability and concealed accounts contradicts its anti-corruption mantra, which has been repeated for its political support base ad nauseam. Though there is no explicit allegation of wrongdoing in the report, the party's resistance during the entire case raises questions.

Transparent disclosures of political finance in our country remain largely uncharted territory. Though funding is key to political campaigns, it can also muddy the landscape if political funds come from entities that aim to influence the governance process. As far as funds go, professionally audited donations and expressions of support from Pakistani nationals may well be legitimate. But secret funds coming from foreign nationals, companies registered abroad or organisations posing as fronts for influential quarters are illegal. They taint the political process and undermine democracy as it is unknown to members of the public how much money is being paid to parties, by whom and in return for what.

If, as the PM and PTI ministers say, the funds are genuine donations and the audit is welcome, then the party should provide details of the foreign accounts and funds in them. This will silence critics and set the record straight once and for all about the PTI's funding sources and donors.

Next, the PTI's demand that the PML-N and PPP's accounts be audited too, should be considered. The opposition parties are right to question the ruling party's resistance in this case, but it would be interesting to see how forthcoming they would be if it came to scrutinising their own campaign accounts.

Across-the-board transparency is a must as illicit finance cannot be allowed to taint governance. Not only does it undermine citizens' trust in political institutions, it encourages parties to compete against each other by overspending to a point where there is no question of a level playing field. Unsavoury practices like this ensure only big players who can tap into powerful, secret donors stay in the political process. This must come to an end. The ECP, which is yet to give its final verdict on the report, should see how lasting lessons from this case can be applied across the political spectrum as the country gears up for a general election.

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## Online 'auction'

FOR scores of Muslim women in India, the new year once again brought home the bone-chilling realisation that they are not safe even within the four walls of their homes. On Jan 1, six months after a similar episode took place in July, more than 100 of them discovered they had been put up for 'sale' at a fake online auction, with their pictures and personal details uploaded on a purpose-built app. As on the previous occasion, the targeted women included rights activists, journalists and other professionals. Among them was prominent actress Shabana Azmi, a sexagenarian mother of a missing Indian student and even Pakistani Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai. The Foreign Office on Tuesday condemned the incident, describing it as "despicable and totally unacceptable harassment and insult of Muslim women" while urging the international community to ensure the safety and security of religious minorities being persecuted by a de facto rule of Hindu extremists. The app has since been taken down by California-based platform GitHub (just as it shut down the app for Muslim women's auction last July) and the Mumbai police have arrested three suspects.

Both incidents are evidence of increasing "communal trolling" of Muslim women by proponents of Hindutva: neither the virtual nor the physical space is safe for minorities in India. Such tactics are part of the Sangh Parivar's broader campaign of demonising Muslims, to which the Modi-led government has given tacit approval by its persistent and perhaps strategic silence. Indeed, the purveyors of hate have become so emboldened by the state's hands-off stance that Hindu extremists a few weeks ago openly called for the genocide of Muslims in India,



invoking the 'Rohingya model' for their followers at the Dharma Sansad held in Haridwar, a town merely 150km away from the capital from where not a single expression of censure was issued. The 'online auction' is even more disturbing in a way because it highlights yet again the toxic confluence of misogyny and Islamophobia that further feeds into the Hindu machismo of today's India. However, this mindset is not only limited to Hindutva trolls but has deep roots in the BJP-led government as well. Consider that after the scrapping of Article 370 that granted special status to India-occupied Kashmir, a BJP legislator remarked that this was an invitation for Hindus to marry "fair" Kashmiri women. The 'auction' is an uglier manifestation of the same triumphalist mentality.

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## **Another leaked audio**

A LEAKED audio of a conversation between Maryam Nawaz and Pervaiz Rashid from 2016 reveals how the PML-N, like other parties, spends much time analysing journalists, countering supposed media biases and mulling ways to get good coverage.

Journalist organisations have rightly criticised the PML-N leaders for their reprehensible harangue against certain TV analysts. However, the leaked clip also confirms how intelligence agencies in Pakistan continue to illegally record telephone calls of politicians and others to damage their public reputation if and when needed.

The act of phone-tapping is illegal to the extent that it infringes upon individuals' rights to privacy, free expression, liberty and life. This is not acceptable in a democracy. In many countries call-tapping is prohibited unless authorised by courts for collecting evidence or detecting criminal and subversive activity.

The purpose of eavesdropping in Pakistan is to control and influence politicians, judges and others, while the agencies having the capability of eavesdropping always operate outside the scope of the law. The alleged tapping of the phones of judges, political leaders, and military and civil officials was one of the reasons the Supreme Court had given in its majority decision upholding the 1997 dismissal of the second Benazir Bhutto government. The court had held that phone-tapping violated the constitutionally protected right to privacy. It also

referred to Article 9 that guarantees the right to life, holding that “life” included the right to be protected from encroachment on privacy.

Thus, the order observed, eavesdropping techniques not only infringed on the right to privacy but also on the right to life and liberty. The order is clear in that the agencies should seek the court’s prior permission for tapping phone calls. However, frequent audio leaks show that this illegal practice of call-tapping carries on despite the court order, and that governments have lost their control over agencies, which continue to surveil even those in power. It is time politicians come together to put their foot down to end unauthorised eavesdropping.

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## **Border with Afghanistan**

THE military spokesman has reiterated that the fencing of the border with Afghanistan will continue despite the recent incidents where the Afghan Taliban disrupted the work being undertaken by Pakistani troops. On Wednesday, Maj-Gen Babar Iftikhar said that the obstructions to the fencing were “localised issues” and had been addressed by the government as it was in touch with the interim Taliban government in Kabul.

Pakistan has nearly completed the fencing of the 2,600-km-long border that is aimed at stopping unchecked cross-border movement which has fanned both terrorism and smuggling. The previous Ashraf Ghani government had also protested against the fencing because it officially did not recognise the international border. This dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan has festered for decades without any resolution in sight.

It is an opportune time therefore for Pakistan to make renewed efforts to settle the matter with the Taliban government — a matter that must be handled by the foreign ministry that is best placed to understand its sensitive diplomatic nuances.

Afghanistan maintains that the Durand Line that forms the border between the two countries is an artificial construct because it divides families, tribes and communities. However, Pakistan does not recognise this as a dispute, and neither does any international body like the UN. By fencing the border, Pakistan

has violated no international laws or treaties and is within its right to do so for its own security reasons.

That said, it is important that border management is done effectively and with mutual understanding of the two countries. With the Taliban now controlling Afghanistan, it is reasonable to expect that they will not actively and deliberately try to undermine Pakistan's interests, and would resolve misunderstandings through reasoned engagement. Hence, it was unfortunate that local Taliban commanders displayed a lapse of judgement by creating unnecessary obstructions in the work being done by Pakistan on the fence. It seems that saner counsel has prevailed and the military spokesman's comments suggest that a mutually acceptable solution will be found.

More needs to be done. This immediate episode may be settled one way or another, and the fence will also be completed shortly, but the unilateral dispute over the status of the border continues to simmer. It would be an encouraging initiative if Pakistan could engage with the Taliban in a bid to settle this issue permanently.

It is clear that any change in the status of the internationally recognised border is unacceptable to Pakistan. However, if some ways and means can be found to address the concerns of Kabul then Pakistan should make that attempt with a positive attitude. Even though Afghanistan's claims do not have any impact per se, Pakistan gains by somehow addressing the matter with the aim of solving it. It may take patience and diplomatic finesse fuelled by political will, but now is as good a time as any to take this initiative.

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## **Importing urea**

THE government's decision to import urea from China should help curb market volatility at a time when wheat farmers are facing shortages and a spike in retail prices despite record urea sales. Producers have sold approximately 6.34m tonnes of fertiliser this year against their three-year average annual sales of around 6m tonnes due to growth in the commodity's demand because of increased farm incomes, expansion in the area under cultivation and adoption of hybrids by growers. The first shipment of the farm chemical of 50,000 tonnes will

arrive next month. After failing to procure the fertiliser from the international market because of global shortages, the authorities have made a deal with Beijing for ensuring quick supplies probably at discounted prices. But why are farmers facing shortages and compelled to pay a hefty premium to buy the fertiliser despite its record sales? The growth in demand and hoarding for profit may be a factor. Yet the main reason for its unavailability is believed to be the smuggling of urea out of the country owing to the enormous price differential in local and international markets.

A report quoting anonymous official sources has suggested that the government was puzzled over at least 343,000 tonnes of 'missing' urea, which is presumed to have been illegally dispatched to Afghanistan. Historically, locally produced urea is sold at substantially discounted prices in comparison to international urea because of the gas subsidy for manufacturers. That difference has now gone up and is an added incentive for urea's illegal trade. The decision to import urea from China will likely help stabilise the market to some extent but that is only a short-term solution to the problem. The long-term solution lies in reforming the urea market. Most important, and, of course, politically the most difficult, part of such reforms will require ending gas subsidies to the urea producers and charging import parity prices from farmers. At the current rate, this would generate additional revenues for gas companies and the government, a portion of which can be used to provide targeted urea subsidies to subsistence, smallholder farmers who constitute 90pc of the landowners and own 48pc of the country's total agriculture land. The industry is ready to pay the weighted average cost of gas supplies if urea prices are deregulated and producers are allowed to export its surplus production after meeting domestic requirements. The government should grab this opportunity to reform the urea sector.

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## **Taxing renewable energy**

THE imposition of 17pc sales tax on solar energy equipment, as proposed in the Finance Supplementary Bill, 2021, runs counter to the prime minister's vision of boosting the share of renewables in the overall energy mix to protect the environment and cut reliance on expensive imported fossil fuels. The increase in the price of solar energy, owing to the withdrawal of the sales tax exemption, will

likely hit the adoption of solar energy in the country, especially by middle-class homeowners, slowing down Pakistan's progress towards clean energy as promised in the National Renewable Energy Policy of 2019. The policy aims to acquire a 30pc share of renewables in the energy mix by 2030. Solar is the largest segment of the renewable energy industry in Pakistan and a significant uptick was seen in its adoption by residential, industrial and other consumers owing to tax incentives in recent years. The bill also proposes to tax wind power which is the other major segment of the renewable energy industry.

The so-called mini budget introduced in parliament for the resumption of the stalled \$6bn IMF funding programme not only taxes solar equipment but also high-efficiency irrigation equipment, effluent treatment plants, and so on. But for what exactly? Just for a few billions in revenue and at the expense of the environment? The new taxation illustrates how the government's tax policies are completely divorced from its environment policy objectives. Many fear — and rightly so — that the increased price of solar energy will encourage illicit trade and/or the import of low-quality cheaper equipment to meet the demand from middle-class consumers. Indeed, the collection in tax revenues is imperative for a sustainable economy and growth. But that need should not blindside our policymakers. There are other avenues, both undertaxed and untaxed, from which the government can generate a lot more than what it seeks to rake in from taxing green equipment. The finance ministry should review its tax proposal and take out such regressive taxation from the bill.

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## Unvaccinated Djokovic

A COURT hearing against the Australian government on Monday is likely to decide Novak Djokovic's Australian Open fate. The situation the Serbian tennis star finds himself in — isolated in a hotel working on his challenge against deportation — is largely of his own doing. Defending champion Djokovic — chasing a record-breaking 21st Grand Slam title at the Australian Open — has refused to disclose his Covid-19 vaccination status. He's been a vaccine sceptic, emerging as a hero for anti-vaxxers, and arrived for the first Grand Slam of the year on a medical exemption from Australia's strict vaccination requirements. However, Djokovic was detained by the Australian Border Force and his visa was

subsequently revoked when he arrived in Melbourne on Wednesday. Outrage had already begun when it first emerged Djokovic had received the exemption as he had contracted Covid-19 in the past six months and was on the way to Australia. That ended months of speculation about whether the 34-year-old, tied with Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer on 20 Grand Slam titles, would defend his title at the Australian Open which begins on Jan 17. But now his plans have hit a snag.

There has been criticism, and rightly so, that his anti-vaccination stance contradicts his position as a global sports icon especially when the pandemic has caused so much devastation worldwide. Djokovic should set an example for others to follow but his views on vaccination are providing anti-vaxxers with the ammunition they need. Even with the pandemic raging, Djokovic held an exhibition tennis tournament in the Balkans where no one wore masks and there was no social distancing. After players — including himself — tested positive, he apologised and admitted he was wrong. But he still refuses to get inoculated. Other prominent players, including German football star Joshua Kimmich, held similar views until they eventually opted for vaccination. With the Omicron variant wreaking havoc, Djokovic too will have to fall in line. Otherwise, his vaccination status would likely be a hurdle in the future as he chases tennis history.

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## **Debating seniority**

IT is a moment to celebrate. Justice Ayesha A. Malik's nomination to the Supreme Court marks the first time in our history that a woman judge has been approved for elevation to the highest court in the land.

Among the judgements she has authored as a judge of the Lahore High Court is the landmark verdict that declared the two-finger 'virginity' test as "illegal and against the Constitution" — an indictment of a system that subjected rape victims to additional distress and humiliation. Justice Malik's competence in other areas of the law has also been hailed. But for many activists, what counts most is the hope she personifies as a woman judge who would be able to empathise more deeply than her male colleagues with the hardships and trauma faced by women seeking justice.



Secondly, in a country which last year ranked third from the bottom in terms of male-female parity, the Judicial Commission of Pakistan's vote in her favour can also be seen as a step towards gender equality in the highest echelons of the judiciary itself. With Pakistan approaching the 75th anniversary of its birth, this fundamental right has been long overdue.

But it has not been smooth sailing. And the 'impediment' — the principle of seniority — merits a serious discussion by all stakeholders. Justice Malik's nomination was rejected last September due to a lack of consensus in the JCP. This year too the vote in her favour was razor-thin: 5-4. The opposition to her proposed appointment has not been without reason and has led to calls for protests and boycotts by several lawyers including bar councils.

Justice Malik is the fourth most senior judge at the Lahore High Court, and her nomination is being seen as an out-of-turn promotion. Similar controversy had been stirred when Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar, a relatively junior judge at the Sindh High Court, was appointed to the Supreme Court last year after the JCP voted 5-4 in his favour too. There have been several other cases where the seniority standard has been bypassed.

One of the judges that opposed the nominations of both Justice Malik and Justice Mazhar was Justice Faez Isa. In a recent letter to the chief justice of Pakistan, Justice Isa stated: "Once the nomination and selection criteria are determined, it will help dispel misgivings that arbitrariness in the selection process holds sway." There is much logic to what is essentially Justice Isa's call for transparency in judicial appointments.

But that task, as previously suggested by senior lawyers, cannot be achieved without the input of those representing the legal system, parliament and civil society as well as others. It is only by establishing in clear terms what qualifies a judge for a higher position, and how one judge is more qualified than the other, that controversies will disappear and nominations such as Justice Malik's can be celebrated without reservations.

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## Aviation relief

THAT the global aviation watchdog ICAO has cleared the Civil Aviation Authority of significant safety concerns after a year of thorough review and audit is good news for the country's struggling aviation industry. Hopefully, it will also lead to an early removal of the 2019 restrictions imposed on the national carrier by the EU, Britain and the US, as well as pave the way for private airlines to start their operations to these destinations. Pakistani aircraft were barred from flying to and from these places because of safety concerns in the wake of the tragic Karachi plane crash in May 2020 and subsequent statements from the aviation minister that over 30pc of Pakistani pilots had dubious flying licences. Indeed, his damning remarks about the licences on the floor of the National Assembly, and that too without any serious prior inquiry, were irresponsible to say the least. But though his words caused significant long-term financial and reputational damage to the country's aviation industry, the worst seems to be over now after the ICAO report.

The suspension of the 'third-country operator authorisation' of PIA to operate flights to and from Europe and the US by their respective aviation authorities until the completion of an ICAO safety audit was seen by many here as an impulsive move at the time. But that is how governments that care for human lives act. The restrictions have proved to be a blessing in disguise for Pakistan as they have compelled the CAA to take action to resolve passenger safety concerns. Yet, it is pertinent to add here that ICAO validation isn't going to automatically restore public trust in either the CAA or PIA and the private local airlines. The aviation authorities should share with the public the measures they have taken since the Karachi crash to make planes safe for travel. Last month's incident in which a PIA flight from Islamabad to Karachi had to twice return minutes after taking off owing to technical fault does not inspire much confidence in the airworthiness of the national carrier or the aviation authorities. The incident underscores the need for the aviation authorities to continuously keep a check on their planes, whether they are operating on the domestic circuit or international routes, in order to ensure that they are implementing international passenger safety standards. Complacency is not an option when human lives are involved.

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## Omicron on the rise

THE surge in Covid-19 cases, especially in Karachi, points to a worrying trend that, if not taken seriously by both the authorities and members of the public, can end in disaster. The Omicron variant is spreading like wildfire in the metropolis, with the positivity ratio increasing to 10pc and infection rate rising steeply from 50pc to 81pc within a week. Daily total tests across the country remain below 50,000, which means the number of actual Covid-19 positive patients could be much higher.

Though studies from South Africa and the UK suggest Omicron causes less severe symptoms and fewer hospitalisations, the WHO has warned against describing it as mild given it is leading to deaths all over the world. While studies may show that fewer people are falling very sick, hospitals in several countries are coming under immense pressure. Pakistan is no exception, with health experts in Karachi already noting increased hospital admissions. Meanwhile, asymptomatic Omicron positive patients are amplifying community spread as they continue to mix with members of the public. This is deeply worrying in a population where, although over 73 million people have received two doses, the rest are either partially vaccinated or unvaccinated. It is said that Omicron is infecting even vaccinated citizens, but the severity of the illness is largely curtailed in those who are fully protected.

As Pakistan enters its fifth wave, it is imperative for the government to take swift action to protect the public and the healthcare systems. A mass campaign about Covid-19 SOPs and preventions must be restarted, which engages both traditional and non-traditional media to urge people to wear masks, maintain social distancing and get vaccinated. In many countries where Omicron appears to be wreaking less havoc, swathes of the population have had their third booster dose — which means citizens' levels of immunity against critical illness in those places are higher than where individuals have had just two doses. Authorities simply cannot afford to take this wave lightly, especially given how rapidly the new variant is spreading and how casually the public is taking it. The response of citizens is reflective of the lack of public awareness, a key responsibility of the state when it comes to protecting citizens from Covid-19. The federal and provincial governments must also do more to ramp up testing and find out the Covid-19 hotspots. Mini or 'smart-lockdowns' which proved beneficial in past

waves, too, can be considered to contain the virus and also allow the rest of the economy to function. Our healthcare infrastructure compared to countries where Omicron is rampant is far weaker, so its spread poses a very real threat of overwhelming hospitals. Authorities must improve messaging, ramp up daily testing and vaccinations, and act fast in areas where cases are rapidly rising if they want to avoid an all-out disaster.

