

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of June 2020

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Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

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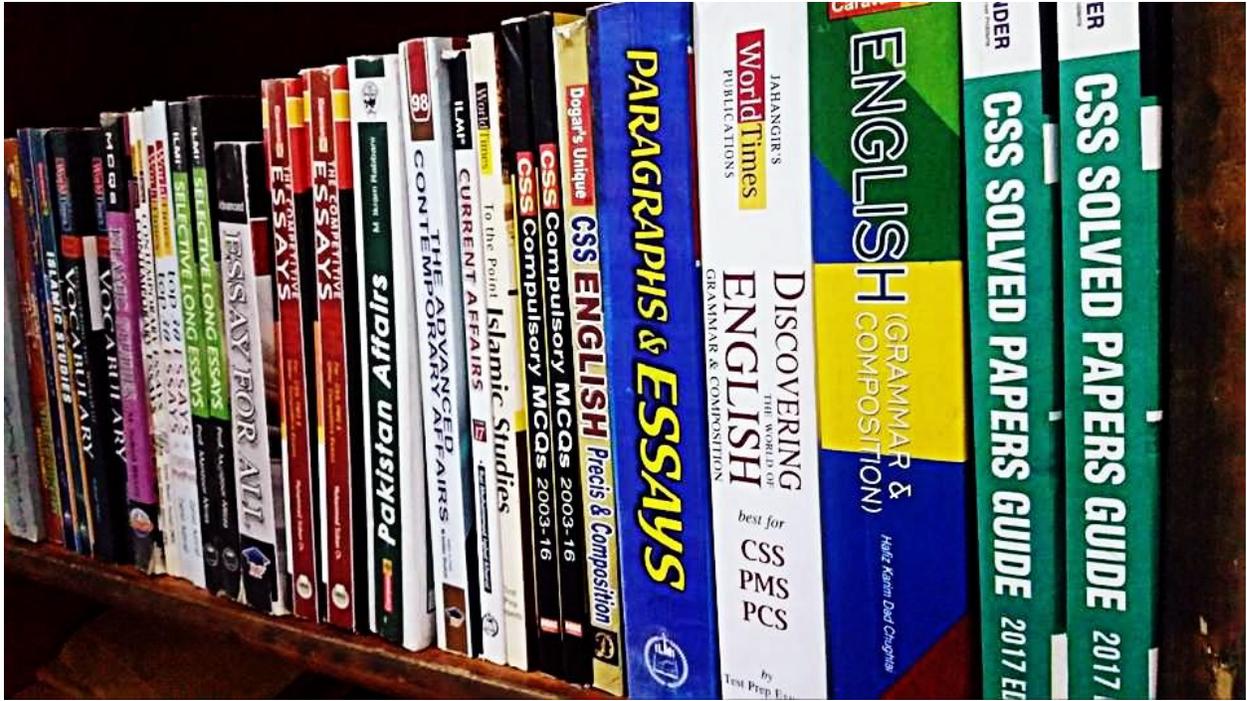
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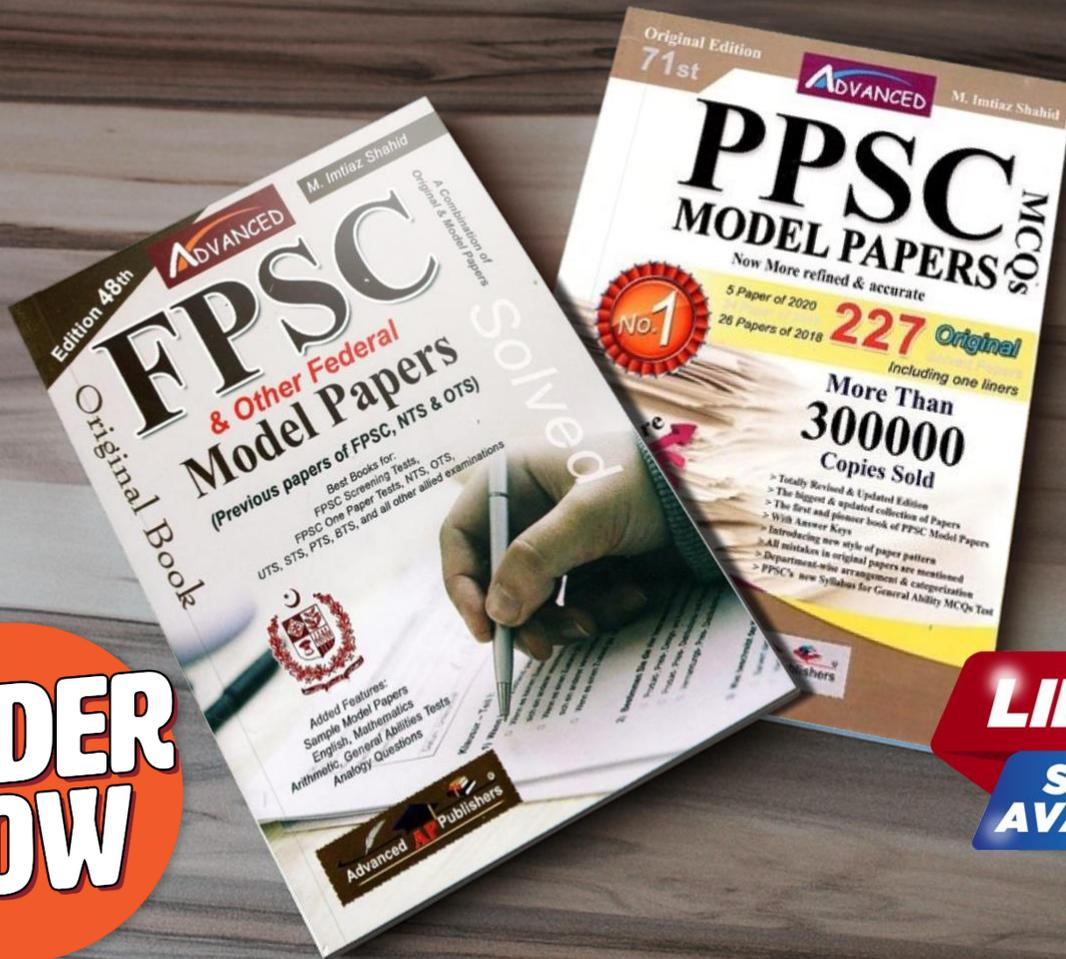
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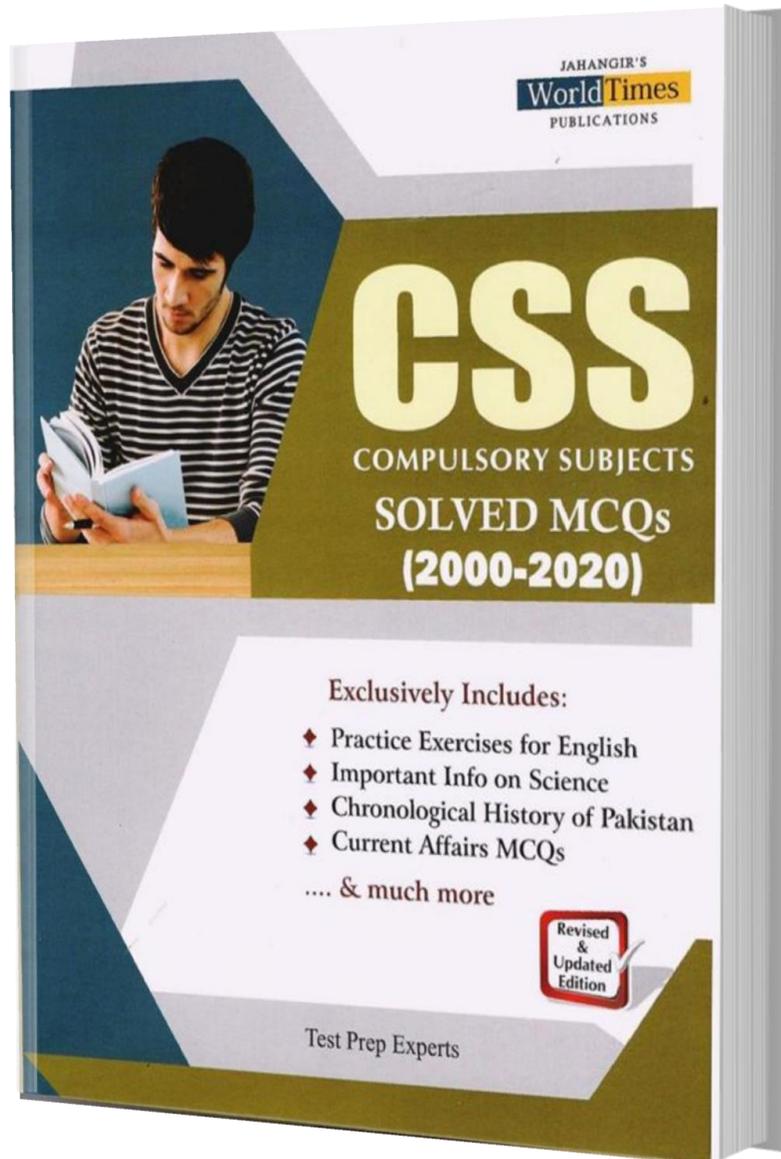
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Contents

Resurgent militancy 10

Medicine policies 11

Keeping history alive 12

Fear of testing 13

Spy games 14

Agriculture mess 15

An alarming decision..... 16

US press attacked..... 18

Man for all seasons 19

Shahbaz’s escape 19

Zahra’s murder 21

Targeting hospitals..... 22

Protecting the environment 22

SOPs not followed..... 24

Online classes..... 25

PSM workers’ sacking 25

A common threat..... 27

Fuel shortages 28

No infection control..... 28

Women voters 30

Insecure police 31

When jirgas abet crime 31

Iran & nuclear deal..... 33

Upholding PWD rights..... 34

Sugar investigation..... 35

Beyond George Floyd..... 36

Building tragedy 37

Path of disaster 38

Archaic law 39

Melting glaciers..... 40

WHO’s advice 41

COAS Kabul visit 42

Use of stun batons	43
Economy in distress	44
Ban child labour	45
Domicile controversy	46
Blaming the people?	47
More swarms arriving	48
Teacher's arrest	49
Package for healthcare workers	50
Colonial symbols	51
Haj decision.....	52
Troubling projections.....	53
Talking to the PTM.....	54
Atlanta shooting.....	55
Media: another blow	56
Punjab budget.....	57
Islamabad accident	58
China-India clash	59
Model Town case	60
Perks for lawmakers.....	61
Convictions in the 'Karachi affair'	62
Sindh budget.....	63
Wali Babar murder case.....	64
Ways of learning	65
Purchasing plasma	66
Imran Farooq case	67
Haj decision.....	68
Missing local link	69
Increased testing needed.....	70
Diplomatic spat	71
Tax exemptions	72
Unjustified detention.....	73
Air crash report	74
Premature optimism.....	75