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## **Murree tragedy**

WHAT was intended to be a weekend getaway turned into an icy deathtrap for thousands of families who ended up stranded in their cars on the snow-covered roads leading into Murree. At the time of writing, at least 22 people, including 10 children, had frozen to death inside the vehicles and rescue efforts by armed forces and paramilitary agencies were underway.

The tragedy could have easily been avoided if the authorities had taken a less cavalier approach towards the bad weather conditions and issued timely warnings to tourists. For almost all of the past week, heavy rains have lashed Islamabad and Rawalpindi while Murree and nearby hill stations in the Galiyat area have received intermittent but heavy snowfall.

Notwithstanding this, a record number of people travelled northbound to experience the snowfall. News reports quoting traffic authorities revealed that more than 155,000 vehicles entered Murree in the past week, out of which 135,000 returned safely but the rest became stranded.

The large inflow of tourists notwithstanding, which is mainly because the government makes no attempt at regulating the numbers, why did the authorities wait a whole week for the situation to get out of control? Hill stations have limited capacity, with Murree only being able to accommodate 4,000 cars at a given time, so why was such a huge number of vehicles allowed to continue onward? Moreover, in light of the dire weather forecast, the authorities should have issued travel alerts to the public, warning families to desist from making weekend travel plans to the hill station.

To suggest that this tragedy occurred merely due to the unprecedented tourist rush is an attempt by authorities at shrugging off responsibility — not to mention

tantamount to rubbing salt in the wounds of those mourning the sudden and heart-rending loss of their loved ones. Further entry of vehicles in Murree was banned only on Friday, at least five days after the snowfall began. It remains to be seen whether the enquiry announced by the PM will issue a finding of blatant negligence on the part of any official or government department. It is deeply unfortunate that it takes such a massive loss of life for the authorities to realise the significance of vigilance and timely action, the bare minimum to be expected from the government. Regulating the inflow of tourists to hill stations in light of existing infrastructure is imperative to avoid further tragedies like this.

Published in Dawn, January 9th, 2022

## **Taliban misogyny**

WHAT many Afghan women had feared would happen to them under the ultraconservative Taliban rule in their country is coming to pass. Every few days there is a new restriction, each one going a step further in erasing women from public life, robbing them of their agency and reducing them to a collective category of nameless, voiceless beings. In the latest move, the religious police have put up posters — carrying images of the all-enveloping burqa — across Kabul ordering women to cover up. A ministry spokesman claimed that non-compliance with the directive would not result in punishment, but it is clear that an environment of fear and oppression is being created to force women to conform. Since the Taliban stormed back into power in August 2021, they have imposed a ban of sorts on girls' secondary education (though some schools in a few provinces have reportedly reopened following negotiations with local authorities) until, they say, "a new education policy" is unveiled. Most working women, in a war-ravaged country of widows, have been told to stay home. In late December, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice announced that women would not be allowed to travel long distances by road unless accompanied by a close male relative.

Two decades separate the first Taliban regime, ousted in December 2001 by US-led forces, and its second iteration. While the intervening years may have seen them hone their skills at diplomacy — including doublespeak about women — the Taliban's misogyny and their fanatical zeal to excise women from everyday life remain intact. At times, this urge can assume macabre forms. A few days ago, a

video clip that went viral on social media showed men sawing off the heads of plastic mannequins, reportedly in response to orders issued to shopkeepers by Taliban authorities in western Afghanistan. One can scarcely imagine the despair of millions of women in Afghanistan who are being pushed back into a nightmare that they perhaps never thought would revisit them.

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## **Cryptocurrency scam**

THE investigation launched by the cyber crime wing of the Sindh FIA against multiple mobile apps linked to the largest global crypto exchange, Binance, for scamming Pakistani investors out of their investments of nearly \$100m in digital currencies points to the absence of a regulatory regime to make the crypto market a safer environment.

The SBP and SECP, the two regulators of the financial and corporate sectors, have practically done nothing so far to develop regulations despite Pakistanis' increasing interest in the crypto business owing to unbelievable returns, and a rapid growth of online sites facilitating trading in virtual currencies from the country. Nor has the PTA, the regulator of the digital space, moved an inch to regulate the online sites to prevent potential frauds.

Each regulator points to the absence of an umbrella federal legal framework under which they can develop crypto regulations.

Although the federal government has constituted a committee to suggest regulations, it has made no progress in months since most of its members have no clue about cryptocurrency or what this business is about.

The fact there is also no clarity on the mode of crypto transactions in spite of bank accounts being maintained by the crypto mobile apps and the claim of the US-based data and software provider, Chainalysis, that Pakistan had received nearly \$1.5bn in cryptocurrency in FY20 shows these transactions are happening off the books. That demands seriousness on the part of the regulators and federal authorities on the matter.



Given the FATF noose hanging around our neck, the absence of a crypto regulatory framework is even more worrisome if the money is moving out or into the country through illegal channels.

Regulating crypto business is not easy. But many countries have developed effective legal frameworks to stop crypto exchanges and mobile apps from operating in their territories unless they agree to register their businesses in the host jurisdictions.

No government can stop crypto. But the sooner this business is regulated, the better for the country and investors.

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## **IHC verdict**

THE Islamabad High Court has in a landmark judgement declared a navy club built on public land in the federal capital as illegal and ordered its demolition. The court has also ordered criminal proceedings against a former naval chief for authorising the project.

This judgement has set an important precedent in a country that continues to endure the menace of land-grabbing both by powerful mafias as well government organisations. The construction of the club by the navy near Rawal Lake is an instance of brazen misuse of authority validated dubiously by relevant civic agencies despite the fact that it is located in a protected national park area. The Islamabad High Court has done well to apply the force of law on those who have often considered themselves above it.

The problem is unfortunately widespread and involves the highest and mightiest in the land. The regularisation of illegal constructions in Banigala and the Grand Hyatt, both in Islamabad, are well-known examples of this phenomenon. In Lahore, the Railways Golf Club case gained prominence because of the involvement of senior military officers. In Karachi too, there are various instances of unauthorised conversion of land meant for defence purposes into shopping malls and other commercial enterprises.

Such violations of the law are often validated by relevant organisations either due to corrupt practices or pressure. In many cases, the result is that citizens are

deprived of access to facilities that are theirs by right. These illegal practices are so deeply entrenched within our system and are so well protected by powerful elements within the state that very few have dared challenge them. It is therefore heartening to see the courts upholding the majesty of the law over those who need to respect it the most.

The chief justice of Pakistan has been taking notice of such issues in his tenure but sadly most of the action seems to have been ordered against 'ordinary' people and not against those that occupy the citadels of power.

Unless the mighty are held to account — as is the case in the IHC judgement — they will continue to flout the law of the land for their vested interests. It is therefore important that the navy club issue is taken to its logical conclusion in light of the court order. The illegal premises should be demolished, all those responsible for facilitating this enterprise should be identified and punished and a clear precedent set for adventurism of this kind in the future. The judiciary should also take cognizance of blatant land grabs by official organisations and ensure that they vacate the area they have illegally occupied so the public land can revert to its rightful usage. This would ensure that civic agencies that usually become conduits for such illegal actions also stand warned not to buckle under official pressure and uphold the law without compromise.

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## Taliban's choices

AS the Afghan Taliban regime tries to win international recognition, it must confront one plain truth: is it willing to take firm action against foreign terrorist groups based in Afghanistan working actively against neighbouring states? While the present rulers of Kabul have said they will not allow their soil to be used against others, there needs to be a firmer resolve to neutralise terrorist elements. Of course for the Afghan Taliban this is easier said than done as many of the groups, including the proscribed TTP, have in the past fought alongside the new rulers of Kabul. This history of cooperation with violent extremist outfits, and their role in providing safe haven to foreign terror groups, is the reason for the international community's justifiable reluctance to recognise the Taliban.

Due to decades of chaos, foreign meddling and internal strife, Afghanistan has become an ideal base for religious extremist outfits of various origins. This includes Central Asian as well as Uighur militants, along with the TTP, while the feared Khorasan branch of the militant Islamic State group is quite active in Afghanistan. Apart from IS, the Afghan Taliban don't appear to have adversarial relations with any of these militant actors. Where anti-Pakistan terrorists go, there is significant reason for concern, as the TTP is apparently regrouping in Afghanistan and there have been a number of terrorist attacks linked to the group inside this country. Moreover, efforts by the government to 'negotiate' with the TTP have crashed, indicating that the militants are in no mood for peace.

It should be remembered that when the Taliban were in power the first time around, sectarian militants responsible for major bloodbaths in Pakistan had found refuge in Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban need to be pragmatic if they are serious about joining the global mainstream. No regional country, nor the international community, will be comfortable with dangerous terrorist outfits operating freely within Afghanistan, especially when these elements show no sign of giving up the way of the gun. Moreover, there will be few takers for the Afghan Taliban's claim that they are protecting 'guests' in accordance with tribal codes. The message from the international community to Kabul is clear: get rid of the militants on your soil. Should the Afghan Taliban dilly-dally, more chaos will be likely and the instability Afghanistan has been seeing for the past several decades will only be perpetuated, while dangerous, violent actors seek to take advantage of the situation.

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## **New LNG terminal**

THE ministry of energy's abrupt decision to set up before next winter a new LNG terminal — the third in the country — in the public sector is an admission of glaring failure by the PTI government to sway the two private investors to move forward with their terminal projects.

The rationale given by the petroleum division blames the slow progress by the two companies on their projects. This is rather surprising and a manifestation of deep policy confusion. Only a few days back, the government had, by implication, conceded that the development of the private terminals was being

delayed due to bureaucratic red tape. What made the government change its mind remains obscure save the fact that the PTI government is getting desperate to fill the energy shortages because another gas crisis next year will erode public goodwill before the 2023 election — and massively.

The private investors, on the other hand, are reluctant to make capital investments without a gas transport agreement, pipeline capacity allocation, land for tie-in facilities and several other regulatory approvals from the Sui gas companies that aren't coming in spite of cabinet decisions and directives. It appears the gas firms are loath to allow intrusion into their monopolies in the gas market besides being fearful of the notorious anti-corruption watchdog, NAB, whose actions have paralysed decision-making in the corridors of power.

The fear of NAB has also kept the gas utilities from allowing the existing two terminals to increase their LNG import capacity by 600mmfcd — or equal to the total capacity of a new terminal — in a matter of weeks. That could substantially ease the winter gas supply gap with zero cost to the exchequer. Likewise, the renewal of supplies to a private LPG plant could help reduce gas shortages for residential consumers.

It is not wrong to blame the energy ministry for the domestic gas supply shortages. That it wasn't able to bring in enough LNG to fully utilise the capacity of the existing two terminals speaks volumes about lack of planning. Last week, the energy minister had tweeted that the gas transportation agreement with the sponsors of one of the two proposed private terminals is near conclusion and that three other groups have applied for importing LNG through virtual pipelines.

If that is correct, what is the justification for a public sector RLNG facility since we will not have the capacity to evacuate the imported gas from the new terminals? If the government thinks it can construct the new terminal in the next 10 months to draw political mileage ahead of the next election, it is grossly mistaken. A better option would be to allow the existing terminals to enhance their import capacity and help clear the way for new private LNG infrastructure projects. Bringing additional supplies without enhancing pipeline capacity will be as big a folly as the IPPs.

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## Trust deficit

WHEN the citizens' trust in the state and its workings begins to decrease, even routine incidents are eyed with mistrust and suspicion. Something similar happened when the Rangers in Karachi raided the home of a lawyer and arrested his son on charges of possessing drugs. The incident became a flashpoint between the state agency, judiciary and the lawyers' community. What complicated the situation — and possibly injected a dubious motive into it — was the fact that the lawyer whose son was arrested also represents PTM MNA Ali Wazir who himself remains under detention. As a reaction to the raid, lawyers did what lawyers now do as a standard operating procedure: they boycotted the courts and refused to appear before the judges. When the lawyer's son was brought before a magistrate, the lawyers vociferously demanded that he be given bail. Consequently, the magistrate turned down the request of the police for his remand and allowed bail.

The matter however appears to be graver than the case of one lawyer's son being picked up from his home. It may well be that it was sheer coincidence that this happened to the son of the lawyer who represents Mr Wazir, but such is the level of mistrust in state agencies and the legal process as it pertains to the case of the South Waziristan MNA that motives start to be questioned. The Supreme Court has granted bail to Mr Wazir in one case; but he remains behind bars because he has not been given bail in the other cases against him. Although an elected representative, he has not been allowed to attend the proceedings of the National Assembly which is possible if the speaker issues his production orders. The charges against him are considered flimsy and it is widely perceived that he is being kept in detention because of his criticism of the security establishment. The authorities need to review his case. They should realise that the treatment being meted out to Mr Wazir reinforces many stereotypes at a time when these need to be done away with. His treatment also alienates a large number of citizens from the state. A more nuanced approach that is aimed at addressing grievances not fanning them would serve the interests of everyone. For this to happen however, those at the helm of state affairs will need to step back and view the situation dispassionately and without preconceived notions.

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# **Textbooks embezzlement**

CORRUPTION appears to be the common thread in the systemic issues that plague the country's education sector. Be it the existence of ghost schools, hiring of teachers, utilisation of funds and resources, plagiarism in PhD papers or cheating in exams — all these problems point towards administrative, financial and ethical malfeasance by education officials.

One recent incident highlighting how deeply entrenched corruption is, emerged from South Punjab where an official of the Basic Education Community Schools — a federal project until recently — was caught selling this academic year's course books of grades one till three at a scrap shop. The said official was reportedly caught selling, not a few dozen but, around 3,500 textbooks. News reports also quoted teachers saying that the official also blackmailed hapless teachers in Pakpattan and Okara into paying him between Rs1,000-Rs1,500 for the 'delivery' of books to the education warehouse. The teachers also stated that they complained several times to the relevant education authorities but received no response. One teacher, quoted in the story, stated that textbooks meant for BECS schools were being sold in Pakpattan markets for years.

Deplorable as it is, the situation is neither new nor surprising. Tales of all kinds of corruption in the education sector keep surfacing, even as the standard of education in the country keeps deteriorating. However, what is most shocking in this scenario is that federal education authorities took no action over a number of years against the crooked official even when reportedly intimidated by the teachers. Corruption does not always involve the exchange of undue favours or funds: negligence and apathy by the authorities is also one of its manifestations. Although the said official has been arrested, it remains to be seen if he receives due punishment. If the authorities are truly serious about reforming the education sector, then they must begin by taking dishonest officials to task and improving service delivery. Effective governance and utilisation of resources are key to a robust education system in any country.

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## **Shameful blame game**

WATCHING a human tragedy become subsumed in a political blame game is always painful. This is exactly what happened in the National Assembly on Monday when the lawmakers decided to debate the causes and lapses that led to the preventable loss of at least 23 lives, including women and children, after thousands in their vehicles were stranded in a massive snowstorm in and around Murree.

The opposition was within its rights when PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif expressed his lack of trust in a committee formed by the Punjab government to hold a probe into the tragic events of the last weekend. He wanted the government to set up a judicial commission to fix responsibility.

What is wrong with that demand? If the government can constitute judicial commissions on other matters, why could it not agree to the opposition's demand? Sadly, the treasury benches saw this as an opportunity for point-scoring and assailed the leader of the opposition, accusing the previous PML-N governments of not doing anything for tourism in the country instead of explaining their reasons, if they had any valid justification, for opposing the suggestion. The government did not even consider another proposal from the ANP to create a bipartisan parliamentary body for investigating the tragedy.

The opposition parties are not the only ones blaming the Punjab government — and by extension the Imran Khan administration — for not taking prior measures to prevent the disaster despite the forecast of heavy snowfall by the Met Office and its warning to the authorities to be alert as bad weather could force closure of the roads in an area where vehicular mobility is problematic even in normal conditions. Rather than mobilising machinery to clear the snow-covered roads for smooth traffic movement and issuing alerts to warn incoming tourists or turn them back, the administration let them in. Meanwhile, as pointed by PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, ministers were flaunting the arrival of tens of thousands of cars in Murree as a sign of the increasing domestic tourism and economic upturn achieved under the PTI rule.

That is not all. When the tragedy began to unfold, there was no one around to respond to the SOS calls from those trapped in the snow or their frantic families and friends. Relief came too late and too slow, with a lag of at least 20 hours.

And when the news of multiple deaths broke, the government went on to first blame the victims for not heeding the weather forecast and then the disaster management authority and local administration for inaction. The prime minister tweeted that he was shocked and upset at the tragedy. If everyone from the country's chief executive to the opposition leader agree that the tragedy was avoidable but for the lack of preparedness of the authorities concerned, it is hard to grasp the logic behind the rejection of the demand for a judicial inquiry.

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## **Russia-West talks**

WHILE for the most part the parleys between Russia and the Western alliance this week may simply be talks about talks, considering the fragility of the situation in Ukraine the engagement is a far better alternative than the exchange of bellicosity. On Monday senior diplomats from Russia and the US met in Geneva, while engagements between Moscow and Nato, as well as Russia and the OSCE are also on the cards. The Western bloc fears Russia is planning to invade Ukraine — something Moscow denies — while Russia is wary that Nato is now sitting on its doorstep. Therefore, the level of mistrust on both sides is immense, while the exchange of mutually hostile rhetoric has been considerable. In such a scenario, talks on multiple levels are the best option for de-escalation.