A heavy price..... 76

Slip of the tongue?..... 77

Interest rate surprise 78

Airlines’ concern 79

Costly oximeters..... 80

Petrol’s slippery slope 81

Intolerance inside 83

‘Dubious licences’ 83

NFC appointment..... 85

Long hot summer 86

PSX attack..... 86

Affordable housing..... 88

Human trafficking 89

Resurgent militancy

MILITANCY is again beginning to cast a shadow over parts of the country, kindling fears of a return to the bad old days. On Eid, three people were shot dead by masked assailants in an act of targeted killing in Mir Ali, North Waziristan. Among the victims was an Islamabad-based senior bureaucrat visiting his native village for the festival. Earlier this month, five people were gunned down in two separate incidents in the same town. In Wana, South Waziristan, PTM leader Arif Wazir was shot dead by unidentified assailants on May 2. Attacks on security personnel are also becoming increasingly frequent. In April alone, 10 of them were martyred in North Waziristan. In fact, 90pc of casualties in acts of violence during April were recorded in this particular tribal district. Then, last Tuesday, two policemen were murdered by unidentified gunmen in Islamabad.

Much blood and treasure has been expended in fighting militancy, particularly where the tribal districts are concerned. Its residents endured years of savagery at the hands of violent extremists, plus the loss of livelihoods and displacement from their homes during the military operation to eliminate the banned TTP. They have been warning since several months that militants are trickling back into the area, and the tenor of attacks indicate that these elements are beginning to acquire a foothold in North Waziristan, the TTP's old stomping grounds. A jirga held by local youth in Mir Ali following the Eid murders accused the government of failing to maintain the peace secured by the Zarb-i-Azb operation and demanded action against growing incidents of targeted killing in the district. The state must swiftly and sincerely engage with the residents, identify and prosecute the attackers, and ensure that any resurgent militant cells are eradicated. Disenchantment with the authorities can be a fertile ground for the seeds of militancy to be sown. That is how the Pakistani Taliban entrenched themselves: they preyed on the people's legitimate, and unmet, desire for justice to impose on them their bloodthirsty regime.

Long-standing grievances in Balochistan too have fuelled several separatist insurgencies in the province, and created conditions in which a slew of violent extremist and criminal groups thrive. Earlier this month, six Frontier Corps personnel were martyred when their vehicle was targeted by an IED near the Pak-Iran border. Allegations that terrorist outfits on both sides slip across the border to carry out attacks on each other's soil have often bedevilled the countries' bilateral ties. Then, two weeks ago, six soldiers were martyred in an

IED explosion claimed by Baloch insurgents, while another laid down his life in an exchange of fire with militants in a separate incident the same day. The uptick in violence during a year when Pakistan is facing multifaceted challenges is very troubling. A sustainable peace may call for a less security-centric and more people-centric approach.

Medicine policies

A RECENT article in this paper has raised some important questions pertaining to the pharma sector in Pakistan. Indeed, the authorities would do well to reflect on our predicament — especially in the midst of the ongoing pandemic — and point to the reasons why we are unable to produce even essential medications. Why doesn't the country produce raw materials used to manufacture medicines? Why does it have to rely on the import of these products? What will happen if the supply of raw materials and ingredients needed to make lifesaving drugs faces sudden disruptions for one reason or another? Since the outbreak of Covid-19, which has upset the global industrial supply chain by compelling countries across the world to enforce partial to full lockdown to stop the spread of the deadly infection, these questions take on greater urgency. But perhaps the answer is not too difficult after all: in a nutshell, the fault mainly lies with our policies that discourage manufacturing and encourage imports.

Pharma raw material manufacturing is a capital-intensive effort as it requires acquisition and continuous upgradation of technology that is not available in the country to produce quality products. Being a science-based industry, it also requires substantial investment in research and continuous development of products and technology. Additionally, it demands years of hard work, and consistent, supportive government policies to become commercially viable. Unless all these are in place, investors will always be looking towards the government for subsidies, which is not a sustainable way of developing any industry, least of all a highly sophisticated one like pharma. In recent decades, India and China have emerged as two leading global suppliers of low-cost pharma raw materials because their governments helped their respective industries every step of the way. India, for example, has invested enormous resources in research and development to bring its pharma industry to a point where it can synthesise even high-end products using indigenous technology and expertise. Although a couple of firms have invested in pharma raw material

production in Pakistan, despite the discouraging attitude of the drug regulator and other government agencies, few investors consider it profitable business given the costs involved and competition from Indian and Chinese suppliers. Nevertheless, the country still has a chance to enter the pharma raw material industry by encouraging the manufacture of plant-based products, especially for the global pain management drugs market. That could be a start.

Keeping history alive

MUSEUMS provide a window to the past, allowing visitors to understand and interact with history. However, ever since the novel coronavirus dismantled the world as we know it, museums and other cultural institutions have had to close their doors to the public to play their part in controlling the rapid spread of the virus and save lives. According to a Unesco report, approximately 90pc of museums around the world have been closed indefinitely since the pandemic, while 10pc may have to shut down permanently, depriving many people of memorable, educational experiences, and others their sources of income.

Even though Pakistan inherited some of the world's oldest civilisations, we never truly developed a museum-going culture, perhaps not valuing our own rich histories, or seeing the potential they held to attract tourists from around the world. Despite this lack of interest, there are some interesting museums scattered across the country that have welcomed people from all walks of life at relatively low entrance costs. A report in the paper last week mentioned that there are 46 museums in the country; out of these, 37 have now been closed. But even the best among them did not pull large enough groups of local or international tourists before the pandemic, when compared to other countries in the region. So while we may not lose revenue in the same way tourist-friendly nations are doing in these times, perhaps it is time to reflect on the importance of museums and the preservation of history to promote a positive national narrative. This government, in particular, has been keen to promote tourism in the country, taking steps to that end like easing the arduous visa application process. According to the Cultural Heritage and Museum Visits in Pakistan report by Gallup Pakistan, tourist traffic at cultural sites increased by 317pc between 2014 and 2018. The pandemic has hit the global tourism industry hard, and local museums are surely a part of it.

Fear of testing

AS confirmed Covid-19 cases rapidly increase across the country, a dangerous trend is emerging within communities: people are refusing to get tested for the coronavirus as they fear being shamed and stigmatised.

There appears to be a general fear that if the test turns out to be positive, the infected individual will be expelled from the community or left to languish in an isolation centre.

The belief is that calling a Covid-19 testing team to one's home or neighbourhood will invite judgement.

The consequences of such apprehensions can be extremely damaging to efforts to curb the spread of the infection.

Such concerns stem from a poor understanding of the virus and the SOPs in place to deal with confirmed cases.

There are also concerns that the bodies of those who succumb to the infection are not released to family members, thereby fuelling reluctance to get tested.

These apprehensions are further compounded by conspiracy theories that Covid-19 is 'not real'.

This phenomenon is not unique to Pakistan.

It is seen in other countries as well, such as Iraq, where religious beliefs and a deep suspicion of the government have made people ashamed and afraid of getting themselves tested.

Over there, the fear runs so deep that some avoid being tested, stop family members getting tested and delay seeking medical help until they fall seriously ill.

A similar trend has been observed in countries in West Africa, where members of a neighbourhood reproached an individual for calling the government helpline to get tested.

In this situation, federal and provincial administrations must improve their messaging to the public.

They must strengthen their awareness campaigns to specifically resonate with those who refuse testing due to mistaken or ill-informed beliefs.

If people fail to report Covid-19 symptoms and refuse to have themselves tested, the chances of community transmission will increase — and the spread of the virus to elderly, vulnerable and immuno-compromised individuals will go undetected.

Therefore, it is extremely important that authorities communicate how crucial testing is, and show how citizens can responsibly play their part in curbing transmission by reporting themselves if they experience Covid-19 symptoms.

Hiding symptoms and failing to be tested will have catastrophic results in communities, especially since reports indicate that our healthcare systems are already overwhelmed.

Such fear and reluctance will only add to the spread of the virus, which has already taken more than 1,500 lives in Pakistan.

Spy games

IN the world of diplomacy, the declaration of consular staff as *personae non grata* by the host state is amongst the oldest tricks in the book designed to indicate displeasure with the sending state. And in the current atmosphere in South Asia, with Pakistan-India relations in a decidedly cool phase, such a move can only serve to further strain ties. Two staffers of the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi have been declared *personae non grata* by India and asked to leave the country “for indulging in espionage activities”. Pakistan has rejected the claims as “false and unsubstantiated”. This is not the first instance of its kind, and whenever ties dip such moves are made, with the other state responding in similar fashion.

The dispensation that currently rules India is averse to peace with Pakistan and will find even the slightest excuse to cut or limit ties with this country. The Foreign Office has termed the Indian move part of a “pre-planned and orchestrated media campaign”. At a time when both states should be combining forces to limit the spread of Covid-19 in the region, India is vitiating the atmosphere by making such moves, and repeating the mantra of terrorism to implicate Pakistan, all the while making threatening moves along the LoC. Instead of cutting ties, efforts

should be made to extend the hand of cooperation at a time when the world is facing an unprecedented contagion that knows no borders, ideologies or religions. Yet with Hindutva, the guiding light of the ruling BJP clique, statesmanship and vision cannot be expected. If India had any genuine concerns about certain staffers, they should have been communicated to Pakistan via diplomatic channels. Pakistan should react to this ill-advised move calmly and resist provocations designed to further vitiate the atmosphere in South Asia. The focus should be on maintaining peace in the region and dealing with the coronavirus threat. Moreover, provocative attempts designed to spark a confrontation should be avoided by the Indian establishment.