It can be argued that the current standoff between Russia and the West over Ukraine is a continuation of Cold War rivalries, when both camps competed for spheres of influence across the globe. It is a fact that Nato has now absorbed once staunch pillars of the Warsaw Pact, something that does not sit too well with Moscow. Furthermore, Russia has often reacted militarily to real and perceived threats, such as annexing Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. Plainly put, the West wants to expand further into what were once Soviet states and satellites, while Russia, which is the successor state of the USSR, wants the US and Western Europe to stay out of its 'near abroad'. Unless cooler heads prevail, this conflict can spiral into something bigger, which is why the engagement between the two sides this week is a positive sign. However, there should be no illusions as a wide gulf of mistrust still separates both sides. For example, while the Nato chief said it was "possible to make deals with Russia", he added that an invasion of Ukraine would entail "severe costs". To prevent a larger conflict, the

Western bloc must assure Russia that Nato's expansion is not aimed at containing it, while Moscow also needs to respect Ukraine's sovereignty. Should neither side back down, the conflict has within it the seeds of a much more destructive conflagration. Moreover, all sides need to shed the Cold War mentality and work for a more peaceful international order. Already the globe is beset by numerous crises and conflicts. A new flare-up in Europe is definitely not needed.

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## When in jail ...

IT says much about the state of justice in a society where convicted felons, guilty of crimes as grave as murder, live in the lap of luxury while the poor run from pillar to post to get the courts to hear their cases. For those with power and pelf, being in jail does not appear to be a punishment. It brings no restrictions to their lifestyle, habits or connections with the outside world. On the contrary, the status of 'VIP prisoner' enables them to reside comfortably in their own homes or in separate 'enclaves' within prisons, take over entire floors of hospitals, or even treat the jail superintendents' offices as their personal domain.

The case of Shahrukh Jatoi exemplifies this dichotomy in the criminal justice system whose officials appear ever-ready to bend the rules for the political elite. Shahrukh's eight-month stay at a private hospital in Karachi ended on Monday when he was moved back to prison. Convicted of the murder in December 2012 of university student Shahzeb Khan, he was awarded a death sentence in 2013, which was later commuted to life imprisonment. Even in prison, however, Shahrukh seemed to have enjoyed extra perks including access to a mobile phone, refrigerator, television, etc. Interestingly, Shahrukh's transfer back to prison, along with 20 other 'high-profile' prisoners, also appears to have been prompted by a public outcry after their plush living conditions in various hospitals of the city were revealed by the media. Some senior PPP leaders have recently been known to spend almost their entire detention periods in the locations of their choice (Agha Siraj Durrani's house was declared a sub-jail while Khursheed Shah was ensconced in a top Sukkur hospital). One wonders why the higher authorities hesitate to take action against officials responsible for this travesty — do they fear reprisal or are they hand-in-glove with them? The law should apply

equally to all, irrespective of their political status or influence and corrupt jail officials should be strictly proceeded against.

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## **No solution**

IN an attempt to address what is a perennial problem, the government has introduced a bill to regulate the system of moon-sighting. Unfortunately, instead of tackling the root of the problem — which lies in relying on an outdated and unnecessarily complicated method for moon-sighting — the bill appears to only give more powers to the moon-spotting committees in an attempt to please the religious lobby with little mention of a scientific or technologically-led way forward. If the bill becomes law, ‘false evidence’ of moon sighting will result in a jail term and a fine. The proposed 16-member committee will include clerics, as well as a science and technology expert, but thus far it is not clear what method will be followed. At present, there is no structured law that regulates the Ruet-i-Hilal Committee and the current set-up has been functioning under the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

The moon-sighting controversy has been ongoing since the Ayub era and is cause of much frustration and panic due to last-minute announcements of the sighting of the crescent that marks the beginning and end of Ramazan. In the late ‘60s, clerics refused to follow a scientifically determined formula when the former dictator decided that military commanders would determine moon-sighting. Today, the system still relies heavily on the Ruet-e-Hilal committee to collect witness accounts of moon sightings in a manner that is both unscientific and archaic. Fawad Chaudhry was right to try to do away with this system when he was minister for science and technology, and his introduction of a website and an android application for the sighting of the moon made perfect sense. Instead of creating more committees to further complicate an already controversial system, the government should focus on making the moon-sighting process a seamless one that considers scientific evidence. For far too long different parts of the country have ended up celebrating Eidul Fitr on different days due to the absence of a streamlined system. This is an opportunity to end the confusion.

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## **Debt crisis risk**

A NEW World Economic Forum report has termed Pakistan's debt crisis as the top risk facing the country. The profligacy of the country's ruling elite — politicians, civil and military bureaucracy and the business community — has brought the country to a stage where we have to borrow more money to not only run the state but also to pay back the past debt.

The country's debt comprises two parts — domestic loans and foreign borrowings. In simple words, domestic loans signify accumulation of fiscal or budget deficit, or the gap between what we collect in taxes and what we must spend to keep the state afloat and the economy running. Foreign debt is accumulation of current account deficit, or the shortfall in the amount of dollars we earn through exports, remittances, FDI, etc and spend on imports, essential and luxury both.

Over time, the growing deficits accrued in the fiscal and external accounts have become unsustainable, undermining the nation's sovereignty. The government conceding to IMF demands to grant absolute autonomy to the SBP and impose new taxes that will hurt the low-middle-income households the most is the latest example of the gradual loss of sovereignty to lenders. The rising debt levels have also constricted Pakistan's ability to grow the economy at a pace needed to create new jobs for 3m people entering the job market each year and cut abject poverty.

A recent World Bank forecast says the country's economy is likely to expand by 3.4pc this fiscal, much slower than the government's target of 4-5pc and at half the rate required to absorb new labour market entrants. No sooner the government tries to push growth, the economy hits external imbalances, compelling it to return to the IMF for help.

Successive governments have tried to control accumulation of debt stock by cutting public spending on social and economic infrastructure at the cost of health, education and growth and/or taxing the already taxed segments of the economy. Obviously, such schemes don't work as is reflected by consistent breach of the Fiscal Responsibility and Debt Limitation Act 2005 that sought to cap total public (domestic and foreign) debt at 60pc of GDP. Currently, the ratio stands at around 80pc of GDP.

The SBP governor told Reuters the other day that the “country has the capacity and financial cushion to ride out rising external account pressures being driven by a surge in global commodity prices”. We will do so indeed with the IMF and other multilaterals backing us with their dollars. But is this a sustainable solution? The only way forward for the country is to broaden its tax net and control non-productive civil and military government expenditure.

Simultaneously, we must increase productivity to boost exports and curtail non-essential imports. In other words, we will have to change our lifestyle and learn to live within our means if the ballooning debt crisis is to be tackled.

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## **Auto-disable syringes**

THE government’s decision to completely ban the use of disposable syringes in favour of auto-disable ones is as welcome as it is desperately needed. The lack of vigilant monitoring of the health sector has led to a situation where harmful medical practices have become commonplace in a society where at least half the population remains uneducated and without access to adequate healthcare.

For example, there is a widely held belief among a cross section of the population that injections are more effective in treating all sorts of significant and even minor ailments. This misconception has been propagated by a large number of quacks operating in the country who prefer to ‘cure’ their patients with the needle. As a result, an average Pakistani is administered eight to 10 injections a year — the highest rate in the world, according to the WHO — and a whopping 94pc of these are not even medically required. This phenomenon, combined with the prevalence of quacks and under-qualified doctors who either unknowingly or knowingly reuse medical equipment — especially disposable syringes meant for single use — creates conditions ripe for the transmission of serious blood-borne diseases. These factors have largely contributed to the high prevalence of hepatitis C and rising incidence of HIV/AIDS in the country. According to UNAIDS, Pakistan has the fastest-growing number of AIDS cases among all Asian countries. In fact, the large outbreak of HIV/AIDS in Ratodero in 2019, when more than 1,440 people were infected with HIV, owed to the reuse of disposable syringes by a local doctor. Among those who became infected, more than 1,000 were children. Meanwhile, the country also has one of the highest



prevalence rates of hepatitis C at 9pc. Between 12m and 15m people in Pakistan are reportedly infected with hepatitis B or C, both blood-borne, while around 150,000 new cases are reported every day in hospitals across the country. Against this background, the introduction of the auto-disable syringe — which has a plunger that gets irreversibly locked when pushed to the bottom — will prevent quacks, health workers, drug users, etc from reusing syringes, thus reducing the transmission of a plethora of blood-borne infections. The Sindh government had attempted to implement similar measures a decade ago but failed. However, now that a policy decision has been taken at the federal level, one hopes that auto-disable syringes will considerably reduce the disease burden and the heavy load of patients at government hospitals and national disease control programmes.

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## Travesty of Gitmo

TWENTY years after the opening of one of the most controversial prisons in the world, Guantanamo Bay remains an affront to American ideals of democracy and human rights. This week, five more detainees were approved for release. The three men from Yemen, one from Somalia and the fifth from Kenya have collectively spent 85 years in the prison without so much as being charged. After all this time, following a review, US authorities deem these men no longer pose a threat to their country. It is a sorry reflection of the justice system that of the 39 detainees at Gitmo, only 10 are ready to stand trial, and even their cases are still at the preliminary proceedings stage. Nine detainees are in limbo, as they have neither been charged nor ordered to be released. Some of them have serious mental health problems, which further complicates their cases as it makes it hard to prepare a case for release or arrange a post-prison life for them.

Though other prisoners' release orders have been issued, including that of Pakistani inmate Saifullah Paracha, the release itself is often delayed as the US administration engages with countries to determine whether they will accept them. In some cases, such as that of the inmates from Yemen and Somalia, their homelands are so torn by war that repatriating them is not possible. As a result, there are fears they will continue to linger in this prison, notorious as a black hole where rights, dignity and justice cease to exist. The prison should have shut

down years ago, when president Obama pledged it would, with the cases transferred to civil courts. Instead it has outlasted the war in Afghanistan, and remains a dark reminder of the US' excesses, a 'justification' for torture and a prolonged misery for inmates who have the right to fair trial. The US has a lot to answer for, especially why, despite two presidents committing to shutting down the prison, it still exists.

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## **PDM's new tack**

THE PDM leadership has stated that in its next meeting slated for later in the month, it intends to deliberate on bringing a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan. Speaking to the media, JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman and Leader of the Opposition Shehbaz Sharif said they had agreed to seriously consider this move and make a decision soon.

This is a departure from PDM's earlier position which was wedded to resigning from the assemblies in a bid to bring the PTI government down. However, it appears the PDM has also now come around to the PPP's view that an in-house change is the best option against the government. This option is premised on various factors, one of which is the opposition's assessment that the establishment has adopted a more hands-off approach towards the government.

Maulana Fazl has already said this when he told journalists recently that the results of the KP local bodies elections — in which JUI-F did surprisingly well — were evidence that when the establishment becomes neutral, the PTI suffers a setback at the polls. The latest PDM statement is also based on the government's weakening position and growing unease within its ranks and also among the allies about the economic and governance ailments that seem to be intensifying with each passing day. The opposition leaders have been heard claiming that many treasury members are in secret contact with them.

It is still premature to say whether such a move will indeed materialise, and whether it would succeed. It is fairly obvious that the opposition is galvanising its efforts against the government both within parliament and on the streets. The PPP has announced a long march on Islamabad at the end of February while the PDM has scheduled its event on March 23. There is increasing collaboration

between Mr Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto and efforts may be underway to coordinate the announced marches as one event.

All these activities point towards a well-thought-out campaign against the government at a time when it is seen as weakening progressively due to multiple political and legal blows. The government is reacting to these developments by cranking up the pressure on the opposition.

The latest move by the government to initiate legal action against Mr Sharif for not fulfilling his commitment to the court of ensuring Nawaz Sharif's return may not lead to any immediate action but it signifies that the government wants to take the battle to the opposition to divert pressure on it from other sources. This could be a risky strategy because it does not address the root cause of the problems afflicting the government. With the next few weeks crucial in determining how the government will fare, it might be useful for the prime minister to seek advice from experienced politicians in his party instead of resorting to knee-jerk reactions.

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## **Ongoing urea crisis**

OFFICIAL claims notwithstanding, growers in many parts of the country continue to face problems in procuring urea or pay a premium on their purchase as conceded by the Fertiliser Review Committee. That the crisis continues to linger despite a significant increase in daily supplies from 342,000 bags to 440,000 bags confirms that the real causes — smuggling and hoarding — responsible for the shortage are yet to be tackled effectively. The prime minister's orders for stern action against hoarders and profiteers as well as smugglers indicate that the crisis is far from over. The committee has expressed confidence that the enhanced supplies will boost the fertiliser's retail availability, stabilising its market in the coming days, but the growers remain sceptical as is reflected by their panic purchases at a higher price to meet their needs over the next several weeks. Despite recent government actions to improve urea's availability by providing uninterrupted gas supplies to the manufacturers and importing 100,000 tonnes of chemical from China, the crunch could extend beyond the wheat season.

Multiple factors — additional demand on better farm incomes, more rains, increase in the area under cultivation as well as hybrid varieties, smuggling, hoarding, etc — are blamed by the government and the industry for the domestic shortages and spiralling prices of one of the most essential farm inputs. This was despite record local production of 6.34m tonne fertiliser in 2021 against the annual average of around 6m tonne for the previous three years. What went wrong? In spite of signs of emerging shortages and warnings sounded by the wheat farmers and the urea industry as early as September, the government did not act to prevent an avoidable crisis. Even reports of nearly 343,000 tonne urea ‘vanishing’ from the market — presumed to have been smuggled out of the country — failed to budge the authorities. No effective measure was taken to stop smuggling to Afghanistan despite evidence. When raids began to be carried out on urea dealers’ premises to release ‘hoarded’ stocks, the crunch worsened as it spread panic in the market. In short, the urea crisis — similar to the sugar and wheat flour troubles in 2019 — is the outcome of the authorities’ inability to correctly forecast the demand-supply situation and take timely action. The urea crunch will ease in the next few weeks. But there are ample chances of it resurfacing if supply chain reforms are not implemented and governance not improved.

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## **Street crime in Karachi**

WEDNESDAY once again brought home the dangers that lurk on the streets of Karachi. Armed men waylaid a car in which a cotton trader from Daharki who had just withdrawn a large sum of money from a bank was travelling with his brother. When he put up resistance, the criminals shot him and made off with the looted cash. The wounded man died in hospital during treatment. In the other incident, a newly married 28-year-old was killed at the door of his residence when he opened it to let in his mother and sister and was fired upon by a mugger intent on depriving the women of their jewellery. That same evening, another man was shot dead while resisting a robbery on Superhighway. The opposition in Sindh has laid into the PPP-led government for ‘letting criminals loose’ on unarmed civilians and demanded that the Rangers be directed to conduct a wide-ranging operation against the criminal elements in the city.

When the Rangers-led cleanup operation in Karachi commenced in 2013, the metropolis was a hotbed of ethnic, political and sectarian violence with rampant targeted killings, kidnapping for ransom and bank robberies. The crackdown against these major crimes by the paramilitary, which was their mandate, also led to a simultaneous drop in street crimes, especially vehicle theft and mobile snatching. In the years since, however, even while major crimes have remained under control, the graph of street crime has started rising, with spikes occurring every now and then. But it is the duty of the police to protect the citizens, and we must demand they do a better job of it. For one, more high-quality security cameras must be installed at crime hotspots and there should be increased police patrolling. Another factor contributing to the stubborn levels of street crime is that perpetrators, even when nabbed, are often back on the streets after being acquitted, which calls for better collection of evidence to ensure conviction. The hapless residents of Pakistan's financial heart deserve no less.

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## **‘Mini-budget’ comes into force**

MANY in the PTI government must have swallowed their pride to get the two controversial bills — one withdrawing tax exemptions worth Rs343bn, and the other granting the SBP complete autonomy — passed by the National Assembly to meet the IMF conditions for the revival of its \$6bn funding programme.

Prime Minister Imran Khan, who had vowed to never knock on the door of the Fund before coming to power and ditched the multilateral lender last year because of its unpopular demands, had to sit through most of the seven-hour session to make sure no one from PTI or its allies voted against or absented themselves from voting. That confirms not every treasury member was happy with the harsh legislation.

Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin, who was initially confident of converting the Washington-based lender to his view till the country's fast deteriorating balance-of-payments position forced his hand to give in to IMF pressure, has since been trying to keep up appearances. He has defended the Finance Supplementary Bill — popularly termed as 'mini-budget' — and the SBP Amendment Bill, dumping the blame on his predecessor and the SBP governor for acquiescing to the austere IMF conditions last year for a \$500m tranche.

The negative inflationary impacts of the bill on the low-middle-income segments of the population cannot be overstated. The finance minister has himself admitted that the withdrawal of certain tax exemptions, which would directly or indirectly affect the common people, amount to Rs71bn, a hefty burden indeed. Earlier, he had said that such taxes amounted to only Rs2bn. Could this situation have been avoided? Opinion is divided. With the country facing an existential crisis on accumulation of massive debt because of chronic fiscal and current account deficits spawned by the state's inability to tax wealthy lobbies and decades of the ruling classes' profligacy, the government had little room to manoeuvre.

The recent attempt by the government to ditch the Fund and grow the economy rapidly ahead of the 2023 polls is enough to prove that we have reached a stage where even a moderate GDP growth rate of 4pc would upend the budget and external account. In the given circumstances, Pakistan's re-entry into the IMF funding programme isn't only important to secure its dollars. It is also critical to give 'comfort' to the other creditors — multilateral, bilateral and commercial included — that Pakistan remains a 'going concern' and that their money would not be lost.

Islamabad will not be able to exit the IMF in the medium term even after completion of the current programme. Once the present facility is over, it may be looking for another bailout from the lender of last resort since our ruling elites refuse to learn from the past, adopt a frugal lifestyle that suits poor countries like ours and pay taxes. We shouldn't forget that even IMF dollars cannot help us for long.

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## **CNG relief**

THE Peshawar High Court has granted partial relief to CNG stations against a ban on their operations by the district administrations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in view of the prevailing shortage of gas for domestic consumers, and allowed them to operate three days a week for eight hours. The decision is based on a constitutional provision which was cited by the All Pakistan CNG Association's KP chapter in their petition. According to Article 158: "The province in which a well-head of natural gas is situated shall have precedence over other parts of



Pakistan... .” The PHC in a judgement in 2010 had already endorsed the constitutional provision, directing the SNGPL to ensure uninterrupted supply of gas in the province.