Agriculture mess

THE threat of food insecurity looms large as Pakistan faces multiple challenges to its agricultural sector, which despite its declining share in GDP remains the country's economic backbone. Agriculture employs almost 40pc of the labour force and provides raw material for manufactured exports. It is also a major consumer of locally manufactured industrial goods including fertilisers, tractors, pesticides, etc. In recent years, the increase in the sale of cars, motorcycles, home appliances and other products have greatly depended on growth in farmers' incomes. Unfortunately, successive governments have neglected agriculture at the peril of national food security and economic well-being. On top of this, changing climate patterns, and pests such as locust swarms, pose a new threat.

Decades of inconsistent and poor policy choices, and little investment in farm mechanisation, efficient irrigation systems and R&D have led to stagnation in yields and prevented farmers from moving towards value-added crops including fruit, vegetables, edible oils and fodder to increase their income. Some estimates show that nearly a third of crop produce is wasted in the harvesting period. The wastage in the case of perishable products is even greater because of poor storage facilities. The story of the livestock sector is no different. Pakistan is the world's fifth largest milk producer and yet many families cannot afford it. A fifth of the total annual output is wasted, and the absence of laws to regulate its trade is hindering investment in the dairy industry. We also have one of the world's largest cattle population. Yet the majority cannot afford meat. Nor have we been

able to capitalise on the presence of a growing multibillion-dollar, global halal meat market.

Recently, the government approved a Rs50bn programme to help farmers access subsidised fertilisers, pesticides, cotton seed, locally manufactured tractors and bank loans. The package to be implemented through the provinces is part of the relief given by the centre to help the economy fight the adverse impact of the coronavirus. This is not the first scheme of its kind, nor will it be the last. But the scope and impact of such schemes is limited. While such measures may help governments cover up long-term, structural issues in agriculture, they don't offer permanent solutions, which require investment in R&D to develop drought-resilient, high-yield quality seeds, training of farmers in water management, provision of soft loans to purchase equipment, and improvement in extension services to reduce the use of chemicals and increase soil fertility. Similarly, the government needs to enforce policies to increase milk and meat yields and laws to regulate their trade for investment in the supply chain. In other words, instead of wasting billions on inefficient subsidies, the government should tweak its policies to encourage development of competitive markets that eliminate the middleman, and enable farmers to buy inputs and sell their produce at the right prices.

An alarming decision

IN a move that flies in the face of ominous data, Prime Minister Imran Khan has decided to further ease lockdown restrictions across the country and to reopen almost all sectors of industry — an unfortunate decision that will see a greater surge in coronavirus infections.

The announcement was made by Mr Khan after a meeting of the NCC which deliberated on the rapid increase in daily new cases and deaths, yet did not come up with a prevention strategy.

Instead, the plan, according to the prime minister, is to rely on citizen responsibility.

Take precautions or you will continue to suffer, he said.

Learn to live with it, as the virus will spread till there is a vaccine, he added.

What is most shocking is the decision to resume tourism in the country.

The writing is on the wall: thousands more will contract the infection and a number of people will die if the government does not come up with effective solutions while it waits for a vaccine that is at least a year away from production and distribution.

It is almost as if the top leadership does not read the news or the alarming Covid-19 data.

Data and news reports are crucial indicators of what is to come and must be examined closely.

Pakistan is now in the world's top 10 countries when it comes to new daily deaths and cases.

In May alone, 1,100 people died of Covid-19 in the country, with 54,000 confirmed cases in 30 days.

A sample survey carried out by health authorities in Lahore estimated that around 670,000 people in the city may have contracted the virus, a figure far higher than the current one.

While questions can be asked about the size of the survey and why its findings are different from official numbers, it is alarming that the Punjab government ignored this study and its practical recommendations.

The worst is yet to come — a scenario predicted by Mr Asad Umar, who said violations of SOPs committed by people over Eid would be felt by mid-June.

Oddly, despite this concern, Mr Umar, too, has opposed a lockdown unless the healthcare system is overwhelmed.

Perhaps our leaders will understand the crisis better if they spend a few hours at emergency rooms in hospitals in the major cities.

Hospital staff are getting infected and dying; patients are being turned away because of lack of space.

But instead of building healthcare capacity and mulling an effective way to curb transmission, the government is talking about tourism.

Who will travel to Pakistan, where infection rates are climbing? It is still not too late to lock down and lower the transmission rate, as has been done in other countries which have flattened the curve and are slowly reopening.

US press attacked

PUBLIC anger that erupted late last month over the death of George Floyd, who died after a policeman put his knee on the African American man's neck for a prolonged period during an arrest, has refused to subside. While many demonstrations have been peaceful, others have descended into riots, looting and arson, with a growing number of American cities rocked by the unrest. Unfortunately, the reaction by the American leadership, particularly the incumbent of the White House, has left a lot to be desired, and has, in fact, fanned the flames. What has been particularly appalling is the apparently deliberate targeting of mediapersons covering the events. Perhaps the most shocking event witnessed in this connection was the arrest, on live TV, of CNN reporter Omar Jimenez and members of his team covering protests in Minneapolis. Troopers in full riot gear handcuffed Mr Jimenez as he asked them why he was under arrest, in a scene straight out of a George Orwell novel. But this has hardly been the only incident of its kind. Activists say mediapersons have been attacked by law enforcers over 100 times since May 28, with some facing rubber bullets and pepper spray despite clearly identifying themselves as members of the press. As the International Press Institute has noted, "The growing list of incidents reveals a chilling pattern in which reporters were targeted by police." One MSNBC reporter recalled, when he told police that he was a mediaperson, the response he got was: "We don't care."

Such behaviour is usually reported from authoritarian states that clamp down on journalists with impunity, and are dragged over the coals by the US and other Western states for their animosity towards press freedom. However, in a sign of the times, it seems that such despicable ways are fast becoming the new normal in the US, thanks largely to the combative nature of the American president. While there is no justification for violence, which in fact dishonours the memory of George Floyd and other victims of police brutality, a much darker picture is emerging from the protests in America. In a country where free speech is a constitutional guarantee, the long arm of the law is instead cracking down on those whose job it is to report the facts. The authorities in the US must ensure

that journalists are allowed to work freely, and not harassed and attacked by those in uniform.

Man for all seasons

FAROGH Naseem has resigned as law minister to represent the government in the presidential references filed against Supreme Court judge Justice Qazi Faez Isa. This act of his seems to be part of a habit. Last year, he resigned from his portfolio to represent army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa in the case of the latter's extension. He was promptly sworn back into the cabinet after the case was over. It is fairly obvious now that such is Mr Naseem's legal prowess that the government cannot trust any lawyer in the country other than him to take on this important legal challenge. The credit for this indispensability cannot be taken away from Mr Naseem who has shown — repeatedly — that he is a man who wears many hats. When he resigned his office to represent Gen Bajwa, critics garlanded him with unflattering labels which would have caused many a person to blush. But not him. Mr Naseem stood his ground, defied all (evened) odds, won the case, and silenced his critics with the contempt many richly deserved for doubting his intentions. Wrapped in legal glory, Mr Naseem galloped back into the cabinet like a conquering hero.

Now once again he has unsheathed his sword of law, donned his judicial armour, straddled his statutory stallion and cantered out of the cabinet straight into the battlefield on Constitution Avenue. It is a short ride from the Prime Minister's Secretariat to the court, and a short ride back. Justice Faez Isa may have branded him a 'tout' in his application to the Supreme Court, but Mr Naseem has proved time and again that he is above such provocations. He is a loyal soldier of the court, and of the government, and of the court again and this trait endears him to so many people who matter when it comes to appreciating the endearing traits of the talented Mr Farogh Naseem. In a landscape of constantly changing seasons, he is truly a man for all seasons.

Shahbaz's escape

THE decision of the Lahore High Court on Wednesday to grant former chief minister Shahbaz Sharif pre-arrest bail capped the latest upheaval in NAB's

avowed drive to punish the corrupt and the Sharif family saga. Mr Sharif has now been asked to appear before NAB on June 9 after Tuesday's high drama which had reduced the official raiders looking for Mr Sharif to a role not quite commensurate with their status or mandate. The PML-N leader had been summoned by NAB officials in Lahore on the day. Instead, he chose to write a letter, introducing himself as a 69-year-old man with reasons to be wary of gatherings during the Covid-19 pandemic. The NAB premises were risky, and on the strength of some unspecified news reports, the letter claimed that certain personnel had contracted the virus. Having registered its reservations, it appears that the PML-N was correct in expecting NAB teams to launch their 'find Shahbaz' operation. The first and most prominent raid was made on the old Sharif residence in Model Town, which was reportedly followed by more searches in other places in the city. They all drew a blank. Mr Sharif had disappeared.

Not that this operation came out of the blue. Some politicians had been predicting that Mr Sharif was on schedule to land in the NAB lockup soon after Eid. Clearly, the PML-N was prepared for that moment when the law came literally knocking on their leader's door. NAB, which has been projected by the government cheerleaders as in the mood to catch and grill big fish, was ultimately found wanting. Government spokespersons and sundry PTI supporters constantly swear by NAB's autonomous and fully empowered status. But this incident hardly painted a pretty picture of the highly hailed accountability officials, who made such a mess of locating and taking into custody a man whose whereabouts in the city from where he drew power have been so meticulously documented. One explanation is that it's not easy to find Shahbaz Sharif or any of his family members whom the city of Lahore has taken under its protective wings — a line which should be officially shunned since it would be a perfect conclusion for PML-N supporters. A better official strategy would be to blame it on human error and the laxity of the raiders.

It has been suggested that Mr Sharif emerged from the episode as a fainthearted leader. But while one can argue that the principled position would have been to face the law, no matter how tarnished NAB's reputation, this would go against the tenets of Mr Sharif's own political philosophy. The former chief minister is here to avoid arrest, perhaps to cut a deal. He avoids and evades; it is up to the other plank of the party to decide when it is absolutely necessary to resist and to be seen to be doing so.

Zahra's murder

THERE is a Dickensian quality to the latest case of child abuse that has shocked the country — such is the appalling social inequity it depicts. On Sunday, an eight-year-old girl did something many of her age might have done: she let escape some birds confined in a cage. Except, little Zahra was not a daughter of privilege — she was a domestic worker in a Rawalpindi household and the pet parrots belonged to her employers. Her 'transgression' allegedly earned the child such a brutal beating by the couple that she succumbed to her injuries soon after being brought to hospital. The suspects have been remanded into police custody. As per the FIR, Zahra sustained injuries to her face, hands, below the ribcage, and legs. She may have also been subjected to sexual assault, though tests are yet to confirm that.

Several of the worst aspects of Pakistani society coalesced in this incident — the grinding poverty that blights large sections of it, the abhorrent sense of entitlement among the 'elite', and an exploitative system that perpetuates the status quo either through apathy or complicity. There is also a tacit acceptance of child labour, at least when it is not in a 'hazardous' capacity. But, as we have seen time and again, domestic settings are no less perilous to minor workers. In 2016, 10-year-old Tayyaba nearly died of torture at the hands of her employers, an Islamabad district court judge and his wife. In that instance, there was some measure of accountability, though the couple's prison sentence was reduced from three years to one. Zahra's murder is only the latest in a shameful litany of cases which illustrate that modern-day slavery is alive and well here. In such a milieu, every man, woman and child does not have inherent dignity: instead, dignity is determined by a sliding scale according to socioeconomic class. Children, being the weakest, are the most vulnerable, sometimes at the hands of their own parents who out of compulsion can put them to work even where their well-being cannot be assured. It is about time that the loopholes in the child labour laws that exist in certain sectors were closed and legislation pertaining specifically to minor domestic workers enacted. Moreover, the government must strengthen child protection laws so that minors can be rescued from abusive or negligent home situations. We must not keep failing young Pakistanis over and over again.

Targeting hospitals

OF late, a number of attacks targeting medical staff in hospitals in Karachi and Peshawar have given rise to apprehension amongst healthcare workers. On May 15, a mob vandalised a section of Karachi's JPMC after attempting to forcibly retrieve the body of a deceased patient who died after contracting the coronavirus. On May 29, the relatives of a 50-year-old woman who tested positive for Covid-19 inflicted damage on Peshawar's Lady Reading Hospital after the critically ill patient passed away. Just a few days earlier, dozens of people had vandalised Karachi's Civil Hospital and attacked doctors, allegedly because the medical staff delayed handing over the body of a Covid-19 patient who died during treatment. The relatives of the deceased patient rejected the test results, while the hospital said the result came out positive after it was under process for some time. Horrifyingly, a female doctor was slapped by a relative of the deceased.

Even as healthcare workers are applauded for their commitment to treating Covid-19 patients across the world and in our own country, these incidents highlight the lack of trust between the public and institutions, as well as the failure to send out the right message. Undoubtedly, the death of a loved one due to Covid-19 or any other reason is painful for the family. But the guidelines from the government say there should be a balance between the rights of the family and the risks of exposure to infection or need for investigating the cause of death. The SOPs may include testing, draining and disinfecting any wounds and suction of nasal and oral passages because there are fears that the lungs of the deceased patient may contain the live virus. These steps take time and are necessary to minimise the risk of exposure to healthcare and mortuary staff. Authorities need to do everything possible to protect healthcare workers who are treating Covid-19 patients at great personal risk. Better security and improved public messaging on the SOPs for deceased patients would be a step in the right direction.

Protecting the environment

EVEN though the novel coronavirus pandemic has put many burning issues on the back-burner, it still presents an opportunity to reflect on the direction the

world had been moving towards in recent decades, and to course correct. Of course, the dream of a better world cannot come to fruition until we change our basic value systems. Since today marks World Environment Day, it is a good time to reflect on our attitudes towards the natural world, as we battle disaster on multiple fronts. While much of modern civilisation has been forced to pause, the effects of climate change — largely the consequence of decades of human recklessness — can still be felt. In Bangladesh, a cyclone has left thousands in need of humanitarian support. While cyclones and flooding are not out-of-the-ordinary occurrences in Bangladesh, they have intensified in recent years. But an even greater calamity may have unfolded had the government there not acted as quickly as it did to ensure 10,500 more shelters were available for those affected, along with overseeing a 70,000-strong volunteer force to mitigate the disaster. Additionally, sanitisers, masks, soap and water were made available to them, while social distancing methods were reportedly implemented. In a world that seems to be falling apart, with much of its leadership missing, in denial, or shifting blame, this is a shining example of the power of collective action and a government taking charge. Imagine if similar preventive measures were applied to the environment, keeping the long-term view in mind.

Five years ago, the Paris Agreement was drafted with the goal of reducing global greenhouse gas emissions. Five years later, global greenhouse gas emissions are said to have gone down, but primarily because of circumstances few could have predicted, rather than through human will and the formulation and implementation of environment-friendly policies. To curtail the rapid spread of the coronavirus, governments around the world had to enforce lockdowns, disrupting economic activities and travel. However, these lockdowns deeply hurt the poorest sections of society, amid much suffering and death — so there is little cause to celebrate. Scientists and experts are also sceptical of how long these changes will last, given the trends in recent history.

Then there is the fear that perhaps it is already too late: a recent study in *Nature Climate Change* says that, even if global greenhouse gas emissions were to be drastically reduced, the world's oceans may still continue to heat up in the latter half of this century, further unsettling the already endangered marine biodiversity. But what feels like the end of times sometimes turns out to be a period of transition. Change is in motion: for the first time in more than 130 years, renewable energy sources have surpassed coal in the United States.

SOPs not followed

AS Covid-19 cases swell across the country, the deaths of some legislators who contracted the coronavirus are a tragic example of how close to home the pandemic has hit for so many families. Among the latest Covid-19 fatalities are two legislators from Punjab and KP who passed away after testing positive. Before this, a Sindh minister died after testing positive. In May, a JUI-F MPA and former Balochistan governor as well as a PTI MPA in Punjab passed away after contracting the infection. The number of lawmakers testing positive is also growing, with confirmed cases of legislators in KP, Sindh and Punjab. The figures look more worrying by the day. More than 4,000 new cases and over 80 deaths were reported in a single day — numbers that show a consistently rising graph.

The government's strategy to curb this rapid spread relies solely on citizens following the SOPs. In many countries, including Pakistan, the SOPs include frequent handwashing, maintaining a certain distance from others, avoiding touching the face and eyes, but most importantly, covering the face and nose. In fact, sharing the federal government's updated Covid-19 guidelines, Dr Zafar Mirza last week said that face masks are mandatory. Although it is unclear how the government plans to enforce this rule, scientific evidence shows that wearing masks can limit the spread of the virus. "It is prudent for the people to wear face masks with an intention to protect their fellow beings," the guidelines say. Since the guidelines were announced, the prime minister was seen wearing a face mask in footage of a cabinet meeting released by his office last night. Raising eyebrows the day before, however, were official photographs of his visit to the ISI headquarters this week, in which Mr Khan was the only participant seen not wearing any kind of face covering. The same has been said about many of his ministers. This careless messaging on the part of the leadership raises several questions: how can leaders preach safety to the public if they themselves follow the SOPs inconsistently? Why has the government gone so terribly wrong in its Covid-19 messaging? After the government's green signal for businesses to resume, ensuring universal compliance with the SOPs is perhaps the only barrier left to limit the spread of the virus to some extent. As cases and fatalities increase, the government must reflect on its own failures. The leadership must be more deliberate in its messaging.

Online classes

FOURTEEN-year-old Devika Balakrishnan's lifeless body was found near her home in Kerala, India, on Monday: the first day of her school semester. According to the police, a suicide note had been left behind, with her last words: "I'm going". Her father, a daily wage earner, said she was disheartened after she was unable to participate in an online class with her peers. Under pressure to perform well in a competitive society, student suicides are tragically not uncommon in India. To make matters worse, ever since a countrywide lockdown was imposed to contain the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus, schools have been shut down and classes are taught online. But modern technologies clearly have not reached everyone, and many students fear being left behind. Reportedly, Devika did not have access to television or a smartphone. Given the reality of such inequalities, particularly glaring in developing nations, there is genuine cause for concern that a large number of children will miss out on their education, further exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities within societies. While some universities in the West have decided to teach all their course material online, this is difficult to replicate in many other parts of the world.

In March, the UN reported that 166 countries around the world had shut down schools and universities in the wake of the pandemic, affecting some 87pc of the enrolled population. That same month, in Pakistan, hundreds of university students and instructors registered their complaints with the Pakistan Citizen Portal regarding problems they were having with their online classes, from the quality of the internet connection to the value of lectures. Just over 36pc of the population uses the internet, while accessibility is particularly pronounced in the rural and periphery regions such as former Fata, Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir. The tribal districts, which have seen internet blockages in the recent past, have been particularly deprived of important services. The right to internet access has never seemed more urgent.

PSM workers' sacking

THE government's decision to sack 9,350 employees of the Pakistan Steel Mills at a time when the State Bank is pushing banks to hand out billions in cheap loans to private businesses hit by Covid-10, so that they can maintain their

payrolls, has come as a rude shock. The entire payroll of the largest industrial enterprise of the country has been terminated in spite of pre-election commitments by the prime minister and PTI leaders, especially Planning Minister Asad Umar, to reviving its fortunes with the help of the existing workforce through better management of its affairs. The government has decided to take the easier route after the failure of its halfhearted attempt to resuscitate PSM.

The steel mill is one of Pakistan's most politicised public-sector businesses and had been suffering large losses and accumulating massive liabilities for over a decade. This eventually resulted in the PML-N administration shutting it down in July 2015 as part of a plan to privatise it. According to the federal minister for industries, who held a press conference a day after the ECC approved the plan to fire the employees, the company currently owes Rs210bn to banks. The sum is in addition to Rs90bn that the government spent to bail it out and Rs55bn to pay wages since its complete shutdown. Yet the decision to sack the entire staff is hard to justify, especially under the present circumstances when millions are losing their jobs owing to the deepening economic recession triggered by the pandemic. The reported death of two mill employees during a protest in Karachi against the decision shows the stress the workers are going through.

It is unfair to solely blame the employees for PSM's collapse. The fact is that years of poor management and failure to appoint the right people with the relevant experience and knowledge to the top posts have done more damage than overstaffing or trade unionism. The mill was designed for an annual production of 2.2m tonnes to be profitable. But its capacity never exceeded 1.1m tonnes because of little investment and lack of interest shown by those entrusted with its affairs. Still, it remained profitable for most of the years between 1985 — the year it began commercial operations — and 2008 — the last year it earned profits. Post-2008 bailout packages could not revive it because they were not accompanied by a restructuring plan to turn it into a viable concern. The government just wanted to keep it afloat for privatisation as its production dropped below 20pc of the total capacity. The government claims that the employees' sacking is part of its plan to revamp the mill. If so, such undoubtedly questionable mass dismissals would have been seen in other loss-making SOEs too. What kind of restructuring plan calls for mass layoffs unless investors are more interested in the enterprise's assets than in resurrecting it?