According to official figures, KP produces 430 MMCFD gas while its requirement is 216 MMCFD, thus leaving a surplus of about 200 MMCFD. KP has long been demanding that with less than 10pc of its population being gas consumers and being a gas-surplus province, there is no justification to subject it to gas cuts and load-management. In fact, it has been asking the federal government to allow it to use its surplus gas to encourage industrialisation in the province which has seen zero growth in the last 20 years. KP faces a location disadvantage in terms of its distance from the sea ports, and bank lending in the province remains dismally low. These factors, among others, make it difficult to attract industrialists without offering them cheap gas and hydel power on competitive rates. Not only this, KP has also been vociferously opposing attempts by the federal government to add the cost of expensive, imported RLNG that will place an added burden on domestic and industrial consumers using only locally produced cheap gas. It is unfortunate that the centre has never paid heed to the rights of the provinces over indigenous resources. Balochistan is a glaring example of this gross injustice and mistreatment where, while the rest of the country benefited from the vast gas reserves in the province, the local population had to wait for decades to gain any right over their own natural resources. It goes without saying that the provinces must make prudent and judicious use of precious natural resources but it is bad tradition and historic injustice on the part of the centre to craft policies in contravention of the Constitution to deny the provinces their due rights.

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## **Omicron threat**

AS Pakistan grapples with the fifth coronavirus wave fuelled by the Omicron variant, the state must take timely decisions to avert a public health disaster. Sindh, and Karachi in particular, is an area of major concern as the highest numbers are being reported from the province. The contribution of the metropolis to the country’s Covid-19 tally, already alarming at 66pc, increased to nearly 80pc in a single day, and the positivity rate in Karachi yesterday was hovering around 35pc. After initial reluctance to once again impose harsh measures to

control the spread of infection, the Sindh government's task force on Covid-19 has now evidently decided the numbers are disquieting enough to merit taking action. While schools in the province are to remain open, it is now mandatory to wear masks in public places, markets and wedding halls.

When the pandemic first hit Pakistan in March 2020, Sindh led the way by imposing curbs and proactively enforcing SOPs to ensure that the virus was kept at bay. The country has thankfully made it through subsequent waves, though this does not mean that the state and the public let their guard down. Virus and lockdown fatigue is a fact, but measures need to be taken to ensure the country's fragile health infrastructure is not swamped with fresh cases. Medical experts have said that Omicron is milder compared to other variants, but its transmissibility is much faster. Both the federal and provincial governments must therefore be on the same page where tackling the Omicron threat is concerned.

The plan to counter the fifth wave must be made in light of expert medical advice. But the surest way forward is to stick to the SOPs that have, till now, succeeded in minimising Covid-19's impact. Maintaining social distancing and basic hygiene practices is crucial, while events drawing large crowds must be discouraged. Moreover, vaccination efforts should be ramped up. Currently, around one third of the population has been fully vaccinated. These numbers can definitely be improved, as vaccinated persons have a much better chance of battling the virus, and limiting the damage it causes to the body. As for lockdowns and restrictions on public movement, this is something the provincial administrations and health experts may have to consider. Admittedly lockdowns are not ideal, especially considering the impact they have on economic and social life. The economically vulnerable suffer even more during lockdowns, while educational activities are also affected when children are physically not in school. However, saving lives must be paramount, and decisions need to be made based on facts and not emotions. One option could be 'smart lockdowns' in Karachi and other areas, especially in neighbourhoods where clusters of cases are reported. Testing must also be increased. With a proactive response from the state, and responsible attitudes from the public, it is indeed possible to beat the fifth Covid wave.

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## Grim picture

THE World Report 2022, compiled by Human Rights Watch, paints a disturbingly grim picture of civil rights abuses in Pakistan and increasing persecution of religious minorities and marginalised groups next door in India. In its chapter on Pakistan, the US-based group noted with concern that Pakistani authorities “expanded their use of draconian sedition and counter-terrorism laws to stifle dissent and strictly regulated civil society groups critical of government action or policies”.

The report went on to say that in 2021, the Pakistani government intensified efforts to control the media, harassed and at times detained independent-minded journalists and vocal civil society activists. Media houses were pressured to lay off journalists critical of the government while those refusing to toe the line were squeezed financially and through other means. These tactics amounted a disturbing contraction in the space for civil and democratic debate in the country last year.

Editorial: It is the govt's responsibility to protect journalists, hold the perpetrators to account and ensure that justice is served

Several national and international media watchdog bodies and civil rights organisations have been frequently highlighting the deteriorating state of affairs. Unfortunately, the government has always ducked criticism of its repressive policies and instead shifted the blame back onto media and civil rights activists, repeatedly labelling them anti-state. Not only that, a few months ago, the government attempted to bring out legislation to regulate the media by assuming draconian powers to erase dissent. Only after stiff resistance from media bodies did it relent and back off.

The report also touched upon increasing incidents of violence against women and girls and religious minorities. Incidents of forced conversion of religious minorities and attacks on their places of worship also continued with the government failing to take appropriate legislative measures to protect them. Moreover, as the report very rightly pointed out, Pakistan has failed to enact legislation to criminalise torture, despite its obligation to do so as a party to the United Nations Convention against Torture.

Clearly, there is much the government can do to create an environment free of repression and coercion so that democracy is strengthened. Meanwhile, the situation across the border with reference to religious minorities, Dalits and tribal populations is also dire, as noted in the HRW report. Impunity for the security forces has resulted in a slew of extra-judicial killings and huge swathes of the population remain in fear of rampaging Hindu supremacist mobs. Sadly, autocratic tendencies in the corridors of power continue to bring misery to the citizens of both countries.

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## **Larkana jail unrest**

THAT Larkana Central Prison authorities had to resort to the excuse of “cleaning the jail” to shift 13 dangerous criminals to other facilities amid uncontrollable rioting by the inmates speaks volumes. It demonstrates how easy it is for criminal elements to hold the state hostage and exploit the law for their own gain. These particular outlaws were described by jail authorities as ringleaders of various groups operating inside the prison who had been fomenting unrest for a few months. Among their demands was that there be no check on the supply of illicit articles, such as mobile phones, liquor etc into the barracks from outside.

This is exactly the kind of situation the Islamabad High Court referred to in December last year while remarking that the country’s prisons had turned into “epicentres of crime, corruption and corrupt practices”. The court had observed that while on the one hand, the basic rights of vulnerable inmates were being violated, on the other, there was a “phenomenon of elite capture” in jails that enabled prisoners with influence and connections to bend the law to their advantage. Given the dismal state of the country’s prisons, these problems have been long in the making. Overcrowding and lack of proper facilities in jails are serious issues: the Larkana Central Prison, for instance, currently houses 1,033 inmates against a total capacity of 650. This, combined with the lack of modern infrastructure, poorly trained jail staff and lack of resources and personnel, creates an environment where human dignity and rights can neither be ensured nor protected. Moreover, the lack of investment in prison staff in terms of professional training and competitive salaries makes them even more susceptible to be influenced or blackmailed by criminal elements operating within and outside

jails. The authorities should learn from this episode and start taking immediate measures to rectify the dire conditions prevailing inside the country's prisons. In the present circumstances, life behind bars is enough to make hardened criminals out of even petty thieves.

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## **Security policy unveiled**

PAKISTAN'S freshly unveiled National Security Policy has broadened the traditional concept and included economic stability as a key component. Prepared by the National Security Division led by National Security Advisor Dr Moeed Yusuf, the report provides a comprehensive framework for looking at national security by making it more holistic and inclusive. By bringing geoeconomics into the centre of the concept, the NSP also charts a clear vision for policymaking at the national level.

Prime Minister Imran Khan launched the report in Islamabad and underscored that a country cannot be secure without having a sound economy. The NSP has done well to distinguish between traditional security — represented by defence, territorial integrity, diplomacy — and non-traditional security that includes the country's economic health and the well-being of its citizens.

“The country's security imperatives in the next decade will be driven by the need to realise its economic potential while ensuring national cohesion, territorial integrity, internal security, and citizen welfare,” states the report.

The expanded definition of national security is a welcome one. For too long have narrow national security concerns defined the priorities of the country. Such a narrow focus on traditional aspects of national security has led to resources being skewed in favour of these areas at the expense of all others. By positioning citizen's welfare at the core of the new concept, the NSP acknowledges that only a paradigm shift in thinking among the decision-makers can lead to re-formatting of priorities.

The NSP is vague in many areas but an umbrella document such as this one is not expected to deliver on details. It is supposed to provide a broad framework and a clear direction for policymaking and guide decision makers in picking the right choices for resource allocation. The NSP has taken years to compile but as

a living document that can evolve with time, it is a very useful addition to the state's policy toolkit. It should prod the leaders to take a closer look at the requirements of geoeconomics and especially when they run counter to the traditional thinking on hard security matters.

The issue of trade with India may provide a test case. Geoeconomics may require Pakistan to relook at the decision of not trading with India when increased trade could deliver tremendous benefits. There should be a debate on how Pakistan can delink this issue with political problems with India that remain intractable. If the NSP can trigger such strategic re-evaluation of national priorities, it would have served a very useful purpose.

Now that the report has been launched, it should be debated threadbare in parliament. It requires a buy-in from all stakeholders and therefore the government should provide full opportunity to the opposition to dissect it and provide inputs that may be included in the report at some point.

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## **Bold decisions**

IT is a double blow within a matter of days. The Islamabad High Court's order last week to demolish a navy golf course in the capital has come on the heels of the same court ordering two Pakistan Navy projects, including farmhouses and a sailing club to be similarly demolished. These are bold and historic decisions in that they hold powerful entities accountable for abusing their authority and violating land use laws.

In the more recent golf course case, the court found it had illegally been built in a protected park area and that the navy had encroached upon state land without lawful authority and jurisdiction. It has ordered the site sealed and its possession handed over to CDA and the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board. Unless it can be utilised for an environmentally-friendly activity, the golf course is to be demolished within four weeks. The court also ordered the CDA chairman to probe the construction of Monal and other restaurants located on national park land.

If these orders are implemented, it will send an important message to privileged segments of society. Too often, we have seen similar directives about the illegal



use of land in Karachi, in which wedding halls and shopping malls have been set up on land allotted for specific military use. But these orders are not complied with and there is no follow-through. Why is it that compliance is only ensured where middle- and lower-income classes are affected?

In the recent Nasla Tower case, for instance, the apex court had expressed its displeasure with the Karachi commissioner for not completing the demolition process in time. To cite another example, when it came to razing Empress Market shops, also ordered by the apex court, the authorities moved with alacrity. The reality is that the rules are different for those that have influence and connections, as compared to those that do not.

In cases where the owners and financiers of illegally constructed property and recreation projects are powerful, court orders are ignored, delayed or simply forgotten. But this leeway is not extended to projects where 'ordinary' members of the populace have a stake. It is a sorry reflection of the authorities' inability or lack of willingness to implement court orders that ruffle elite feathers. The IHC directive to demolish the navy projects is a test case for the Islamabad administration to prove if a 'naya' Pakistan is at all possible.

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## **Rohingya camp blaze**

A HUGE blaze in a refugee camp housing members of the Rohingya community in Bangladesh last week has left up to 5,000 people homeless, highlighting the miserable conditions the group continues to live in. Driven from their homes in Myanmar's Rakhine state due to ethnic violence, hundreds of thousands live in subhuman conditions, mostly in Bangladeshi camps, where such tragedies are commonplace. The fire occurred at a camp in Cox's Bazar and though fortunately there were no fatalities reported, thousands of people have been left under the open sky, with their meagre belongings turned to ashes. In a similar incident in March last year, at least 15 deaths occurred when a blaze ripped through what is described as the world's largest refugee camp. Conditions at such camps are usually squalid, with men, women and children living in ramshackle structures. However, the other choices confronting the Muslim Rohingya are not very appealing: statelessness and violence in Myanmar, or risking their lives trying to make it to greener pastures aboard rickety boats. For the Rohingya, described as

the world's most persecuted minority by the UN, it seems that escaping death and privation, and finding respectable shelter are increasingly difficult tasks.

Of course, the basic problem is the fact that the Rohingya have been uprooted from their homes in Myanmar with “genocidal intent” as described by the UN. The military junta that presently rules Myanmar, as well as the hybrid set-up it overthrew, both did little to protect the Rohingya from deadly violence and in fact in many cases encouraged their persecution. Those Rohingya that are still left in Rakhine face immense hardships on free movement as well as in availing other basic facilities, while the threat of violence — from the junta as well as armed Buddhist groups — is never far. As the international community continues to call for a return to democracy in Myanmar, it must also keep reminding the ruling generals that the Rohingyas’ fundamental rights must be assured.

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## **The establishment pivot**

INFORMATION Minister Fawad Chaudhry has claimed that four senior members of the PML-N have met some important people and offered themselves as replacement for the Sharif family. The PML-N has rubbished this claim contemptuously.

The issue may be one more example of mutual mudslinging between political opponents but it has once again brought to the fore the role of the establishment as the centre of gravity for all sorts of power plays. This comes in the wake of a statement by the military spokesman when he denied that the military was involved in any deals with political parties. The spokesman advised journalists that whenever someone mentioned a deal, they should ask him who had offered the deal.

Talk about deals has picked up momentum in recent months ever since reports started circulating that relations had become strained between the PTI government and the establishment as a result of the controversy over the appointment of the DG ISI. No responsible stakeholder has said anything on the record but all have been dropping broad hints that the power matrix may be undergoing a subtle shift.

Such a shift, whenever it happens, invariably involves a reorientation of the establishment's relationship with various political actors. The history of the last few decades is well-documented in this respect. While it may still be somewhat unclear how this shift is taking place in the present day, if at all, the fact remains that the political tug of war between the government and opposition seems to be reinforcing the dynamics of this traditional matrix.

The government ministers continue to claim unabashedly that they are on the same page with the establishment while the opposition leaders are also saying in no uncertain terms that they will only bring about a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan when they are sure the establishment will not bail him out. This is as much proof as needed that from the perspective of the political stakeholders, their fortunes remain tied to their relationship with the establishment. Perceptions can often start to shape reality and in this case even if the establishment tries to dispel the notion, the perception of the centrality of its role drives the reality of present-day politics just as it has previously. The more things are said to change, the more they remain the same, it seems.

After more than seven decades as an independent nation envisioned as a democracy by its founding father, it is a sad reality that the power matrix continues to revolve around the establishment. Electoral democracy is supposed to legitimise the acquisition of such power and delink it from the support of hard power that flows through the barrel of the gun, but such is our predicament that legitimacy remains subservient to the reality of this hard power. All stakeholders need to indulge in some serious soul-searching.

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## **Remittances growth**

THE hefty growth in remittances from Pakistanis living abroad continues to defy forecasts to the contrary. New State Bank data shows that remittances have surged by 11.3pc to an all-time high of \$15.8bn in the first half of the present fiscal to December from a year ago. Many anticipate these transfers to grow to above \$31bn by the end of the fiscal should the current thrust sustain. This is a good sign for the economy since remittances are the biggest source of foreign exchange earnings for Pakistan — significantly higher than export inflows — and help finance the trade deficit that has soared by over 106pc to \$25.5bn in the first

half of the ongoing fiscal. The country had received \$29.4bn in remittances in the last financial year, up by 27pc from the previous fiscal. “Proactive policy measures by the government and SBP to incentivise the use of formal channels and altruistic transfers to Pakistan amid pandemic have positively contributed towards sustained inflows of remittances since 2020,” the bank said last week. Multiple factors — disruptions to international travel due to Covid restrictions, a crackdown on hundi and hawala as part of the FATF mandate, ease of money transfer through banks and, last but not the least, massive rupee depreciation — have encouraged overseas Pakistanis to use formal banking channels to send cash to their families since the Covid outbreak. Part of the remittances is also flowing in through RDA deposits for utility bill payments, transfers to rupee accounts, etc.

The present growth momentum notwithstanding, some remain sceptical about its sustainability. Their concerns stem from the fact that considerably large amounts of cash are still being brought into the country through informal channels. The increase in the premium on informal transfers from Dubai because of the surging gap between the inter-bank and market rates of dollars on the back of SBP checks on dollar purchases from the open market is a big incentive for overseas workers. Moreover, the recent growth in remittances is driven by Pakistanis living in the US, UK and other Western countries. Transfers from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the two countries that still are the source of the bulk of remittances, are stagnating. Once the virus is contained and travel reopens, inward remittances could decline or stagnate. Given external-sector vulnerabilities, even a small dip in remittances will increase Islamabad’s reliance on loans to finance the deteriorating current account deficit unless measures are taken to preserve the remittance growth momentum.

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## **China-Iran deal**

THE China-Iran strategic deal that has recently taken effect is more than just a long-term bilateral agreement between Beijing and Tehran. It is also a powerful symbolic gesture between the two states designed to send a signal to the US-led Western bloc. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian recently announced that the deal had entered the implementation stage after a visit to

China. The agreement, which focuses on economic, military as well as security matters, was signed in March of last year during the term of Hassan Rouhani. The latest developments are but an endorsement by the government of conservative President Ebrahim Raisi, indicating that the deal has entered the practical phase. For Iran, which is fighting to break the economic and political isolation imposed on it by the US and its allies, the deal appears to be a lifeline. Tehran has already been selling discounted oil to Beijing despite American sanctions. The comprehensive partnership indicates that both countries are willing to deepen their cooperation despite the displeasure of Washington. China has also defended Iran at the ongoing nuclear talks in Vienna, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi saying his country supports Iran's "logical" position at the crucial talks, and adding that China hopes to see "the interests of the Iranian people secured".

Beyond the bilateral sphere, the China-Iran partnership is a demonstration of cooperation between the loosely linked anti-American bloc, which also prominently features Russia. While the US and Iran have had no diplomatic relations since the events of 1979, the Sino-American relationship has also deteriorated considerably, with the US establishment considering the People's Republic a major threat. Iran needs to tread carefully in this tricky game of bloc politics. While it definitely needs an economic lifeline to break the stranglehold of Western sanctions, deepening ties with Beijing is likely to win Tehran few friends in the West. Moreover, the US and Europe must give Iran a fair deal and lift sanctions if they are serious about mending fences with Tehran.

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## **UAE targeted**

MONDAY'S deadly drone strikes by Yemen's Houthi rebels targeting the UAE, and subsequent retaliatory attacks on Sana'a by the Saudi-led coalition, could result in a major escalation in an already fragile region.

The Iran-allied Houthi militia, which controls the capital Sana'a and large chunks of Yemen, claimed responsibility for the UAE strikes and called upon civilians and foreign firms in the Emirates to "stay away from vital installations". Three people were reportedly killed in the attacks, including a Pakistani, which targeted oil facilities and the Abu Dhabi International Airport.