A common threat

THE Pakistan-India relationship continues on its rocky trajectory, with multiple challenges obstructing the path to peace. Overcoming them is difficult, especially when there is an apparent lack of appetite for peace in New Delhi. However, there is some positive movement where the fight against locusts is concerned. As the Foreign Office said on Thursday, both Pakistan and India have joined forces — under the auspices of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation — to combat the threat these pests pose to regional food security. Under the umbrella of the Commission for Controlling the Desert Locust in South-West Asia, which also includes Iran and Afghanistan, both sides are working to counter the threat posed by giant swarms that have devoured crops across the region. After causing havoc here, the locusts have headed eastwards towards India, and it is expected that more swarms will make their way to this region later in the month.

The cooperation over the locust invasion shows that despite the bitterness that affects bilateral ties, both states can work together to tackle common threats. These include pollution — the toxic smog that chokes Lahore and New Delhi knows no boundaries, but can be tackled together. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic continues its deadly march across the planet, and a regional approach can help both states combat the contagion. This is not to say that differences will disappear overnight; Pakistan has major, legitimate concerns over New Delhi's brutal tactics in held Kashmir and India's treatment of its own Muslim citizens, as well as frequent, deadly cross-LoC fire. Yet while these thorny issues need steady efforts and diplomacy to resolve, other problems can be dealt with in a less complicated manner. If bilateralism does not suit the states at this juncture, then multilateral or regional fora, such as the FAO anti-locust body, can be used to tackle common threats. Moreover, Saarc, which has largely become moribund, can also be reactivated to approach the relatively 'soft' issues that afflict South Asia, such as climate change, food security, health, etc. It is hoped a regional strategy is chalked out to deal with the locust issue, considering the threat it poses to food security, while multilateral fora can also be used to address other common issues. Once progress is achieved on these fronts, perhaps both states will one day have the confidence to approach the more difficult questions that have bedevilled South Asia for over seven decades.

Fuel shortages

THE shortages of vehicular fuel in various parts of the country are grounds for concern and must not be allowed to turn into a full-scale crisis of the sort the country saw in 2014. The shortages exist because of the confluence of two unusual situations. One is the lockdown of April and May during which demand for vehicular fuel plummeted, while the other is the collapse of oil prices, followed by their rapid rise. The two are linked in the sense that international oil prices collapsed because of the global lockdowns, but their effects have transmitted themselves to Pakistan's oil supply chain separately. Oil companies were reluctant to book shipments of the fuel at a time when local demand had fallen and inventories had piled up. And when the lockdown was lifted and demand returned, the government had passed through the lower price to the pumps, which made it difficult for the companies to arrange future shipments.

There is no doubt that Pakistan's oil supply chain is extremely fragile and can run into difficulties very quickly. Both operational and financial problems can cause the supply chain to break down. But it is always the government's responsibility to ensure this does not happen. This is because vehicular fuel is too important a product to be left to its own devices, and also because the government assumes responsibility for pricing as well as supply issues. At the moment, the leadership seems committed to passing through major oil price benefits to the consuming public, against the advice of the Finance Division which sees an opportunity to generate revenue amid the price declines, as well as of the oil marketing companies, who argue that declines in the price at the pump complicate the effort to arrange future supplies. One can be agnostic on the question of pricing, but if the supply chain is disrupted to the point of creating a fuel crisis, the responsibility must squarely lie with the government.

No infection control

IF someone were to draw on everything the world has learned about Covid-19 in the past six months and write a playbook about what not to do in the event of a high-fatality pandemic, our government's strategy could comfortably feature as a case study of what happens when the wrong decisions are made. Where many countries rightly rely on data, mass testing, and science-led strategies to enforce

lockdowns and limit the spread of Covid-19, our government has been defensive, slow to act and adopted a hands-off approach in which citizens are left to protect themselves. This week, the prime minister sent the same message: that people should protect themselves and that there will be no lockdown. He also appeared to imply that countries that locked down were somehow impractical. “What did these countries gain from strict lockdown? Their people lost jobs, poverty increased while cases of the coronavirus continued to increase there,” he said, in a statement that contradicts the falling graph of Covid-19 infection rates and deaths in many countries including the UK, Italy, France and Spain.

That the government’s approach has not changed even when Pakistan’s daily death rate is climbing and the total number of Covid-19 cases (advancing rapidly towards the 100,000 mark) has surpassed those of China, a country with a population of over a billion people, is troubling. It betrays denial on part of the government and is at odds with everything epidemiologists have advised. What is more alarming is that the authorities ignored the fact that many countries have lowered transmission and death rates by enforcing strict lockdowns and distancing. The crucial ‘R number’, a key factor used by many countries gauging the coronavirus pandemic which refers to the ‘effective reproduction number’ of Covid-19, is largely missing from the national conversation. An R figure that is even slightly greater than one can lead quickly to a large number of cases due to the virus’s exponential growth. Where many countries have understood this as a crucial threshold and have committed to locking down again if the figure surpasses one, Dr Zafar Mirza has admitted that Pakistan’s R value is two — with no lockdown or restrictions in sight. What is even more worrying is that the government has abandoned its earlier policy to quarantine international travellers coming to Pakistan — a decision which will increase both new and community transmission cases. Travellers will now arrive at the airport and go straight home without waiting for their Covid-19 results, possibly infecting members of their household, who will, in turn, infect many others.

The coming weeks look very grim. The government’s undeclared adoption of herd immunity may destroy the social and healthcare fabric of this country and further cripple the economy and the poor whose plight is used as a justification for doing little to prevent the virus from spreading.

Women voters

ELECTIONS embody the very essence of democracy but a huge number of women in Pakistan are excluded from the exercise because their names are missing from the electoral rolls. Last year, the Election Commission of Pakistan had released its district-wise data for male and female registered voters in the 2018 polls, which revealed that the gender gap among voters was a whopping 12.54m. On Wednesday, the chief election commissioner called for urgent measures, including an awareness campaign, to address the issue. Of the 20 districts with the widest gender gap, no less than 17 are in Punjab. In fact, two Punjab districts — Lahore and Faisalabad — account for more than one million of the differential. Of the remaining, two are in KP and one in Sindh.

Despite repeated electoral cycles, women's political participation appears to be on the decline rather than on an upward trajectory. Consider that in the 2013 polls, the gender gap between voters was considerably less at 10.97m. That the discrepancy should have increased during the 2018 elections despite concerted efforts to enhance the female component of the electoral rolls is a matter of concern. In an effort to underscore the importance of women's participation in elections, the ECP for the first time declared it mandatory to have at least 10pc of votes in each constituency cast by women. That also gave men a stake in ensuring women voters' turnout. In fact, re-polling was ordered in a Shangla constituency because only 4.01pc of registered women voters had cast their ballot. The overall environment too on the surface appears more conducive to women's political participation, with TV news channels providing a platform for vocal female politicians, and a considerable amount of women-friendly legislation having been enacted. Clearly, however, there remain impediments to women's participation in the political arena that are resistant to change. These are anchored in patriarchal traditions that keep women outside decision-making processes. There are still areas where local representatives of political parties strike tacit deals to discourage women from voting, and then use the convenient pretext of 'culture' to justify their absence from the hustings. The matter must be taken up by the federal and provincial governments and at the highest levels of every political party. District administrations and local party workers must be ordered to ensure that every woman eligible to vote is registered. At the very least, the gender gap between male and female voters must be bridged.

Insecure police

THE transfer earlier this week of Lahore Police's investigation and operations chiefs has added fuel to the perennially heated debate over the level of autonomy allowed to the law-enforcement force. Voices emanating from the police department — some of those recorded in news features — speak of an uncontrollable urge on the part of the executive in Punjab to toy with official postings. And in this game that the provincial set-up is accused of constantly engaging in, senior policemen are the most frequent victims. This is also the case in other provinces where police find themselves subject to the whims of the government, making it difficult for them to carry out their duties honestly. Those who try to do their job are publicly humiliated. At a time when the virtues of modern governance are often stressed as crucial to the democratic functioning of the state, the image of the police force leaves a lot to be desired. There must be accountability of all at all stages and the misuse of power must be dealt with with an iron hand. But at some point, the government will have to find a way to ensure security of tenure for a police officer involved in the delicate work of enforcing the law against great odds. That task will be difficult since it would require pulling the current chief executives out of their insecure zones.

It is about time we moved to the next point — if the ever-widening rift between the exploiting politicians at the helm and the easily used police officers allows us to. No one seems to take into account the negative effects that the constant reshuffling of the police force, including very visible public officials, can have on the public. The people are likely to view all abrupt police transfers not only with suspicion, but also fear. The more the number of such transfers in a city, the greater the number of insecure police officers there will be. A city with so many insecure officers will also be insecure.

When jirgas abet crime

THE fracas involving ANP leader Ayaz Wazir in South Waziristan harks back ominously to the 'bad old days'. That was when the district was part of the semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which lay beyond the purview of the Pakistani courts and thus left the people deprived of judicial protection of their fundamental rights. On Friday, a jirga of the Ahmedzai Wazirs decided that

a lashkar would raze Mr Wazir's house to the ground. The tribal elders had reportedly been angered by the ANP leader speaking with the district administration to advocate for local police to be empowered to raid places where they suspected the presence of criminal elements. On Saturday, the jirga reconvened to raise a 2,400-strong armed militia to demolish Mr Wazir's house. However, local police called in reinforcements from elsewhere in KP, including 500 elite force from Bannu. The show of counter force enabled the police and district administration to persuade the Ahmedzai Wazirs to come to the negotiating table and accept Rs1m and four rams as reparation from Mr Wazir and his clan. Peace has been restored, at least for now — but at what cost to the state?

Fata's integration with KP in May 2018 fulfilled one of the principal demands of its residents — that the draconian Frontier Crimes Regulation be done away with in its entirety (it had been amended in 2011). Thus, at one stroke, with the passage of the 25th Amendment, the people of the tribal districts had recourse to Pakistan's legal system instead of relying on parallel mechanisms of justice known as jirgas. These tribal, all-male councils are known to have meted out wholly disproportionate as well as regressive and misogynistic punishments.

Then, in January 2019, the Supreme Court declared jirgas/ panchayats as ultra vires of the Constitution when they function as adjudicative bodies in civil or criminal matters. According to the judgement, they could lawfully operate as arbitration, mediation, negotiation or reconciliation forums between parties to a civil dispute.

However, as the latest incident shows, old ways die hard, and those who have historically wielded power do not give it up easily. More importantly though, the state, by facilitating negotiations whereby the intended target of a crime had to compensate the perpetrator — rather than arresting those holding the jirga, and planning and abetting the attempted crime — has abdicated its duty to the people. That the jirga announced its intentions so openly is also indicative of the impunity with which notables of the area operate. The state must demonstrate that it alone has a monopoly on violence. Then again, this is hardly the only jirga that has taken the law into its own hands. Nor are the tribal districts the only place where such gatherings take place. Pakistan must no longer indulge these kangaroo courts.

Iran & nuclear deal

WHEN the US withdrew from the multilateral Iran nuclear deal in 2018, it was hoped that the other signatories would help save the landmark accord by helping investment reach Iran's battered economy. Due mainly to US pressure, hardly any of that investment has materialised, and the Iranians had been saying for a long time that if the deal failed to bring them due benefits, they would withdraw. Sadly, it appears that the JCPOA, as the nuclear deal is known, may now well be in its death throes as according to the IAEA, Iran has violated the restrictions placed on its nuclear activities by the 2015 accord. Specifically, the global nuclear watchdog says Tehran has surpassed the amount of enriched uranium it is allowed to keep.

For a brief while over the past few days, it seemed that behind the scenes, progress was being made between the US and Iran. The most tangible evidence of this emerged when details of a prisoner swap were made public; Iran sent back a US navy veteran it had apprehended while the Americans released an Iranian scientist they were keeping in detention. However, it may well be that the US will pounce on Iran for violating the deal based on the IAEA information, even though it is no longer part of the JCPOA. It is a fact that Iran is under a lot of pressure. Due to crippling US sanctions its economy is tanking, while it has been hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. The violations of the nuclear deal must be seen in this context — a signal from the Iranian establishment that, unless it is given some breathing room, it will discard the deal. However, Iran would be well advised to stick with the deal; any further sanctions and blockades will only add to the miseries of the Iranian people. Moreover, the other signatories of the deal — the Europeans, China and Russia — must try and save it, mainly by allowing more economic interaction with Iran. Should the situation deteriorate resulting in Iran's departure from the deal, it will not be a good omen for the region. The war party within President Donald Trump's administration will once again raise shrill cries for Iran to be 'punished' and, should they deliver on this threat, the people of the Middle East will suffer the consequences. Therefore, Iran must tread carefully and resist such provocations.

Upholding PWD rights

LAST week, the HRCP raised concerns about “the government’s decision to abolish the two per cent public and private company employment quota for persons living with disabilities, by deleting Section 459 of the Companies Act, 2017, through a presidential ordinance in May”. Later, on Twitter, secretary of the Ministry of Human Rights Rabiya Javeri Agha stated that the deletion of this section from the Companies Act would not jeopardise the job quota guarantee. While the secretary’s responsiveness ought to be appreciated, this episode highlights issues that can arise through hastily promulgated ordinances, without stakeholder feedback and parliamentary debate and oversight. Hopefully, the briefing from the chairman SECP before the Senate Functional Committee on Human Rights scheduled for today will bring clarity to this issue. Disability rights advocates have every reason to be wary of their protections being eroded, and seek an official guarantee from the government that this one remains intact. Labour protections in this country are weakly enforced in general, and more so for PWDs who have been historically barred from accessing their rights and opportunities on an equal basis.

Despite ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of PWDs in 2011, Pakistan has made little to no progress to help bring these citizens into the mainstream fold through inclusive policies in every sphere and at every level of government. There has been legislative progress at both the federal and provincial levels since on disability rights, yet implementation remains piecemeal and negligible. The spirit of the UNCRPD demands an approach in which disability is factored into all decision-making processes. Merely filling job quotas will never lead to systemic change if this effort is not blended with comprehensive measures to facilitate PWDs’ participation in society by ensuring all their rights are affirmatively upheld. Without these, Pakistan will never be able to redress decades of stigma and discrimination of PWDs. Far more Pakistanis are estimated to have some form of disability than is officially recorded — it is time to treat them seriously.

Sugar investigation

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has sanctioned the launch of multiple investigations against sugar mill owners on the basis of the findings of a comprehensive forensic audit report prepared by the high-powered Sugar Inquiry Commission last month. This is an unprecedented move against an entire industrial sector, which has operated as a cartel and tricked all stakeholders — government, farmers, taxpayers and consumers — for years without any accountability and deprived them of tens of billions of rupees. The sugar cartel has allegedly cheated farmers, evaded taxes, secured undue subsidies and committed corporate fraud with impunity because of its deep political influence over all political parties and successive civil and military administrations. The sugar inquiry has done a good job by pointing out systemic issues in the industry. The report reveals how the cartel duped the stakeholders every step of the way, from the procurement of sugarcane from farmers to the sale of sugar — domestic and export — and how it supplied incorrect and unverified data, besides using its political clout to secure undue subsidies from decision-makers and regulators. It has also underscored the collusion of industry regulators and owners for financial benefit.

The investigations will be conducted by anti-corruption agencies such as NAB, FIA and provincial anti-corruption bodies, as well as financial and corporate sector regulators ie the State Bank, FBR, CCP and the SECP. All will be looking into different aspects of the alleged fraud by sugar mill owners and will finalise their reports in 90 days. For example, the State Bank has been tasked with probing the possibility of sugar exporters having forged documents to secure freight subsidy without actually shipping the commodity to Afghanistan, and bank defaults. NAB will probe the issue of sugar export and other subsidies, and the CCP will be looking into cartelisation that manipulates the market. Asset Recovery Unit head Shahzad Akbar and Information Minister Shibli Faraz promised to “take on all the mafias in the country one by one. Everyone will be held accountable, no matter how rich or politically powerful”. That commitment will be tested in the weeks to come. In the meanwhile, the government needs to satisfy its critics, who are accusing it of allowing Jahangir Khan Tareen, the largest sugar producer and until recently a close adviser to Mr Khan, to fly out of the country hours before the announcement of the probe against sugar mill owners. Mr Tareen, who bankrolled the PTI’s election campaign in 2018, has

claimed he was going abroad for his biannual medical examination and not running away.

While industry practices need further investigation, especially to bring to book those who have stolen billions over the years, it is equally important to reform the sugar supply chain. That can be done by gradually deregulating the industry, doing away with the support price mechanism, withdrawing curbs on the free import/ export of sugar and improving corporate oversight.

Beyond George Floyd

THE tragic death of George Floyd in Minneapolis has served as a bellwether event, sparking protests in cities across the world against racism and the state's brutality. On the surface, it is about one man pinned down by a policeman apparently due to the colour of his skin, and shown no mercy despite his desperate cries for help. Of course George Floyd is not the first victim of police brutality in America, and unless things change drastically, he will not be the last. Another equally appalling video shows police officers pushing an elderly white protester in the city of Buffalo to the ground; the man lies on the pavement with blood oozing out of his ear as officers march past. But as the protests in the US, Europe, Australia and elsewhere show, the issue has morphed into something bigger than simply police violence in America. Thousands of people have taken to the streets calling for equality; this is a cry, as it were, from the wretched of the earth against racism and oppression in all its forms.

Indeed, many so-called First-World countries have built democratic structures and managed to give their people significant freedoms. However, it should not be forgotten that many of these states are built on a legacy of colonialism and slavery, and it is only over the last few decades that they have adopted a democratic course. Moreover, these grim legacies have helped shape the violence and intolerant attitudes today against minorities. Only a few years ago, members of the far right in the US staged torch-lit marches reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan's activities. In fact, much of the angst of the protests over the past few days can be seen as a reaction against the rise of the far right in the West. Donald Trump's journey to power has been propelled partly by white nationalists, while in Europe, the ideological children of fascism today sit in parliaments in Germany, Austria and Hungary. But what is equally troubling is the march of the

extreme right in the former colonies. Narendra Modi and his Hindutva acolytes are a case in point, while even in our own country regressive forces lurk in the shadows, sabotaging efforts to create a more egalitarian society. In such circumstances, progressive forces must unite and continue the fight for a better, more equal world, and prevent the forces of hate from dividing people along racial, religious and sectarian lines.

Building tragedy

YET again lives have been lost in a building collapse in Karachi — this time in Lyari. The narrow residential construction is said to have boasted no less than 40 living units or flats in a thickly populated area. The condition of the building was such that residents were aware of the imminent disaster. The lean five-storey structure appeared to tilt, an ominous sign that apparently compelled some of the families lodged there to escape. So far, six bodies have been retrieved from the debris of the building that caved in on Sunday, and many people have been rescued. But it is still unclear how many people might still be beneath the mountain of concrete which has now become a site from where officials and politicians of all stripes can conduct their favourite blame game.

In a city that has suffered so much on account of feuding in the name of politics, Karachi's tendency to exhibit strong signs of polarisation in times of disaster was on full display yet again. The governor, along with the PTI MNA from Lyari, was quick to point out that the Sindh Building Control Authority under the PPP government was responsible for the collapse. One wonders if there is a realisation that it is also the responsibility of legislators, as elected public representatives, to try and protect the lives of the voters of their constituency. At the same time, no amount of criticism seems to embarrass the provincial PPP government, which after years of rule has yet to reveal a development plan for this city of 20m. The SBCA too must be held accountable, as it was after a building came crashing down in Rizvia Society in Karachi in March. Unfortunately, such a course hardly leads to positive results. The city is notorious for its haphazard planning and dangerously built structures, many of them constructed illegally in congested localities that can even render rescue work difficult. More tragedies of the sort can be expected if the authorities continue to neglect the state of housing.