The UAE, meanwhile, responded to the “heinous criminal escalation” by pounding Sana’a under the Saudi coalition’s umbrella on Tuesday. Over a dozen fatalities were reported, including those of non-combatants. Pakistan, meanwhile, has condemned the “wanton act of terrorism” targeting the UAE.

The fact is that unless the Yemen quagmire is addressed in a holistic manner and a peaceful resolution is found, this deadly cycle of attacks and counter-attacks will continue. It is indeed shocking that the Houthi militia has managed to penetrate the defences of the UAE, a state that spends billions of dollars on its defence budget. However, the Yemeni rebel group has shown the capability of staging other low-tech but highly devastating attacks before, such as those targeting Saudi oil facilities in 2019. It is unlikely such capabilities have been developed without Iranian assistance, indicating that Yemen is very much a proxy battlefield in the Riyadh-Tehran struggle for regional power and influence.

However, caught in the middle of this geopolitical battle have been the hapless people of Yemen. Since the Saudi-led intervention in 2015, Yemen’s civilians have had to live under the constant shadow of bombs, with disease and famine further decimating the population. The Arab coalition, supported by the West, has often indiscriminately bombed markets, schools and weddings, causing high civilian casualties. The Houthis, on the other hand, have launched attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, leading to both military and civilian casualties.

## **Explainer: What is the Yemen war?**

The best approach to end this futile war, and ensure the security of the entire region, is for all foreign forces and their Yemeni allies to support a ceasefire and encourage a negotiated settlement. Saudi Arabia and Iran should take the lead in this process, urging the Yemeni government and the Houthis, respectively, to end hostilities. It is also a fact that allies Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have been supporting rival factions within Yemen, which has further complicated matters.

Following the UAE attacks, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called on “all parties to exercise maximum restraint and prevent any escalation”. In the present combustible situation, this is sage advice. De-escalation by all sides must be followed by sincere efforts to end the Yemen war, or else regional peace as well as the global economy will take a major hit should this conflict spiral out of control.



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## New province debate

THE private bill introduced by a PML-N senator seeking a new province in south Punjab amounts to oversimplification of a complex constitutional and political issue. However, the initial response from major political parties to the bill says a lot about the rhetoric their leadership spews every now and then regarding the issue. The rhetoric will increase as the 2023 polls approach. Apparently, the PPP is the only party that is supportive of the idea. The reasons behind the hesitation of the ruling PTI and PML-N are easy to understand. The parties competing for power in Islamabad and/ or in the province via central Punjab would never want this division. Therefore, we have seen the PML-N dilute the issue of a 'Seraiki suba' by linking it with the demand for a Bahawalpur province. In January 2019, the party moved a constitutional amendment bill in the National Assembly for two new units in south Punjab. Likewise, the PTI, which had promised a separate province within 100 days of its coming to power, continues to drag its feet on the issue. Last year, it gave a sketchy plan for creating the province but hasn't moved since to change the Constitution for turning it into reality, arguing that it lacks the two-thirds majority required for amending the Constitution. Ring-fencing their share from provincial development funds for the southern districts and the establishment of a secretariat do not make up for a separate unit.

The demand for a Seraiki suba isn't a new one. In recent years, however, it has garnered significant support from the Seraiki-speaking middle classes. While the known protagonists of the movement want Punjab's division along ethnolinguistic lines, there are many who support it for improving administration in the region. In either case, Punjab's division is going to provide impetus to calls for new provinces in other areas as indicated by PML-N Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed who said that making a new province could open a Pandora's Box, which the country could not afford just now. Indeed, it will not stop there, as he said. No party can afford to bury its head in the sand. The major political parties, whether or not they support the Seraiki suba, must ascertain public support for the latter. If the majority opinion supports it, politicians from across the divide should get the ball rolling in parliament for the creation of the new province.

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## Omicron in Karachi

WITH the wedding season in full swing, it is no surprise that the Covid positivity rate in Karachi has been touching 40pc of late. What is also of concern is that among those infected by the Omicron variant are at least 500 health workers, including doctors, nurses and paramedics. This strain has infected thousands of people across the country. In fact, the actual figure — including for infected health workers — is probably far higher than the official number, considering that not every Covid case is reported. The only silver lining is that while more transmissible, the Omicron variant has proved less lethal and there are fewer hospitalisations than previously. Nevertheless, SOP adherence continues to be necessary. Given that half of Europe's population is on the verge of being affected by Omicron, medical experts predict that cases in Pakistan will begin to peak in the second week of February. With a single day's tally showing that Karachi was responsible for 66pc of the country's Covid cases, the situation in the city is especially precarious. Several medical staff are reportedly on sick leave at a number of medical facilities which are already under a great deal of pressure.

The Sindh government has made mask-wearing mandatory in public places, while the Pakistan Medical Association has demanded an immediate ban on political rallies and public gatherings. The NCOC's decision on the closure of schools, offices and business places in light of the rising infections across the country is awaited. Meanwhile, the provincial government should, besides ensuring strict implementation of SOPS, ensure contact-tracing of all health workers to understand whether breaches in hospital procedures or careless socialising is to blame for the high number of infections in their community. Once the government has traced the source of the lateral spread of Omicron, it might be in a better position to take effective steps for the protection of health workers and the patients who come in contact with them, giving the health infrastructure some breathing space even as cases continue to rise.

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## Suu Kyi charges

MYANMAR'S ruling junta seems determined to spin a complicated legal web around Aung San Suu Kyi to ensure that the popular leader is not able to participate in politics for a long time to come. The generals have implicated the former state counsellor and democracy activist in a raft of cases ever since overthrowing the elected government led by her in February 2021. The latest charges are linked to renting and buying a helicopter. Ms Suu Kyi is accused of corruption and violating the Official Secrets Act as well as vote fraud. The generals have also convicted her for illegally importing walkie-talkies and violating Covid rules. While some of the charges are clearly laughable, Myanmar's military rulers seem determined to misuse the law books to keep the civilian leader away from power. It is also true that while there was sustained resistance to the coup early on, now the junta has consolidated its power and is confident that it can ward off challenges to its iron-fisted rule.

While Ms Suu Kyi led a hybrid regime in which the generals maintained the upper hand, it at least presented a semblance of democratic rule. However, wary of the civilians' growing power, the generals decided to strike, citing 'irregularities' in the 2020 elections which were due to bring Ms Suu Kyi's NLD back to power. Observers, meanwhile, said the polls were mostly fair. Regional efforts to urge the generals to restore democracy have also stalled as Asean, the bloc Myanmar is part of, remains divided over how to proceed on the issue. While the bloc had issued a rare rebuke to the junta, the Cambodian prime minister recently visited Myanmar, helping it break its regional isolation. The fact is that the coup has exacerbated Myanmar's internal crises. And though the generals will be able to keep a lid on things through the use of force, it is only sustained democracy that can help bring peace and development to this troubled nation, something that Myanmar's rulers must realise soon.

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## Too great a divide

THE government's offer of talks to the opposition on electoral and judicial reforms is a welcome development in a toxic political milieu. Yet it isn't enough to

bridge the vast gulf that exists between the two sides, and the government must take certain measures to prove the sincerity of its proposal. Even though Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has expressed the intention to engage the opposition on electoral and judicial reforms as well as on the process of the NAB chief's appointment, his words will prove to be mere rhetoric unless they are backed by confidence-building measures to create an environment of mutual trust. However, his categorical statement ruling out the possibility of the prime minister sitting across the table with the opposition leadership, a key 'prior action' demand from his opponents, doesn't give much hope regarding a thaw in the political deadlock in the foreseeable future. The fact of the matter is that neither side wants to look susceptible in the run-up to the 2023 elections.

Indeed, the opposition's grievances against the Imran Khan administration are not without reason. It is also true that the government was the first to spurn the offer of cooperation from the opposition soon after the PTI's ascension to power as it pursued its accountability drive against the main opposition politicians. The prime minister's refusal to shake hands with or consult the opposition leader Shehbaz Sharif — even on issues where he is required to do so constitutionally — has only widened the gap between the two sides. The government's rejection of the opposition's objections to the electronic voting law, the central bank's autonomy as well as other legislation of importance has also been instrumental in turning up the political heat and pulling the treasury and opposition benches further apart.

It goes without saying that the onus of taking the first step for mending its relations with the political opponents is on the government. But the opposition parties — their reservations and grievances notwithstanding — must also seize this offer for opening up a dialogue to resolve some key issues, especially regarding electoral and judicial reforms, for the sake of strengthening democracy in the country. The opposition should understand that it has nothing to lose if it accepts the offer. It will only gain the high moral ground if the ruling party backs out or acts in a non-serious manner. Nonetheless, it will be seen as irresponsible if it rejects the offer, even if the ruling PTI intends to use it to deflate the opposition's planned campaign to bring down the administration. That said, it still appears unlikely that either side will make the first sincere move in the present-day political environment that is defined mostly by noisy rhetoric and blame games, with both the government and opposition looking for support from the establishment that they publicly pledge to keep out of politics.

## **Military inductees**

INCONVENIENT questions serve a valuable purpose: they expose what may be an unjust status quo and nudge authorities to course correct. Indeed, there is nothing that serves a country better. A heated debate of this nature has taken place in the Senate over what the opposition terms as the “militarisation” of civil institutions.

The issue was raised by the Jamaat-i-Islami Senator Mushtaq Ahmed who spoke of encountering reluctance by the interior ministry to provide details about serving and military officers — including their perks and privileges — currently employed in Nadra. The senator said he had asked for the information in light of the rising unemployment in Pakistan while “we are hiring retired personnel of armed forces on lucrative positions”.

According to Senator Raza Rabbani, such personnel were holding at least 15 posts in civil institutions, including top positions at ANF, PIA, ASF, NDMA, etc. The government has defended the induction of the military officers on the grounds that they too are Pakistani citizens.

It is perhaps understandable, though no less unacceptable, that such inductions would be particularly frequent during military dictatorships, of which Pakistan has regrettably had several. To take but the latest such period into consideration, it was reported in late 2003 that 1,027 military officers, including 104 from among the highest ranks, had been inducted on civilian posts, including Pakistani missions abroad, following the coup on Oct 12, 1999, by Gen Pervez Musharraf. Of the total, 27 military officers were inducted at Grade 22, the highest attainable rank and pay scale for a civil servant in the country.

The sectors where the 1,027 security personnel were working on civilian posts included communications, minority affairs, health, agriculture, and social and women development, among many others. Matters may not be as extreme at present as they were then, but there are still a significant number of military inductees in civilian posts, a situation at odds with a democracy and bound to create disgruntlement among civilian officers qualified for these positions.

The fact is, those that fight wars are not always best suited for tasks outside their specific expertise; if that were the case, then Pakistan should have emerged from

every dictatorship with governance running like clockwork. Moreover, at a time when the courts are increasingly underscoring the military's constitutional role, the PTI government by extending overtly preferential treatment to military personnel while considering appointments in civilian roles, is exposing them to unnecessary controversy.

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## Murree suspensions

ON Wednesday, the Met Office issued a red alert for more heavy snowfall in Murree over the coming weekend, and advised immediate precautionary measures. But it seems that at the helm of administration now are people just days into their job. Also on Wednesday, the Punjab government identified “gross negligence, lack of coordination and team work as well as risk assessment” on part of the administrative authorities as the reasons leading to the tragic deaths on Jan 8 of 23 souls who became stranded in sub-zero temperatures. The suspension with immediate effect was announced of 15 officials — effectively, the entire chain of the relevant administrative command, as mentioned in our report. Those taken offline range from the Rawalpindi commissioner, deputy commissioner and city police officer to the Murree assistant commissioner, assistant superintendent of police, Rawalpindi highways officers and Murree forest and district emergency officers. These persons are to face disciplinary action in line with the findings of a five-member committee inquiring into the lapses that led to the disaster. At a news conference that lasted hardly a couple of minutes and apparently with no reporters in attendance, Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar announced: “I have fulfilled my promise of holding a fair and transparent inquiry into the Murree tragedy and taking action [...]”

So easily are duties discharged that it is indeed a cruel joke. The reasons for the tragedy have been identified, blame apportioned, and action taken — in an inquiry that lasted just about 10 days? Further, the inquiry committee claims the compilation of a four-volume report as well as a shorter version that was apparently presented to the chief minister at his office on Wednesday evening — but we have to take the authorities at their word, given that no detail therein was released to the press or the public. The administration needs harsh reminding that much more is required than its usual resort to knee-jerk reactions and



scapegoating. This is urgently needed to learn lessons; it is also the very least owed to those who died.

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## **Emergency rumours**

ISLAMABAD is once again in the grip of rumours. The latest issue finding traction revolves around a mysterious campaign that appears to be pushing for a presidential system and even the imposition of an emergency in the country. Such rumours are best ignored but that is hard to do when parliament sits up and takes notice. The opposition has found the matter serious enough to submit a resolution in the National Assembly expressing the resolve to strengthen the parliamentary form of government as provided in the 1973 Constitution. “When the government, imposed through rigged elections, has ruined the country, then whisperings of imposition of an Indira Gandhi-like emergency and change in the system through various formulas are being heard,” tweeted PML-N MNA Ahsan Iqbal. The opposition has also pointed a finger at the PTI government accusing it of being behind this whispering campaign. Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has however denied this and said such talk is nothing but “fake news” that the media has picked up from non-verified social media sources.

This is unfortunately not the first time that such rumours have germinated in our political landscape that is clearly quite fertile for their growth. Talk of a presidential system recurs at fairly regular intervals and is supported by the ‘usual suspects’ who blame parliamentary democracy — and not the mal-intent and incompetence of those running it — for failures of governance. However, most of them suffer from selective memory and conveniently forget that the country has experimented with a presidential system a number of times, and with disastrous results. Those arguing for such a centralised system have so far not been able to build a persuasive case about how this system would resolve the failure of governance. In any case, if the people of Pakistan prefer a presidential form of government on the lines of the United States or France, then there is a constitutional way of making this change. By a two-thirds majority, parliament can make a constitutional amendment and change the parliamentary form into a presidential form of government. There is no other legal way of doing this.

While all these rumours may be a convenient distraction from the very real problems plaguing the country, and therefore not reflecting any serious move from any quarter, they do inject an added element of uncertainty in an already unstable political environment. This has an adverse impact on the economy. What the country needs at this stage is political stability and an end to the constant turbulence born of political wrangling. The markets need to feel comfortable, as do investors. Needless distractions and whispering campaigns create inorganic chaos that fuels further instability. Pakistan's politics needs to settle down to a rhythm that is predictable in a systemic way and does not spring surprises when none are needed. These rumours should die a natural death.

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## **TTP attack**

MONDAY night's assault on a police party in Islamabad, which left one cop dead and two injured, marks a significant uptick in the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan's resurgent campaign of militancy.

By carrying out such an audacious attack in the capital where there is a heavy security presence on account of numerous sensitive locations, including dozens of diplomatic missions, the banned terrorist outfit indicated its capacity to wreak mayhem in 'mainland' Pakistan — if and when it chooses to. Responsibility for yesterday's IED blast in Lahore's Anarkali area that killed at least two people and injured 26 may have been claimed by Baloch insurgents, but it nevertheless underscores the multidimensional nature of the militant threat that Pakistan is once again facing.

Until now, in its latest iteration, the TTP had mainly been targeting security forces in the former Fata area, as well as tribal leaders, peace campaigners and government officials. For locals, the violence has revived memories of the nightmare years when the area was a terrorist hub, and a target of US drone attacks and Pakistan Army offensives. If reports are to be believed, the TTP has been chomping at the bit to unleash full-scale attacks but has so far been 'restrained' by the Afghan Taliban who have, however, refused to take action against the terrorist group.

The US forces' retreat and the Afghan Taliban's storming back into power 20 years after coalition forces overthrew their first regime has been a huge morale booster not only for the former insurgents but also for their ideological comrades from Pakistan. It has also burnished the fighting capabilities of both, for they were able to seize arms and equipment worth billions of dollars left behind by the retreating US forces.

Sadly, the emerging scenario speaks of a monumental failure of policy in which the Pakistani state wilfully refused to gauge the extent of affinity between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP and what could transpire in the event of a US withdrawal from Afghanistan. It was only recently that army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa was quoted as acknowledging that both were 'two sides of the same coin'. Remarkably, even the fact that the Afghan Taliban never uttered a word of condemnation against the TTP's acts of terrorism in Pakistan — with the exception of the APS Peshawar massacre — did not change the state's blinkered approach. And now the people of Pakistan may have to pay the price.

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## Cricket hope

SIX Pakistan players named across three teams of the year announced by the ICC is a testament to an uplifting 2021 for the national team. Skipper Babar Azam being named captain of both the One-Day International and Twenty20 International teams is also a reflection of what an inspirational leader he has been on the pitch. He led the team to the semi-finals of the T20 World Cup last year after a troubled build-up but while Pakistan won just two out of six ODIs, Babar continued to make runs. He didn't make it to the Test team though, despite leading Pakistan to seven victories in nine matches, with middle-order batter Fawad Alam and pacers Shaheen Shah Afridi — also part of the T20 team — and Hasan Ali being named on it. Opener and wicket-keeper Mohammad Rizwan was named on the T20 team after breaking the record for the most runs in a calendar year in the shortest format of the game by a country mile. Rizwan amassed 1,326 runs in the last 12 months, bettering the record of 748 by Ireland's Paul Stirling in 2019. Babar too had a prolific year in T20s, making 939 runs, and the opening duo will be expected to help Pakistan do even better at

this year's T20 World Cup in Australia where they face arch-rivals India in their opening match.

Pakistan recorded their first-ever World Cup victory over their historical rivals at last year's T20 extravaganza in the UAE where Shaheen was impeccable with the ball. Hasan Ali too had an impressive year in Tests while Fawad provided valuable runs as the team won the series against South Africa, Zimbabwe and Bangladesh. Apart from Babar, batter Fakhar Zaman was the other Pakistan cricketer in ICC's one-day team — a format in which Pakistan needs improvement. This is a big year for Pakistan cricket with Australia, England, New Zealand and West Indies all scheduled to tour. It is hoped the prominent presence of Pakistan players in ICC's line-ups will spur the team on to more victories.

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## **Updating the economy**

THE long-overdue rebasing of our GDP has boosted the economy's size through improvements in the coverage area of economic activities. The calculation of national accounts to FY16 from FY06 has increased the economy's size by almost 16.5pc to \$347bn and jacked up the FY2021 growth rate from 3.9pc to a 14-year-high of 5.6pc. Even at the old base year, the GDP growth rate was revised up to 5.4pc owing to incorporation of the final data on industry, agriculture and services.

The updated accounts incorporate changes in prices, trade and industrial production indices over time. The economy's revised value shows that its real size was underestimated by 11.3pc on prices of the previous base year of 2006. Gross national income has also increased to Rs59.3tr, with per capita income rising from \$1,543 to \$1,666. So what are the advantages and implications of this exercise for the government and public?

The rebasing of the GDP resulting in a higher growth rate and the economy's expansion has spawned speculations that the government has fudged national accounts to paint a rosy picture and draw political capital. Such assumptions are uncalled for. GDP rebasing is a process of replacing an old base year with a more recent one — usually every five years — to keep pace with price evolution

and changes in the economy's structure over time to capture current economic conditions.

Thus the new GDP series reflects a more accurate picture of the size and structure of the economy, and incorporates new activities and technologies that had previously not been captured by national accounts. It will allow policymakers to use a new set of economic information, which is more reflective of the current structure than those based on the 2006 base year, and help them make evidence-based decisions.

The impact of rebasing is felt primarily in changes in the major macroeconomic indicators. Indeed, the reduction in public debt from 84pc of GDP to 72pc and external debt from 29pc to 25pc after the economy's expansion will enhance the government's bargaining power and create space to borrow more at home and from abroad to meet fiscal and external account needs.

Likewise, the 1pc reduction in fiscal deficit as a ratio of GDP will provide greater room for fresh sovereign guarantees pegged on the economy's size. At the same time, a higher GDP indicates a significant drop in the tax-to-GDP ratio from 11.1pc to 9.5pc and exports-to-GDP ratio from 8.6pc to 7.4pc, underscoring that most of our economic troubles are rooted in poor fiscal efforts and low productivity.

Meanwhile, if anyone thought they can use the improved numbers to show that fewer people slept on empty stomachs or the number of unemployed had decreased because of rebasing GDP, they are mistaken. Rebasing doesn't make countries or people richer; it is just about updated data for policymakers to take informed public investment and taxation decisions.

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## **Covid curbs**

CONSIDERING the steep rise in Covid-19 cases in the country over the past few days, the government decided on Thursday to reimpose a number of curbs to curtail the spread of the infection that is currently being driven by the Omicron variant. The non-pharmaceutical interventions include more curbs in cities where the positivity rate is above 10pc, and lesser restrictions where infections are below this threshold. The positivity rate in Karachi, Lahore, Hyderabad and

Islamabad is particularly high with 45pc reported in the Sindh capital. While curbs should have been put in place earlier to keep Covid in check, now the state must enforce these restrictions, and urge citizens to act responsibly to help dampen the impact of the fifth wave. In cities with over 10pc positivity rate, school attendance has been brought down to 50pc for children under 12, while indoor weddings and dining have been banned, among the major interventions. Markets are free to open, however, while full office attendance has also been allowed, albeit working from home has been encouraged.

It can be argued that large public events such as indoor weddings should have been curbed when the first signs of the fifth wave had emerged. Admittedly, such decisions are difficult, as they adversely affect people's social and economic life. But acting early can limit the damage and help society return to normality much sooner. The fact is that the entire globe is having to live with the 'new normal' that Covid-19 has brought with it, and Pakistan is no exception. But as the experience of the earlier waves shows, a combination of testing, vaccination and targeted restrictions can help restore economic, educational and social activities. Some quarters have decried the curbs, particularly restaurateurs, while the education of primary students will also be adversely affected. While lockdown fatigue may be a fact, unless these steps are taken, Pakistan's fragile healthcare system risks being swamped with Covid cases. All segments of society need to abide by the new curbs, and following the globally recommended SOPs seems to be the best route to stay ahead of the contagion. And while experts should be the ones making the final call, mini-lockdowns in areas where a high percentage of cases are reported can be a viable option. With patience and adherence to SOPs and expert medical advice, the fresh Covid challenge can be overcome. Pakistan cannot afford to take the Omicron threat lightly.

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## **Yemen atrocity**

AN airstrike in Saada, the heartland of Yemen's Houthi rebel movement, on Friday has resulted in a horrific death toll, highlighting once again the futility of this destructive war. The strike is believed to have been carried out by the Saudi-led coalition, which had also struck a telecommunications facility in Hodeidah



earlier in the day, killing at least three children and knocking out Yemen's internet connectivity.

The Saudi coalition has denied the Saada attack on a detention centre, in which over 70 people perished, with many more injured in critical condition. However, it is unclear who else has the firepower to carry out such a devastating attack. The Saudis have accepted carrying out the Hodeidah operation though.

The bombings come in the aftermath of Houthi attacks targeting Abu Dhabi earlier in the week, in which three people, including a Pakistani, were killed.

While both Saudi Arabia and its coalition partner the UAE have a right to defend themselves against external aggression, the killings of such a large number of non-combatants is indefensible. There has been widespread condemnation of the Saada massacre, led by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who reminded "all parties of their obligations ... to ensure that civilians are protected". Even the US, which arms the Saudi coalition, called for "de-escalation".

Unfortunately, this is not the first time the coalition has targeted non-combatants in large numbers; previous attacks on markets, weddings and schools have resulted in mass casualties as well. The sad fact is that Yemen's people have been crushed by foreign aggression, starved and left to fend for themselves in the face of disease due to this futile war. According to the UN, over 377,000 people have died due to the conflict — 70pc of them children. Considering these grim facts, to halt the suffering of the Yemeni people and ensure the security of all regional states, the sooner this war is ended, the better.

Explainer: What is the Yemen war?

The history of recent conflicts has shown us that guerrilla groups using asymmetrical tactics have managed to take on much more powerful and well-armed adversaries. In Yemen, the Houthis have done just that against the Arab coalition backed by hi-tech Western weaponry. Therefore, what is required is a negotiated end to the war. An immediate ceasefire must be declared and the Yemeni government, the Houthis and southern elements, as well as other legitimate stakeholders, should chalk out a power-sharing agreement. The foreign supporters of these Yemeni factions — Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran — need to facilitate such efforts.

Thereafter, a democratic roadmap can be agreed upon that protects the basic rights of all Yemenis, keeping in mind the country's confessional and tribal intricacies and protecting Yemen's territorial integrity. More Houthi attacks on Saudi and Emirati targets, and savage responses which decimate a large number of civilians, are unacceptable and will only fuel a cycle of violence in Yemen and the wider region.

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## **Medico-legal flaws**

ON Friday, a 13-page verdict authored by Justice Ali Zia Bajwa of the Lahore High Court revealed a shocking fact about medical examiners that carry out medico-legal work. Few in the country would be unfamiliar with the term, but it bears repetition nonetheless: the medico-legal process refers to the physical examination at a mandated health facility of victims of unnatural death or injury, possibly involving criminality, that could have legal repercussions. From assault to accidents to suspected homicide, and everything in between, the first step of the investigation is the medical examination that puts on record the victim's injuries. One would imagine, then, that medical examiners in this specific field would be well-trained. But it seems, as the honourable judge observed referring to data provided by the Primary & Secondary Healthcare Department, a mere 10.45pc of medical examiners in Punjab meet the minimum qualification threshold that is mandatory before a person can embark upon medico-legal work. Even worse, if that were possible, is how low the bar for qualification is: a four-week practical training course.

"A medico-legal system with 90pc inexpert and unqualified medical examiners surely is not in consonance with the right to fair trial as guaranteed under Article 10A of the Constitution," the judge said. This is, as he noted, an alarming situation that must result in the miscarriage of justice in an untold number of cases every day. The dispensation of justice is one of the most important pivots of a functional state and society, key to which is balanced and objective adjudication. But such a process can remain only a pipe dream as long as even the most basic evidence-gathering process is deeply flawed and inexpertly conducted. The equivalent data in other provinces needs urgent collation, and the situation must be immediately rectified. Not only must the current qualification

requirements be stringently implemented, the qualification itself needs revision, as the judge recommended. Without that, there can be no hope of improvements in the justice system.

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## **Regressive taxation**

THE FBR appears to have kicked up a new and unnecessary controversy by serving notices on currency dealers to deposit 16pc federal excise duty on their total income and pay withholding tax on the outward remittances they make through an Irish company. The federal government had withdrawn FED on the exchange companies' income after a decision by the Council of Common Interests in 2014 to accept the argument that exchange companies, which deal in buying and selling of foreign currencies and pay 29pc income tax on their incomes, were not service providers and, hence, the federal government could not take FED from them. The Sindh High Court has also ruled against the imposition of FED on currency dealers. Moreover, the service tax has been declared a provincial levy and its collection delegated to the provinces under the 18th Amendment in 2010. The FBR cannot tax services provided in the provinces. Likewise, the demand for payment of withholding tax on outward remittances sent through the exchange companies through an Irish firm is said to be a violation of the double taxation treaty with Ireland. In response, the exchange companies have written a letter to the finance minister, seeking his intervention for the withdrawal of the tax demand created illegally by the tax authorities.

Prima facie the FBR will not have a leg to stand on if the affected currency dealers challenged the legality of these notices in a court. Nevertheless, the exchange firms were also way out of line when they threatened to pass on the burden of this tax to their customers to bring pressure on the government for the revocation of the FBR notices. It is totally uncalled for. The right way for them is to engage with the finance/revenue ministry and the FBR and seek an amicable resolution of the issue. The FBR must also reconsider its action in the light of the CCI decision because the imposition of this tax will likely encourage the black market by moving a significant part of the legal forex business into the hands of illegal hawala/hundi operators, which could hit efforts to boost inward remittances

through legal channels besides weakening Pakistan's stance in FATF negotiations. The FBR's desperation to increase its collection to meet hefty tax revenue targets is understandable. But that should not be used as an excuse to resort to regressive taxation. There are plenty of untaxed and under-taxed areas from where it can boost its collection.

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## Cutting mangroves

FOR Karachi, the mangrove cover along its coastline is a thin line of defence against potential oceanic and climatic disasters. Known as guardian forests, mangroves absorb four times more carbon from the atmosphere than rainforests, and are 1,000 times cheaper per kilometre than building sea walls to protect against the effects of natural disasters, according to the UN. Besides, they are a natural nursery for marine life. Losing the mangrove forests would strip the city of what remains of its protective armour and leave its population exposed to every passing storm in the Arabian Sea. Unfortunately, we have refused to wake up to the calamity that faces us as mangroves are ruthlessly cut down. According to an IUCN report, in the 1980s somewhere between 615,000 and 700,000 acres of the Indus delta was covered by mangrove forests, but by the 1990s the area was reduced to about 395,000 acres. It is a travesty that such a rich natural resource in parts of Karachi is being destroyed by the land and timber mafias and their backers in government. These elements are cutting down mangroves in areas including Machhar Colony, Kakapir village, Rehri Goth and Ibrahim Hyderi. That the state is either apathetic, or in cahoots with these mafias, is evident by its lack of action against the land grabbers who were allegedly involved in the deaths of two environmental activists in Kakapir village a decade ago.

Moreover, while the Sindh government's efforts at planting a record 1.172bn mangrove trees between 2008 and 2020, are commendable, they ring hollow in the light of its decisions to establish industrial and economic zones along with a coal power plant in protected forest area. Though mangrove reclamation and conservation are said to be a key component of the prime minister's Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme, simply planting mangrove saplings won't be enough if other factors such as deforestation and land encroachment are not tackled

simultaneously. The authorities should rethink their approach and punish the land grabbers who play havoc with nature.

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## **Anti-extremism policy**

HAD there been more far-sighted policymaking on the part of the state and an understanding of how religious extremism can insidiously seep into society and that the forces of radicalism can never be 'managed', we may not have come to such a pass. However even though the country's leadership had some years back acknowledged the need to course correct and push back against violent extremism, there was no comprehensive strategy to translate that realisation into action. But now such a strategy is close to being finalised. Soon after launching the National Security Policy, the government has approved the National Counter Violent Extremism Policy 2021 which, with input from multiple stakeholders and experts, is aimed at stemming radicalisation among the populace. Among its salient features are measures to counter extremist tendencies in seminaries and public and private schools; regulate places of worship and put an end to incendiary sermons from the pulpit; and keep tabs on extremist tendencies among the ranks of law enforcement. The policy also seeks enactment of a uniform CVE law along the lines of the Anti Terrorism Act 1997.

The last few decades have seen this country list disastrously towards extremist ideologies. A confluence of regional and domestic developments in the late 1970s created a perfect storm for religious extremism to be seeded in Pakistan. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US ploy of using Islamist ideology to beat back the 'infidel' Russian troops dovetailed neatly with Gen Ziaul Haq's exploitation of religion to entrench his rule in Pakistan, as well as his desire to acquire legitimacy in the world's eyes. Thousands of 'mujahideen' were trained and equipped to fight the Soviet army, with hard-line madressahs along the Pak-Afghan border churning out thousands more. Meanwhile, the Iranian Revolution had set in motion a violent proxy war with the Saudis; that in large part was played out in Pakistan, at a terrible cost to communal harmony and social cohesion.

Then, the state's catastrophically myopic approach of using violent extremists to further foreign policy agendas, not to mention fight against Baloch separatists at

home, ceded more space to ultra right-wing elements to hold society hostage. Gradually they became part of the political landscape: aspiring electoral candidates made seat adjustments with them and successive governments appeased them even when they threatened violence against law-abiding citizens and acted on it. It has been a shameful capitulation by the state, a complete dereliction of its duty to protect the lives and property of the people. Recent history indicates that the authorities remain reluctant to enforce the law against violent extremists. Each time this happens, the problem becomes that much more daunting. Now that the government is about to roll out the new NCVE policy, one can only hope that it is not too late for the beleaguered citizens of Pakistan who only want to live in peace and harmony.

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## **Government's silence**

A MAJOR trial is underway in London during which Pakistan has repeatedly been mentioned as the place where payment was allegedly sent to a hitman for hire. The case revolves around the defendant, a British Pakistani man Gohir Khan, whom the Crown Prosecution Service alleges was hired by an individual in Pakistan to murder exiled Pakistani blogger Ahmed Waqass Goraya, who is now based in Rotterdam (the Netherlands).

Regardless of the outcome, the case has significant implications, not just for the UK but also Pakistan. On multiple occasions, the prosecution has alleged that a middleman based in Pakistan approached the defendant with a 'job' to kill Mr Goraya. It has also been alleged that the middleman provided £5,000 which was paid into a Pakistani bank account, a photograph of the target as well as his home address in Rotterdam. A further £80,000 was allegedly promised if the 'job' was completed. Thus far, none of the allegations or evidence has been contested by the defendant. He has pleaded not guilty to the charges of conspiracy to murder and maintains he had no intention to kill anyone but just to earn cash.

The case has raised serious questions about a possible transnational murder plot, which on the surface appears to have been initiated by elements/individuals in Pakistan. Despite these implications, there is a deafening silence in Pakistan. The authorities have not uttered a word about the disclosures being made in the



UK court, which include the name of the middleman as well as a bank account and receipt of the money transfer.

It is unclear whether Islamabad is in touch with London about this individual, or if efforts are underway to determine the identity of this middleman and his boss. The UK and Pakistan have signed mutual legal assistance documents, which enable the easy exchange of information between police in both countries in such cases. MLAs have been used in cases in the past, including the Imran Farooq murder, to prosecute individuals. Are such mechanisms being exhausted to nab the alleged culprits?

The fact that both the Dutch and UK authorities are taking the matter seriously should prompt some action in Pakistan. Sadly, aside from MNA Mohsin Dawar raising it in parliament, there is no discussion of this case, which is built around an alleged murder plot targeting a Pakistani dissident overseas. The government must demonstrate it respects free speech and human rights, and bring any possible perpetrators to justice.

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## **Under pressure**

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has issued a warning that he would be more dangerous on the streets than he is in government. He delivered these meaningful remarks during a live session with callers while answering their queries.

However, this particular remark was not in response to any specific question and was a part of his diatribe against the opposition. In the lengthy session, Mr Khan defended his government's performance and tried to argue that the economic situation was rather favourable and not as dire as was being painted by the opposition and the media.

He devoted considerable time to lambasting the opposition — with special focus on the Sharifs — and emphasised repeatedly that pursuing them was a 'jihad'. However, at the end of the session he volunteered this opinion about being a greater danger on the streets which many have construed as a threat.

It is fairly obvious that the prime minister is cognisant of the trouble that his government is in from a political and economic perspective. His remark was surely an implicit acknowledgement that the PTI could find itself out of power. It was a signal, perhaps a message, that he was ready for his role in the opposition. It almost sounded like he was relishing the possibility of being liberated from the shackles of power so that he could flex his muscles on the streets and atop the container.

If that is indeed the case, then one can also see how some key themes in his discourse could form the basic ingredients of the narrative that the PTI may adopt if it finds itself out of power and on the campaign trail.

The first ingredient was the obsessive focus on the opposition. Mr Khan is now returning to his favourite theme and will increasingly harp on it in the coming days. The PTI is thus expected to respond to criticism of its performance by saying that the system is at fault and in such a system these 'mafias' remain outside the reach of the law.

The second ingredient sprouts from the first one. It connects to what the prime minister said repeatedly that whatever his government could not do was because institutions or vested interests would not allow it to be done. Whether it was the issue of stay orders or weak NAB prosecution or other failings, he has now made it clear that his narrative is that it was the fault of others that he could not deliver on the promises that he had made to the citizens.

The opposition has obviously trashed such arguments and said the prime minister was increasingly sounding like a frustrated and defeated man who could sense that his government's days were numbered. Whatever the fact, it is clear that the government is showing signs of being under pressure. Mr Khan's speech was the latest manifestation of this reality.