Path of disaster

THE nightmare scenario that doctors in the country had warned of in April is fast approaching. At the time, senior doctors had written to the government urging it to reconsider its decision to allow congregational prayers during Ramazan, and had said that the number of Covid-19 patients in need of urgent medical care would “expand exponentially” if strict distancing was not enforced. More than a month later, with the government lifting most lockdown restrictions, those fears are turning into a grim reality. According to official data, major hospitals across the country are rapidly running out of capacity. With over 31,000 cases in Karachi alone, private and public hospitals in the metropolis are becoming overwhelmed. The Sindh health department’s data shows there are no beds vacant in ICU units in Karachi, except for six at one hospital. The Pakistan Medical Association has said that major hospitals in Karachi had stopped admitting critical patients. Even the government’s Pak Neghayban app showed that ventilators were available in one hospital only, while others were running on limited capacity. In KP, the chairman of the Provincial Doctors Association expressed fears that the province was rapidly heading towards a situation where “there will be no space in hospitals to take Covid-19 patients”. According to him, most of Peshawar’s hospitals had run out of beds, with patient’s relatives running from pillar to post in search of a health facility.

One hopes that the harrowing numbers of the infected and the dead that were once seen in Italy as Covid-19 peaked there are not reflected in statistics in Pakistan, where doctors are being forced to refuse patients and make difficult choices in rationing ventilators. As this situation unfolds, Prime Minister Imran Khan has forecast that Pakistan will hit its peak in July or August, whereas earlier, NCOC head Asad Umar had said infections would peak in June.

With no prevention strategy in sight and no consensus between the federation and provinces on a way forward, it is clear that Pakistan is hurtling towards a Covid-19 catastrophe at full throttle. The prime minister, who had disturbingly downplayed the coronavirus as “a type of flu”, is, ironically, today expressing his frustration at the lax attitude of people who are ignoring SOPs. In a televised message this week, Mr Khan said that people who are careless about SOPs will endanger themselves, the elderly, the immuno-compromised and in turn the country — a contrast to his earlier messages that people should not panic and

that we were much better off than other countries. Sadly, few in the government are aspiring to follow New Zealand, which now has zero new cases, or Vietnam, which reported zero deaths. The authorities must look inward and reflect on where they have gone wrong, and what message has been conveyed to the public. They must remedy their mistakes. Alarm bells are ringing loudly. The government must listen.

Archaic law

AN archaic law, enacted by the colonial masters to oppress the ‘natives’, should not — in theory — be difficult to jettison from the statute books. Sometimes, however, the masters of old are replaced by autocrats or, at the very least, quasi-autocrats seeking to quell a ‘troublesome’, rights-demanding populace. Thus, when former chairman Senate Raza Rabbani introduced in the upper house on Monday a bill to do away with sedition from the Pakistan Penal Code, it was akin to taking the bull by the horns. For the offence has increasingly become a go-to for state authorities seeking to clamp down on dissenting voices and independent thought. Civil rights activists — including student leaders and academics — have been targeted for demanding constitutional rights and even journalists singled out for publishing information that ran counter to the official narrative. In January, no less than 23 people were booked for sedition after being hauled up at a peaceful protest calling for the release of PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen, who had himself been arrested for the same, among other charges. Hearteningly, there has been civilian pushback. One of the leaders of the above protest filed a petition in the Lahore High Court asking it to declare the section of the PPC dealing with sedition as being ultra vires the Constitution. The Islamabad High Court also took an extremely dim view of peaceful protesters being charged with the crime.

Defined in Section 124A of the PPC, the offence is deemed to have been committed by an individual who by “words either spoken or written or by signs or by visible representation or otherwise brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt or incites or attempts to incite dissatisfaction...” towards the government. The vague language of the law facilitates its abuse as a one-size-fits-all weapon to harass and intimidate inconveniently vocal individuals. The very *raison d’être* of the law is reflected in the names of some of the historical figures charged with sedition or put on trial for the offence. Among these were Maulana Mohammad Ali and Maulana Shaukat Ali — indeed, Gandhi himself —

individuals who were the voice of an oppressed people and, therefore, those whom the British Raj wanted to silence. The government's human rights minister has rightly criticised the sedition law as "an anachronism in an independent, democratic state". There are other colonial-era black laws, such as contempt of court, which should also be consigned to the dustbin of history.

Melting glaciers

SINCE recent headlines have been dominated by the spread of the novel coronavirus and themes of racial injustice, climate change has taken a back seat. Yet its effects continue to be felt by people around the world. According to a news report, residents of a village in Hunza Valley have expressed their concerns at the rising level of water and flooding, which has left a path of destruction in its wake, forcing people to evacuate their homes. As global temperatures continue to soar, and glaciers melt at an alarming pace, the urgency of addressing climate change could not be greater — especially for countries such as Pakistan, which is one of the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and home to over 7,000 of the world's known glaciers. This battle cannot be fought alone, but it is not as if the warning signs were not there, or that such events occur out of the blue.

For several years, residents of Gilgit-Baltistan have complained about the destruction of their natural environment due to rapid changes they have had to witness before their eyes, including receding glaciers and shrinking forest cover. Pakistan is said to have one of the highest deforestation rates in the world. Not only do trees lower temperatures and provide sanctuary from the scorching sun, they also protect the land from flooding and erosion. Memories of the Attabad Lake disaster remain fresh, and it is telling that one of the most popular tourist attractions was born out of tragedy. Ten years ago, following a landslide, 20 people were killed and 6,000 displaced as their houses were submerged in water. The people of Hunza are some of the most progressive when it comes to the environment; they are among the first in the world to impose a ban on the use of plastic bags, and it is unfair that they disproportionately suffer from the effects of climate change. Instead of slandering, arresting or eliminating climate change activists, listen to their warnings.

WHO's advice

THE writing was on the wall from the start. Only the government refused to see it. Now, the WHO's letter to the provinces, expressing concerns over the steep spike in Covid-19 infections across the country owing to easing the lockdown without effective disease transmission control or surveillance systems, has only confirmed our worst fears. The government had erred in lifting restrictions and opening up the economy after two months of closure. Its actions have caused infections to spike and overwhelm the country's already overstressed public health infrastructure. Every call for extension in the virus lockdown was dismissed as an 'elitist plan'. The lockdown was lifted on the plea that Pakistan could ill afford a longer closure as the shuttered economy would kill more poor people than would Covid-19 infections. Consensus was missing as the centre berated Sindh for pursuing stricter measures, and encouraged businesses to demand the removal of restrictions. It was also troubling to note the superior judiciary's view that Covid-19 "apparently is not a pandemic in Pakistan".

A month after the government ordered the easing of virus restrictions, the country has confirmed more than 115,000 infections and some 2,300 deaths, with each day recording a higher number of cases. Now Pakistan ranks 15th on the list of countries with the most Covid-19 infections and is among the top 10 reporting the highest number of new cases. The disease has spread to every corner of the country and hospitals are reportedly turning away patients because they don't have enough beds. The health authorities say the outbreak will not peak before August. And yet, despite this grim situation, the government continues to send out confusing messages to the public, with politicians often seen without a mask and not observing social distancing guidelines.

The WHO letter says that the disease transmission is steep, and the health system isn't capable of detecting, testing, isolating and treating every case, and tracing every contact. It also points out that a high positivity rate of 24pc, which is above the required level of 5pc, underlines the seriousness of the situation and the poor efforts of the government in this regard. It urges the provinces to enhance daily testing capacity to 50,000 to assess the actual prevalence of the coronavirus besides strengthening the surveillance system (identification, testing, isolation, care for the ill including identification and the follow-up of contacts and quarantining). Lastly, it has recommended the imposition of a 'two weeks on, two

weeks off' lockdown to contain the virus transmission. The government disregarded expert advice when doctors called for banning congregations and ensuring the strict implementation of social distancing guidelines to halt transmissions. It didn't consider their opinion when lifting the lockdown. And it has consistently ignored violations of social distancing guidelines with the result that few have bothered to make the necessary adjustments to lifestyles. It is doubtful then that it will heed the WHO's advice.

COAS Kabul visit

IT is apparent that efforts are underway to save the peace process in Afghanistan on the global and regional levels. The unannounced visit of army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa heading a delegation to Kabul on Tuesday must be seen from this perspective. Gen Bajwa, while in the Afghan capital, met both President Ashraf Ghani as well as Abdullah Abdullah, the second most powerful officeholder in Afghanistan. As expected, intra-Afghan peace efforts were the focus of the discussion, with Dr Abdullah highlighting "Pakistan's constructive role in this regard". Gen Bajwa's Kabul visit came soon after Zalmay Khalilzad, America's point man for Afghanistan, visited Islamabad and Kabul, as well as meeting Afghan Taliban representatives in Doha. Clearly, as the Americans eye their complete exit from Afghanistan, they are encouraging efforts for a settlement in the war-torn country to ensure the fiasco that ensued after the Soviet withdrawal over three decades ago is not repeated.

From a local standpoint, it seems odd that the Kabul sojourn was a military-led initiative, with the ISI chief accompanying the army chief, and the newly appointed special envoy for Afghanistan serving as a token civilian representative. Legitimate questions arise about whether the elected government is disinterested in the Afghanistan file, or if it is being told to stay away. Even in previous engagements, Mr Khalilzad and other senior foreign visitors have been more interested in meeting the military leadership, as the latter is viewed as having the final say in key matters. Perhaps if the foreign minister or some other senior civilian functionary had headed the delegation, it would have provided for better optics. Looking at the larger picture, it appears that the US doesn't want to be blamed for leaving a mess in Afghanistan after its troops board the last American military flight out of Kabul. This explains why in the aftermath of much discord and a bitterly contested election, Mr Ghani and Dr Abdullah were

'prompted' to share power by the US, after Washington cut significant amounts of aid for the Afghan government. The recent shuttle diplomacy is part of the same process. Regardless of America's intentions, the Afghans themselves — the government as well as the Taliban — must take the lead in brokering a lasting peace, and regional states, including Pakistan, must facilitate the process. Without a workable agreement, the descent of Afghanistan into more violence post-US withdrawal cannot be ruled out.