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## **Ukraine tensions**

TENSIONS between Nato and Russia over Ukraine have reached a critical pass, and there are genuine fears of a fresh conflict in Europe at any time. At the heart of the crisis is Nato's eastward expansion into Russia's 'backyard', particularly overtures from the Western bloc towards Ukraine, with Moscow drawing the line

at any attempts to include the former Soviet republic within the Nato orbit. The Western side claims Russia has massed around 100,000 troops at the Ukrainian border and is poised for an invasion. Moscow denies any such intentions. Over the past few days, there has been a disturbing uptick in combative rhetoric from both sides, while the US has rushed “lethal aid” to Kyiv to help stave off a Russian attack. In the latest developments, the Americans have ordered families of staffers as well as non-essential workers to leave their Kyiv embassy, with the US State Department saying that “significant military action” by Russia could come “at any time”. The tensions are reminiscent of Cold War-era stand-offs, indicating that the wide gulf of mistrust that once existed between the West and the Soviet Union today continues in the form of frosty ties between the Nato states and Russia.

While talks have occurred between the highest-ranking American and Russian diplomats over the crisis, so far these have failed to resolve the issue. However, instead of accepting an armed conflict as a fait accompli, both sides need to keep the communication channels open. A new war in Europe will be disastrous for the region, while also having geopolitical and economic impacts on the rest of the world. It is a fact that since the fall of the USSR, Nato has continuously expanded into the heartland of ex-Warsaw Pact states, sending alarm bells ringing in Russia. However, Moscow has also been involved in the internal matters of former Soviet states and communist allies, intervening militarily at times. To address this and future crises, all sides need to shed the Cold War mentality. Nato must explain why it is expanding its reach even though the bloc says its moves are not targeted at Moscow. Russia, on the other hand, must respect the sovereignty of former constituents of the USSR and its satellite states. Any fresh conflict will have devastating effects on the region, and force members of the global community to take sides, similar to the circumstances that existed during the Cold War.

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## **Defeating polio**

WITH Pakistan in the decisive stage of the battle against polio, every vaccination campaign is of significance as it brings the country closer to victory in the race against the crippling virus. Last year ended on a positive note, with only one case

of the wild poliovirus reported from Balochistan. With a consistent decrease in reported polio cases as well as in the detection of the virus in environmental samples, Unicef described Pakistan as “closest to the finish line”. Previously, the body had aired concerns about the immunisation coverage and children being left out of vaccination drives. In 2021, Unicef officials had described these “invisible” children as the last mile of polio eradication in the country. Though the number of children who did not receive the vaccine at all or not according to schedule — due mainly to parental refusal and factors such as internal migration or not being registered in official records — had reduced considerably, complete eradication still seemed some distance away. Aggravating this situation was the fact that polio vaccinators and the security officials protecting them were routinely targeted by those suspicious of the vaccine. Against this backdrop, the sub-national polio immunisation campaign, which kicked off across the country on Sunday, is important as it aims to target the missing children, who remain susceptible to polio.

Vaccine hesitancy that emanates chiefly from notions that the drive to inoculate children is part of a Western ploy has been a major hindrance in polio eradication efforts. To counter such retrogressive ideas, it is imperative that the health authorities continue to engage religious and other community leaders who exercise influence in their respective areas and can convince the people of the efficacy of the vaccine. One notable example is that of Mufti Qazi Yahya Khan, a cleric from Balochistan, who advocates the administration of the polio vaccine and has attempted to raise awareness through religion itself. One hopes that efforts such as his are encouraged by state authorities so that conspiracy theories can die down.

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## **Failure of accountability**

THE resignation of PTI government’s accountability czar Barrister Shahzad Akbar is a blow to the party’s central political narrative and could not have come at a worse time for the government.

Mr Akbar tweeted on Monday that he was resigning from his position as head of the Asset Recovery Unit but would remain associated with the party. He gave no reason for his resignation. However, it has now been reported in the media that

he was in fact asked to resign by Prime Minister Imran Khan. The PM was reported to be dissatisfied with his performance.

The PTI had repeated time and again for years that once in power it would bring back money looted by previous rulers and stashed abroad. The PM as well as Mr Akbar had kept on claiming regularly that they had identified this looted money and the nation would soon hear the good news. However, more than three years later, the whereabouts of this money remain a mystery and the government has failed to explain why its claims are just that and nothing more.

In addition, Mr Akbar had also led the accountability drive against the PTI's opponents — and specifically the Sharif family — but as yet no solid evidence has been brought to the courts to substantiate the allegations made by Mr Akbar and his various colleagues in numerous press conferences.

Shahzad Akbar's unceremonious departure is the latest evidence that the government's accountability drive is slowly coming undone. This should surprise no one. It is by now fairly obvious that this drive has been politically motivated and aimed primarily at netting the opponents of the ruling party. NAB has also contributed to this discrediting of accountability by pursuing cases against various opposition leaders while looking the other way when it came to allegations against those people associated with the government.

The judiciary also criticised NAB for failing to produce a convincing case against many opposition leaders which led to the courts giving them bail. The report of Transparency International issued on Tuesday further downgraded Pakistan in the corruption perception index thereby delivering yet another blow to the government's anti-corruption narrative. With both accountability and eradication of corruption floundering, the PTI government will have a tough time explaining why it has failed to deliver in its core areas of focus. It is therefore time for the government to acknowledge that its claims were unrealistic and it was wrong to follow a politically motivated approach.

Pakistan needs a process of accountability that citizens can believe in. This can only happen if governments and their institutions follow merit and keep political motives out of the process. This is easier said than done but never was this needed more than today. The PTI's failure on this account should remind everyone that one-sided accountability can never deliver the desired results.

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## **New freight service**

THE launch of a new railway freight service connecting the Karachi port with the industrial and commercial centres in the rest of the country is a welcome development and the first step — albeit an isolated one — towards turning the loss-making Pakistan Railways into a profitable company. Railway and port officials say the containerised cargo will be discharged from the ships and put directly on to a train that will deliver them to the customers at their factory gates in Multan, Lahore, Sialkot and elsewhere. The freight train will cover the distance between the port and its destination in Lahore in four days, which is not bad given the stopovers it may make and the rundown condition of the railway infrastructure. According to the railway minister, the new service will triple the container transport for Pakistan and make the railway, which has accumulated losses to the tune of more than Rs1.2tr over the last couple of decades, a profitable organisation in six months. Will it do so?

As noted, the new service will help PR somewhat improve its earnings and cut its losses. However, it would be naïve to expect it to bring the company out of the woods. At best, it signifies just the beginning of a long journey. Turning the company into a profitable entity will require the railway authorities to boost the share of freight business earnings to at least two-thirds of their total revenues. That is a huge ask given the unreliable railway infrastructure and competition from road cargo transporters like the NLC even if businesses are willing to shift to rail freight because of lower costs. Still, it can secure its monopoly over the movement of dirty cargo, which is costlier and cumbersome to transport long distance through trucks. Regaining the cargo business requires huge investment in improving its dilapidated infrastructure. Sadly, the cash-strapped government appears to have put all its eggs in the Chinese basket, hoping that Beijing's promised investment of \$6.8bn for upgrading ML-1 connecting Peshawar with Karachi would save the company. The project, nevertheless, has hit many snags. The worst part is that the government, fearing resistance from railway employees, seems to have put reform plans on hold until the Chinese money rolls in. That isn't a prudent strategy. If the railway is to be put back on track, the government will have to invest heavily in rebuilding and rehabilitating the missing and broken infrastructure now besides implementing governance reforms.

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## **flying curbs**

THE unexpected decision of the European Union Aviation Safety Agency to continue its ban on PIA operations to EU countries in the wake of the May 2020 PIA plane crash in Karachi has come as a big blow to the troubled national carrier and the credibility of the Civil Aviation Authority. The EASA decision came as a surprise since Pakistan had been given to understand that the closure of significant safety concerns of the International Civil Aviation Organisation against Pakistan personnel licensing would lead to the lifting of restrictions on Pakistani airlines. Instead, EASA has conveyed to the PIA management that it would conduct its own evaluation of the CAA and PIA before allowing the resumption of flights from Pakistan even though easing ICAO concerns is an important step towards ending the suspension of PIA's third-country operator authorisation. EASA says it will conduct an audit of the operator prior to ending its suspension as its safety concerns indicated "serious degradation of the PCAA certification and oversight capabilities ... Since deficiencies in state oversight were a contributor to the suspension decision, such an audit will have to include verification if these have been properly addressed and corrected".

No matter how disappointing or worrying the extension in EASA curbs is for Pakistan's aviation industry, the development is a stark reminder of public concerns regarding the measures taken by the CAA and PIA to tackle safety lapses, as well as the mess that both the industry regulator and national carrier find themselves in. The extension in the curbs also underscores the doubts of the international aviation safety agencies regarding the ability of the CAA to properly regulate and PIA's capacity to address myriad safety gaps and other issues related to the airworthiness of its aircraft as per global standards. With EASA unlikely to send its people to Pakistan for carrying out the audit because of security concerns and the Covid situation, both the airline and the CAA should use this time window to improve their credibility.

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## Corruption index

TRY as it may, it is difficult for the PTI government to spin the numbers in Transparency International's latest report any way other than what they suggest. Pakistan has plunged 16 places on TI's corruption perceptions index in the span of only one year and, with a score of 28 — down from 31 in 2020 — now ranks at 140 out of 180 countries.

The report punches a hole in the self-righteous façade of a party that has long beaten the drum of accountability, whose leader — the country's chief executive — will not deign to meet senior opposition leaders on the pretext of their alleged corruption. Past governments have often expressed reservations about the reliability of TI's findings and the conclusions that can be drawn from them. However, while in opposition, Imran Khan would present the CPI as a gold standard and use it as a stick with which to beat the party in power. Now that Pakistan has scored the worst on the index since 2013, for the PTI government to find fault with the methodology is challenging, to say the least.

Editorial: Shahzad Akbar's exit is latest evidence the govt's accountability drive is coming undone

Nevertheless, its spin doctors are pushing back in the face of uproar from the opposition parties. Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry ascribed the drop in Pakistan's CPI ranking to weak rule of law and 'state' capture rather than financial wrongdoing. It is a thin, illogical argument that does not in any way exonerate the PTI government. Rule of law is the foundation upon which rests the edifice of accountability; it is a situation in which the law is applied across the board, without fear or favour.

However, NAB, the premier anti-graft body, has by now been thoroughly discredited, with several judgements of the apex court questioning its workings and decrying the blatant political witch-hunt in which it has been engaged. The amendments that the government has enacted in the NAB law have made accountability an even more partisan exercise. In other words, it has made a deliberate choice to weaken the mechanism of anti-corruption. State capture too cannot be delinked from financial corruption: policy manipulation by the ruling elites to further their own interests is precisely what enables such malfeasance.

That said, it is unfortunate the CPI ranking has in the last couple of decades been used by all sides for point-scoring. Corruption remains a major issue in Pakistan, as in many other developing countries, something the TI's latest report itself illustrates. By exacerbating inequity and concentrating resources within a sliver of society, corruption prevents a country from developing to its full potential.

The fraying of the PTI government's narrative about accountability has been obvious for some time. No amount of sophistry can stitch it back together again. The only way forward is for the country's representatives to work collectively and with consensus in order to strengthen democratic institutions in Pakistan.

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## Oslo meeting

A DILEMMA continues to confront the international community where Afghanistan is concerned: whether or not to recognise the Taliban government in the country and how to get vital aid to the Afghan people in the absence of international recognition. Five months after the hard-line group took Kabul from the West-backed government, international acceptance eludes them, primarily because of their less-than-stellar human rights record. However, it is also a fact that as the economy faces critical shocks, the Afghan people's sufferings are compounded. In an attempt to break this deadlock, Taliban representatives met members of Afghan civil society and officials from the UN and Western states in Oslo recently. While the meeting has been described as positive by all sides involved, no particular breakthrough was announced, while some Western officials have said the conclave should not be seen as an attempt to grant the Taliban regime legitimacy.

At the heart of the matter is the Taliban's attitude towards fundamental rights, particularly women's rights. During their last tenure, the women's rights situation in Afghanistan was simply appalling, with women practically banished from the public sphere. This time around, the Taliban promised better things, but these have yet to materialise. For example, the UN's special procedures group says the Taliban are trying to "erase women and girls from public life", while adding that the group's policies serve as a "collective punishment" for women. Moreover, the Taliban have also been accused of targeting journalists, activists and

remnants of the former administration. Be that as it may, ordinary Afghans are suffering as the West tries to punish the Taliban. This grim fact has been highlighted by UN Secretary General António Guterres, who has said a “nightmare [is] unfolding in Afghanistan”. An economy in free fall has resulted in widespread lack of healthcare, jobs and food as Afghans brave a harsh winter. Therefore, as the UN chief has rightly stressed, there is a need to separate humanitarian aid and international recognition of the Taliban regime. Indeed, the international community must continue to try and make the Taliban improve their attitude towards basic rights, especially if they seek global acceptance. But these efforts must not block the delivery of vital funds and aid to the Afghan people. Mechanisms must be put in place that can help verify help is reaching the Afghan people, while economic activity in the country should not be obstructed by foreign states.

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## **Sanitary workers’ rights**

RELIGIOUS discrimination in Pakistan has many faces and one of its most troubling manifestations is the virtual institutionalisation of bigotry that looks upon non-Muslims as lesser beings. This is most evident in jobs related to garbage disposal, sanitation and sewerage management that many Muslim citizens consider to be beneath their dignity and that are left for minority communities to take up. At least 80pc of the country’s sanitation workforce comprises non-Muslims, mainly members of the Christian community. In this context, the decision taken by the National Human Rights Commission of Pakistan to raise awareness about the issue is a step in the right direction. That the commission also intends to file a suit against the government for the use of discriminatory language in advertising jobs in the sanitation sector is also a sign that the NCHR is serious about tackling this issue.

Job advertisements by the government in this sector often ask non-Muslims to apply, although it goes against the spirit of the Constitution and international human rights conventions. Non-Muslim sanitary workers are already subjected to the ugliest forms of social and religious discrimination; they are further exploited financially. Most remain underpaid and overworked, and perform their jobs without being given proper equipment or attire; they often have to climb inside

large sewerage pipes to clean faecal sludge with their bare hands at considerable risk to their lives. Only in October last year, two young sanitary workers died in Karachi while two others perished in Sargodha when they inhaled toxic fumes as they worked to unclog the underground sewerage lines. According to the NCHR, between 2011 and 2021, more than 65pc of sanitary workers who died while unclogging gutters belonged to minority communities. The services and plight of the country's largely non-Muslim sanitary workers have remained unseen and unheard for far too long. One hopes that the initiative taken by the NCHR is able to bring about a positive change in the lives of those who toil hard to keep this country clean.

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## Never-ending debate

PAKISTAN is gripped by a debate on the presidential system, again. From apparently nowhere, calls for this system have made their appearance on social media sites as well as some news channels. No one from the government, or associated with the ruling PTI, has officially propagated this idea but many known social media accounts supporting the presidential system are known to be partial to the government. The argument being peddled is that the limitations of the parliamentary system have hindered the governance of PTI and not provided space to Prime Minister Imran Khan to deliver on his agenda. The logic then continues that in a presidential system someone like the PM would have enough political powers to choose his team and not be beholden to parliamentarians, allies and electables who have to be handed cabinet portfolios. The latest debate is amusing in its staleness.

Almost all the arguments in favour of the presidential system fall flat when confronted with the lived experience of the system. In their exuberance to support the system, many of its proponents forget — or choose to ignore deliberately — that Pakistan has endured the system for decades and bears scars as proof. All presidents enjoyed the kind of powers that these proponents pine for, and none had anything substantive to show for them. In fact, if anything, they weakened democratic institutions as well as the federation by the centralised use of executive and legislative power. However, despite this unenviable track record, various lobbies in the country — most with vested

interests — continue to propagate this system. It is fairly obvious by now that the mysterious debate that breaks out every so often is far from organic.

That said, the fact remains that the only way to actually bring about such a change in the system through a democratic process is to amend the Constitution by a two-thirds majority in parliament. We can debate the pros and cons of the presidential and parliamentary systems for as long as needed but the only way to act upon it is to follow the laid-down procedure. If those who support the presidential system want it to replace the existing system, they should get the numbers needed to make the amendment. But even this would probably not be sufficient. The Supreme Court has laid down through its judgement that the parliamentary form is the constitutional system for the country. In theory then, even if somehow parliament were to conjure up a two-thirds majority to amend the Constitution, the apex court will have the power to interpret this legislation in light of its existing judgement. Hence, the debate is a futile exercise that serves little purpose other than distracting citizens from the real issues at hand. It would be best if the debate was buried once and for all.

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## **Riverfront verdict**

THE Lahore High Court decision scrapping the controversial multibillion-dollar Ravi Riverfront Urban Development Project is a major victory for the environmentalists and farmers whose lands were being acquired forcibly and illegally by the government to build a new city for the rich and powerful on the banks of the river. But the fight for them is yet not over as the government is considering “all legal options following the court verdict” and plans to continue work on the project by “making the relevant [land acquisition] law in conformity with the LHC [orders]” to pull off the scheme. For now, several provisions of the act have been declared violative of the Constitution and the fundamental rights of citizens. Among other things, the act has also been found by the court to be offensive to the environment protection law since the environment impact assessment prepared by the Ravi Urban Development Authority doesn’t conform to Punjab environment protection regulations. The verdict supports what its critics have long emphasised: the project is not for public welfare and that the “government had been unable to justify the scheme keeping in view the public trust doctrine as Punjab would be bereft of its fertile plains”.



That the government brushed off criticism of the project ignoring its costs to the environment and thousands of farmers underscores the growing influence of wealthy real estate developers in the policymaking process and on the PTI leadership. The government is pitching the scheme as the country's first eco-friendly, green initiative that would help Lahore tackle its problems like unsafe drinking water, inadequate drainage, degradation of the environment and shortage of housing, hospitals and schools for low-middle-income families. Few, other than the land developers lobbying for the project for around two decades now because of massive expected returns, believe that as they see its potential impact on the environment and livelihoods of cultivators. The project also runs counter to the PTI's election promise to reshape the country's development strategy by moving away from the large brick-and-mortar schemes to investing in people for inclusive growth. The construction of a new city outside Lahore is not the answer to the metropolis's problems. At the moment we need to save our existing cities from collapse rather than serve the commercial interests of powerful lobbies. The Lahore High Court ruling has given the government an opportunity to reconsider the project and its implications for people, livelihoods and the ecology of the area.

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## **Karachi violence**

WEDNESDAY'S events in Karachi indicate that unless the controversy over the Sindh local government law is handled delicately and with foresight, things can easily descend into chaos. At least one person was killed — the provincial administration attributes his death to a heart attack — and several were injured when police confronted an MQM-P protest against the law in front of Chief Minister House.

The administration soon moved in as the protest was supposed to be limited to the Press Club and had breached the so-called red zone. Baton charge and tear-gas shelling followed, leading to the death of an MQM supporter and injuries to several others. The Muttahida has slammed the use of force while the PPP-led Sindh government has said it had to move in to maintain security in the area, as PSL teams are also lodged in hotels within the red zone.

Indeed, protest is a democratic right, and police excesses are unacceptable, particularly the use of deadly force. It appears as if the administration panicked, resulting in the excessive use of force. For its part, the MQM should have stuck to the agreement of protesting in front of the Press Club instead of marching to Chief Minister House. It should not be forgotten that peace in Karachi is incredibly fragile, and vitriolic statements designed to arouse ethnic passions must be avoided.

The present impasse can descend into what was the norm not too long ago, when ethnic battles used to be fought regularly in Karachi. Instead of giving the LG law controversy an ethnic colour, the government and the opposition must keep the focus on civic issues to ensure that all of Sindh's people are guaranteed their civic rights.

The opposition parties must bear in mind that protest campaigns shouldn't rock the boat where law and order is concerned, while the Sindh government must show flexibility, accommodate the opposition's legitimate demands and help pass an LG law in Sindh that addresses the province's civic issues in a just and progressive fashion.

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## **Tax on cellular services**

THE increase in the withholding tax rate on cellular services — calls and internet usage — from 10pc to 15pc indicates that the country's fiscal policymakers still consider connectivity a luxury rather than an essential service or a good. The tax on cellular services was enhanced through the Finance (Supplementary) Bill passed earlier this month to fulfil a key condition for the resumption of the \$6bn IMF funding programme. This jacks up the effective tax burden on the 188m mobile users to 34.5pc, one of the highest in the world, and also includes a 19.5pc sales tax. Such high taxation is normally levied to discourage the use of harmful substances like tobacco. The imposition of withholding tax on mobile users is totally unjustified since 98pc of them — including students, daily wagers, Ehsaas programme beneficiaries etc — purchase credit in advance of using the service and aren't liable to pay income tax and file returns (to claim its adjustment or refund). The FBR elaboration that the advance tax on mobile use will not be collected from "...a person who produces a certificate from the

[income tax] commissioner that his income during the tax year is exempt from tax” is absurd. How many of us can even access the tax authorities, let alone obtain such certification?

The enhanced rate of mobile tax, which was slashed from 12.5pc to 10pc in the budget 2021-22, also goes against the government’s commitment to reduce the levy to 8pc in the next budget and will slow down plans for a ‘digital Pakistan’. The step also betrays the FBR’s inability to broaden the tax base for boosting revenues in spite of its tall claims and the availability of large data on those who live in luxury but do not pay any taxes. The 9.5pc tax-to-GDP ratio, one of the lowest in the world, exposes the tax agency’s unwillingness to tap the huge tax potential of under-taxed and untaxed segments. Taxing mobile users will prove detrimental to economic activity and productivity without adding much to government revenues.

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## **Renewed insurgency?**

THE last few days suggest that the Baloch insurgency is far from a spent force. According to an ISPR statement, 10 soldiers were martyred in a terrorist attack on a check post in Balochistan’s Kech district on the night between Jan 25-26; one assailant was killed and several injured in the fierce exchange of gunfire.

The military’s media affairs wing further said that three terrorists were subsequently rounded up in a clearance operation that is still underway. Reportedly, the Baloch Liberation Front has claimed responsibility.

Lat Thursday, it was a new militant outfit — the Baloch National Army — that assumed responsibility for the powerful IED blast that had ripped through Lahore’s Anarkali market a couple of hours earlier, killing at least three people and injuring 33 others. Yesterday, four lives were lost in a landmine explosion, as yet unclaimed, in Balochistan’s Sui area.

The recent spike in major attacks by Baloch separatists adds another dimension to the deepening unease regarding the security situation. On Jan 17, the TTP carried out a brazen assault on a police check post in Islamabad, signalling its ability to strike inside the country’s most well-secured urban centre. And this was

only the latest in a series of deadly attacks by the terrorist outfit, most of which have targeted Pakistan Army soldiers in the tribal districts.

Editorial: Recent attacks point to the state's failure to realise affinity between TTP and Afghan Taliban

While the TTP's resurgence has a direct link with the Taliban taking power in Afghanistan, there may well be merit in the contention that the ouster of Ashraf Ghani's government has also prompted hostile foreign forces to double down on their support to the Baloch insurgents. Certainly, all terrorist outfits need to be dealt with through kinetic tactics to some extent. However, to deal with Balochistan's insurgency as a law and order problem to be beaten down with lethal force is a myopic and self-defeating approach.

Much has already been said and written about Balochistan's grievances; it is no secret the resource-rich province has been ruthlessly exploited and its people deprived of their fundamental rights to protection of life and liberty, to freedom of speech and due process. Many 'upliftment packages' have been announced by various governments, only to fizzle out without achieving anything.

The fact is, there is a lack of sincerity in the approach towards Balochistan, and the 'packages' are merely window dressing to obscure the state's reluctance to allow the province any agency over its affairs, particularly with reference to the vast mineral resources that lie beneath its soil. Also, actions such as detaining Baloch students following terrorist attacks like the recent one in Lahore should be taken with care, lest all Baloch feel as though they are perennially suspect. The cycle of distrust and disaffection must be broken. According to the new National Security Policy, economic security is at the heart of national security. The state's approach to Balochistan must reflect that.

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## **Local star power**

THE seventh edition of the Pakistan Super League is up and running. The T20 extravaganza opened on the back of a solid past year for the national team which has raised expectations of a promising future. Despite rising Omicron concerns, the PCB has pulled out all the stops to hold the month-long PSL. It was a case of now or never, especially with a packed international calendar ahead offering no

other window for its marquee competition to be held. That has meant a lack of international star power with several teams engaged in international series of their own — most notably England and the West Indies. Sri Lanka are touring Australia next month, when New Zealand are hosting South Africa. The PSL is also clashing with the Bangladesh Premier League, meaning top Bangladesh players are missing. The Covid-related cancellation of the Mzansi Super League had raised hopes that South African players might be available for the PSL but their board couldn't agree on terms with the PCB. Other semi-retired players, like Pakistan all-rounder Mohammad Hafeez, are playing the Legends Cricket League in Oman. PSL teams therefore had to make do with second-string foreign players despite a new broadcast deal and a huge uptick in sponsorships. Most of the top players picked by the franchises had to be replaced with those who were available. Players from England and the West Indies will arrive once their series concludes in the Caribbean but the ins and outs will happen in times of uncertainty, with a rapidly changing pandemic situation, quarantines and isolation periods.

Since taking over, PCB chairman Ramiz Raja has stressed that Pakistan needs to work on equal terms with other top cricket boards. Once that is achieved, perhaps the PCB can force a window for the PSL like the Indian Premier League across the border has. In the meantime, the national team's strong performances have resulted in the PSL being graced by Pakistan's own stars who have won international recognition. The PSL will have the ICC Cricketer of the Year in Shaheen Shah Afridi, the best ODI player in Pakistan skipper Babar Azam and the top player in the shortest format of the game Mohammad Rizwan. That adds some excitement with the trio captaining their sides — Lahore Qalandars, Karachi Kings and defending champions Multan Sultans respectively. But most importantly, with big-name internationals missing, this season's PSL is offering a chance for talented youngsters to make their mark on the road to becoming stars.

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## **LG law protests**

AFTER a tense few days witnessed by Karachi in which fears mounted of a return to the ethnic violence of old, the political temperature in the metropolis has

thankfully come down. Nearly all the opposition parties in Sindh had been protesting for weeks over the passage of the Sindh Local Government Amendment Act by the PPP-led provincial government. At the forefront of this movement was the Jamaat-i-Islami, which had been staging a sit-in in front of the Sindh Assembly against the law for close to a month. While the Jamaat was about to extend the scope of its protest, the city witnessed violent incidents on Wednesday when an MQM demonstration in front of Chief Minister House spiralled out of control. As police and party supporters clashed, MQM activist Aslam Khan died; it is unclear how exactly he lost his life. Fears had begun to mount of renewed ethnic and political violence in the city in the aftermath of this event. However, the agreement between the Sindh government and the JI on Thursday night to call off the dharna is a positive development. Hopefully, it will encourage a political solution to the LG controversy instead of 'resolving' differences on the street. The decision by Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah and MQM leader and Federal Minister Aminul Haq not to give the death of the Muttahida worker an ethnic colour is also a welcome move.

While protest is a democratic right, violent demonstrations on the streets, especially with ethnic undertones, are a recipe for disaster. Therefore, the PPP and JI should be commended for resolving their dispute in a democratic manner. Now it is hoped that Sindh's ruling party fulfils the promises it has made to the Jamaat, such as giving the elected Karachi mayor powers to oversee key civic issues including water, sewerage and waste disposal, as well as health and education. The opposition parties have tapped into the genuine discontent felt by the people of Karachi where civic services are concerned. Many people in the city feel that particularly over the last decade, since the PPP scrapped the Musharraf-era LG law, civic service delivery has plummeted. Karachi's broken roads, mounds of garbage and overflowing sewers bear ample testimony to this. Therefore, the PPP needs to incorporate the legitimate amendments demanded by the opposition into the LG law, or risk more protests against a failed system.

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## **Anti-polio efforts**

PRAISE from the Unicef and the WHO for Pakistan's efforts to eradicate polio in the country is reassuring. This, coupled with that fact that last year Pakistan saw



just one case of WPV1 or wild poliovirus, means that the end of a very long battle of several years is finally in sight. But it has also been reported that eight cases of cVDPV2 — or vaccine-derived poliovirus — emerged in Pakistan during the year. Which means that vaccination efforts must be intensified further, considering that the transmission of vaccine-derived polio is attributed to inadequate immunisation rates. Pakistan must locate and inoculate the ‘invisible children’ – those whose parents are averse to the vaccine, who are out of school or whose name is not to be found in official records. This is crucial to successfully traversing the “last mile” before being declared polio-free. The difficulties remain: just a few days ago, the country lost another policeman guarding a polio vaccination team a day after a nationwide anti-polio drive was launched.

The other challenge is synchronising national anti-polio efforts with those in Afghanistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan are often referred to as the two remaining countries that are not polio-free. However, as immediate neighbours, they comprise “a single epidemiological block”. It is only by coordinating closely that they can defeat the virus. But the turn of events in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover last August has cast a shadow over anti-polio efforts. The Taliban themselves might back anti-polio drives but Afghanistan’s healthcare system is in a shambolic state and the politics of relief for the beleaguered residents has led to despair and uncertainty. Hence, while Afghanistan, like Pakistan, had shown progress in the polio eradication journey, it is too soon to say that polio cases will not re-emerge there. This could have implications for Pakistan in view of migrating Afghan families anxious to escape conditions across the border. These challenges should prompt action by the wider international community if they want a polio-free world.

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## **Opposition’s hot air**

THE PTI government has reason to gloat. Despite not having the parliamentary numbers on its side, it was successful in passing the State Bank Amendment Bill in the Senate by a slim margin of one. The opposition was left shell-shocked at this latest in a long series of humiliating defeats in the Upper House.

Prior to the vote, many opposition stalwarts were expressing confidence that they would be able to successfully block the passage of the bill and hand a stinging

defeat to the government. The reality check, when it came, was appropriately harsh.

The opposition may now cry foul as usual but the fact is that it has no one to blame except itself for the defeat. How else can it justify that its own leader Yousuf Raza Gilani remained absent from the House in addition to a handful of other senators? Mr Gilani is now peddling all kinds of justifications for why he was not in attendance but it is fairly clear that if blocking this bill was as important to the opposition as it had been claiming then Mr Gilani and the others would have ensured their presence on the floor of the House. The opposition now has to put some tough questions to itself.

It may want to start by coming clean on its genuine stance on the bill. Did it really want to block the bill or was it playing politics by letting the government get it passed and then deal with the fallout? There have also been reports that both the government and the opposition were informed that passing the bill was the country's strategic requirement because getting back into the IMF programme was a necessity. If true, this may explain the lack of urgency on the party of the opposition in ensuring the presence of all its members.

Be that as it may, the optics of the defeat are not pretty for the opposition. The defeat in many ways deflates the opposition's claims that it is preparing to bring a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan. If it cannot even muster the numbers in a House where it has a majority, it is hardly possible for it to overturn the treasury benches' majority in the National Assembly.

This means that despite all its bluster and threats of a long march, the opposition does not have much to show for its aggression other than empty claims and vague hopes about the neutrality of the establishment. This will come as a relief to the government at a time when it is burdened by a dismal state of economic affairs. The government can use this relief to improve its lackadaisical performance or waste it by demonising the opposition. Such relief can be temporary if the government does not get its act together and rearrange its priorities.

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## **State Bank's role**

THE passage of the SBP Amendment Bill that gives absolute powers to the central bank will remove the last hitch in the way of the revival of the suspended IMF programme. But it would also drastically change the bank's job description and its relations with the country's fiscal authorities.

The amended law would have major implications. For starters, it declares price stability as the primary objective of the State Bank even though no clear inflation target is set for it. That will free the bank from its responsibility of bolstering economic growth and bar it from lending to the government or funding its quasi-fiscal operations.

The bank would no longer extend any direct credit to or guarantee any obligation of the government or public entities. Financial stability will be the State Bank's secondary function with support for development policies and fuller utilisation of resources as its tertiary responsibility. The bank will have full freedom to determine and implement monetary and exchange rate policy as the changes in the law eliminate the finance ministry's role in its functions.

The significance of these changes can be gauged from the fact that until now, the law was unclear on the State Bank's exact role in targeting inflation as it was required to regulate the monetary and credit system and support growth and fuller utilisation of productive resources.

There is no denying that the need for central bank freedom in targeting price stability was being felt for a long time. The negative impact of excessive political intervention in its functions of monetary and exchange rate policy determination on the economy and current account under the previous PML-N administration also made many change their opinion.

But concerns remain regarding the bank's role in times of crises such as the Covid pandemic. Will it stick to its redefined mandate of price stability, or would it be willing to support economic growth in such crises? We don't know. We've seen central banks across the world stepping in to support economic growth and recovery during the 2008 global financial crisis as well as after the outbreak of Covid in 2020. On both occasions, the IMF, which pushed Islamabad to change the State Bank law as a key condition for its funding, was standing behind them.

State Bank autonomy is very desirable to prevent politicians from influencing the bank for political purposes. But we also need clarity on its role during such crises.

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## **Prisoner's escape**

EVEN allowing for the dysfunctionality that plagues our criminal justice system, the circumstances surrounding Friday's escape of an undertrial prisoner from police custody in Karachi can only be described as farcical.

The individual in question fled from a shopping mall where he had been taken, at his own request no less, by a head constable on the way back from his hearing. It appears that instead of transporting him straight to prison from court, the cop took the accused to the location in a private car and allowed him to roam around freely. The prisoner did not look the gift horse in the mouth, and fled, along with his shopping.

Two cops, including the head constable, have been charged with negligence and remanded in police custody, while the Sindh chief minister has ordered the suspension of the courts SSP. What makes this episode all the more shocking is that the man on the run, Zohaib Ali Qureshi, is not charged with some minor crime: he is one of the accused in the high-profile kidnapping cases of Bisma Saleem and Dua Mangi. The women had been abducted in two separate incidents during 2019 and were reportedly released after payment of ransom.

Whether complicit or gullible, the policemen's actions are indefensible and they should be punished accordingly. Moreover, every effort must be expended to nab the fugitive. This is scarcely the first time that suspects have given law-enforcement officials the slip. Just a few days ago, also in Karachi, five suspects allegedly involved in the murder of Nazim Jokhio fled from court when the judge recalled their interim pre-arrest bail. The policemen present reportedly made no attempt to apprehend them.

Such incidents make a mockery of the law. Not only do they pervert the course of justice; they inhibit witnesses from coming forward lest escapees exact revenge from them; and precious resources have to be diverted to once again hunt down the fugitives. There must be no tolerance for such dereliction of duty.

## **Rampant virus**

CASES of the Covid Omicron variant are increasing rapidly across the country, with over 100,000 active infections and almost 8,000 new cases detected in a single day. The National Command and Operation Centre records on Sunday showed that 29 people had died of Covid-19 complications over the last 24 hours.

The total number of patients in critical care at hospitals touched 1,455, and the national positivity ratio was about 12.5pc. In multiple cities, the positivity ratio has been much higher, with Peshawar and Karachi leading the way.

Daily testing, however, is still inadequate, which means the actual number of positive cases is far higher. Though daily testing in the current wave at approximately 70,000 a day is the highest in the country since the start of the pandemic, it is far too low for such a large population — especially given how fast this variant spreads. Indoor dining has been banned in Karachi and Hyderabad, but most other cities are functioning as per usual despite a high number of cases.

While the situation is not as alarming as it was in previous waves, when the lethal Delta variant was rampant, it nevertheless points to the unchecked spread of the virus in a population where 80.7m of 220m are double jabbed, and a mere 2.2m boosted. Research shows that though two jabs offer protection from the new variant, the booster shot is required as immunity can dip after some time.

Authorities must ensure that the vaccination drive continues without hurdles and manages to cover the unvaccinated as well as citizens who are eligible for boosters. Reports that the Expo Centre in Karachi has suspended jabs are extremely worrying. The mega vaccination facility that had earned praise early in the immunisation drive is now at a standstill as staff protest non-payment of salaries. This is an unfortunate turn of events which sends a demoralising message to vaccinators as well members of the public. Unpaid dues and mismanagement have resulted in the suspension of a key service in the thick of the pandemic — a situation which neither the federal nor provincial units can afford at any cost.

As the virus spreads across the world, and countries grapple with solutions such as the antiviral pill that has recently been approved, it is only a matter of time

before yet another variant will surface. There are early reports that a new variant, the 'Omicron BA2', has been detected in parts of Asia, Europe and the US and that it is more contagious than Omicron. Though this new variant appears to pose a similar threat level as Omicron, the reality is that in countries like Pakistan where millions are still unvaccinated, the chances of greater risk are high. The authorities must operate with this threat in mind and make sure that vaccine coverage is undertaken on a war footing.

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