Use of stun batons

IN a disturbing development, it has emerged that law-enforcement agencies in Faisalabad are using stun batons on citizens in a bid to enforce coronavirus-related SOPs. Local police are using these stun batons as a means of punishing those flouting Covid-19-related rules, with videos on social media showing how motorcycle riders with exposed faces are being subjected to this painful and unacceptable treatment. These handheld instruments — clearly approved and supplied by the provincial government — are known to deliver an electric shock that causes the victim to momentarily lose his balance; it disrupts muscle control, besides leading to mental confusion and disorientation. Those who have been at the receiving end of such treatment know that the pain, though briefly felt, is excruciating. One victim said he felt like he "was dying". A policeman on condition of anonymity told this paper that the higher authorities were well aware that these stun batons were being used by LEAs, and that they hoped it would be helpful in making people follow SOPs to contain the spread of the coronavirus. The use of such a device to enforce any kind of rule is unacceptable. Rights groups such as Amnesty International and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan have rightly criticised the use of stun batons as torture. In a statement, the HRCP termed the use of such instruments as a flagrant violation of Article 14 of the Constitution of Pakistan as well as of the UN Convention Against Torture to which Pakistan is a signatory. "The crisis must not be tackled at the expense of human rights — this is not an 'either/or' situation," the commission added.

The government must stop this practice immediately, as not only does it have no legal basis, but it is also an inhumane attempt to remedy its own failure to educate the public. Poor messaging, weak enforcement of SOPs and the authorities' lax attitude are the reason why Covid-19 is spreading unabated. Physically punishing those who do not follow the SOPs is cruel and senseless.

Economy in distress

THE Economic Survey released on Thursday paints a picture of an economy in deep distress. Since the period covered by the data includes mostly the first nine months of the fiscal year, meaning July 2019 to March 2020, much of what is portrayed cannot be attributed to the disruptions from Covid-19. The numbers betray troubling indicators deep inside the grooves of the economy, beyond the headline GDP growth figure, which is negative 0.38pc, a rare occurrence.

A slightly closer look shows some startling numbers. For example, credit to the private sector fell sharply from Rs554.7bn last year to Rs187.3bn this year in the July to March period. This is a marked decline and shows a sharp deceleration underway in private sector activity. The breakdown paints an even starker picture. Working capital loans, for example, dropped from Rs369bn last year to Rs28.8bn this year in the same period. Loans for fixed investment dropped from Rs83.1bn last year to negative Rs5.2bn this year, meaning on net there was negative investment in the country this fiscal year. At the same time, the amount of foregone revenue from tax exemptions jumped to Rs1.15tr this year. Only a few years ago, the figure was less than half this amount. The sharp increase in exemptions given to businesses over the two years that this government has been power has no doubt contributed to this picture.

What is noteworthy here is that despite a string of 'incentives' and 'packages' targeted at specific industries, there has been a sharp deceleration in the pace of economic activity in the country. The cost of these special incentive packages is evident at least partially in foregone revenue, but the benefits don't show up in demand for working capital or investment. The assumption under which the government has repeatedly handed out incentives to the wealthy is that ultimately this will benefit the poor through increased employment and business activity. But it seems these wealthy investors prefer to retain much of the benefit from the packages for themselves, and very little actually reaches the poor. For the forthcoming fiscal year, the government should turn this approach on its head. Instead of the rich, it should put the poor at the centre of its economic policy agenda. Let the poor be the beneficiaries of the state's largesse, and let the benefits trickle up rather than down. Putting money in the hands of the poor and unemployed means it will return to the economy in the form of demand, and that demand should be the signal for wealthy investors for where to invest. This

approach has the added benefit of giving us more durable and organic growth rooted in the needs of the people directly. The budget provides the opportunity to make this shift. Investing in the rich is providing meagre dividends.

Ban child labour

TODAY is World Day Against Child Labour, an apt moment to reflect upon where we stand in relation to this abhorrent practice. While Pakistan has largely eliminated child labour in industries that have international exposure, such as carpet weaving, and the surgical instrument and soccer ball industries, it is not a heartening picture across the board. Consider, for instance, that there are an estimated 12m minors working in the domestic sector. Instances surface regularly of sadistic treatment meted out to these vulnerable individuals who have no agency in the conditions of their employment. Recently in Rawalpindi, an eight-year-old maid named Zahra let escape some caged birds belonging to her employers. That 'mistake' cost her her life, as a result of a savage beating allegedly at the hands of those for whom she was working. In October 2018, 11-year-old Kinza, also a housemaid in Rawalpindi, was found with marks of torture on her body; her employer was charged with causing the injuries. Two years previously, 10-year-old Tayyaba was rescued from an abusive household in Islamabad, her face swollen with welts and hands scarred with burns inflicted by her employers. The couple, a district judge and his wife, were sentenced to one year behind bars.

This is the tip of the iceberg, exceptions that make it into the public domain. Abuse of minor domestic workers takes place with impunity, out of sight behind high walls and the façade of 'social respectability'. Here, these individuals wash, cook and clean, and look after the children of privilege while they are robbed of their own childhood and denied their inherent dignity. All provinces except for Balochistan have enacted laws against the employment of children below 14 years of age, but these pertain to hazardous work, which is in conformity with constitutional protections. There is no legislation specifically against child domestic labour that, as we see time and again, can also be a form of modern-day slavery. Moreover, why is 14 the minimum age for hazardous work? How can teenage boys, over 14 but below the age of 18 — when they are ineligible to vote, or even marry — be deemed old enough to work in places where their health could be compromised, such as in tanneries, car workshops and the like?

The people's representatives must revisit child labour laws in the light of reality. All minors have a right to protection from mental and physical harm.

Domicile controversy

FOR the past several days, protests have been held in different cities of Sindh over the issuance of purportedly fake domiciles and permanent residence certificates in the province. Political parties, nationalist groups and civil society activists claim the practice of issuing the aforesaid documents to non-residents of districts as well as the province is rife thanks to corrupt elements in the bureaucracy. Spurred into action, the Sindh chief minister had launched an inquiry into the matter; findings of the probe thus far, as announced by the provincial information minister, revealed that over 150 bogus domiciles and PRCs had been detected in four districts. He pledged action against the officials responsible, while announcing that an inquiry committee consisting of himself and the chief minister's legal adviser was looking into the matter. However, the opposition MQM-P had earlier rejected the Sindh government committee, saying the move constituted contempt of court as the party had already approached the Sindh High Court regarding the matter of domiciles. The MQM's plea is that non-residents of Karachi are given 'bogus' domiciles.

This is a very sensitive issue as government jobs, places in educational institutions and other official benefits are at stake. While residents of rural Sindh claim they cannot find work in their own districts and that those from other districts and provinces snap up government jobs, people of urban Sindh say they are deprived of employment and education by those from outside the cities. Perhaps the best way to address this is to reconstitute the committee probing the matter. Along with government officials, representation of non-partisan individuals — including respected names from civil society from both rural and urban Sindh — need to be on the committee to ensure that its work is transparent. With limited government jobs and places in public educational institutions, and a large, growing population, the Sindh administration will have to ensure that the process of granting domiciles/PRCs does not involve corruption, and only those eligible to obtain the documents under the law receive them.

Blaming the people?

THE number of Covid-19 cases across the country are increasing rapidly, with social media posts and news reports reflecting how quickly hospitals are running out of space and how limited healthcare access is. Hospital staff is becoming overwhelmed as more and more medics fall ill and fatalities increase. Confirmed cases in Pakistan are around 130,000 and daily fatalities of nearly 100 are being reported. These figures are of confirmed cases and official hospital deaths, with the actual number of Covid-19 cases including fatalities possibly far higher. In a televised speech, Prime Minister Imran Khan, too, acknowledged how rapidly the virus is spreading and expressed his frustration at how casual the public's response is. "I am disappointed to see that our nation is being very careless," he said, adding that many don't believe that the coronavirus even exists or that people are dying of it. Yet, his strategy to curb and control the spread of the coronavirus is limited to pleas for distancing and observing SOPs.

While the message about distancing and SOPs is the correct one, the government cannot simply leave it to citizens to fend for themselves and then hold them responsible if deaths continue to escalate. The government is ultimately responsible for how badly the coronavirus hits the population and, therefore, must not stop at merely requesting that people take precautions. A mass awareness campaign with effective messaging is the need of the hour, as it is the only way the state can limit the death and doom spelt by the virus in the absence of a lockdown. Unfortunately, while the government's anti-lockdown policy has been strongly and repeatedly communicated, its anti-coronavirus messaging is weak. If, as the prime minister says, there are so many people who think the virus is a hoax or part of some conspiracy, something is amiss in the government's existing communications strategy and must be addressed immediately — not when cases rise even further.

They must create a sense of urgency among the population and also have an enforcement mechanism in place for those who don't follow the rules. As has been said before, the notion of 'self-responsibility' and 'voluntary rule following' in a country where millions can become infected and thousands die is dangerous. Sweden adopted this approach to avoid long-term economic hardship, but paid a heavy price as its deaths per capita surged to the highest in the world. The support package for healthcare workers and data collection from hospitals are

important and necessary government initiatives in this battle, but the war against Covid-19 is a long and difficult one. The government must not stop here. It must invest in improving its messaging and in implementing SOPs. Instead of blaming those who are violating SOPs, the authorities must examine why they have failed to convince the public of the very real consequences of the infection.

More swarms arriving

IN a contracting economy that faces an uncertain future amid the rapid spread of Covid-19 across the country, the agriculture sector has proved to be the only silver lining in the thick black recessionary clouds. The farm sector, which, according to the Economic Survey for 2019-2020, has grown by 2.67pc, compared to 0.85pc the previous financial year, could not stop the overall economy from moving into negative territory for the first time in 68 years, but it did help slow down the damage. That agriculture registered a positive growth in spite of the significant damage caused to crops by the widespread locust plague speaks volumes for this sector's resilience. Some say that agricultural growth estimates for the present year may be exaggerated. But everyone agrees that the sector may not perform as well during the next fiscal year unless the new threat from the crop-eating pests in the coming weeks and months is tackled effectively and urgently.

The locust infestation across the country is worsening in spite of the ramped-up measures taken in recent weeks to control the menace. A report on Thursday said that, apart from their old route through Iran — the pests have found a new corridor via Afghanistan to enter Pakistan and devastate crops in KP before attacking green fields in the adjoining districts of Punjab. In addition, a new wave of locust swarms originating from Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa is expected to reach Balochistan via Iran after travelling through Saudi Arabia and Yemen in the next two weeks. The emerging situation is alarming for farmers who have for more than a year been trying to cope with the plague to somehow cut their losses and protect their livelihoods. Tens of hundreds of poor farmers, especially from Balochistan — the worst-hit province with its 33 districts under locust attack — have already lost their means of earning while others are reporting significant losses. The government claims it is monitoring the movement of the migratory pests in the region on a daily basis and strengthening its infrastructure to fight off the menace. However, the

authorities need to realise that they are running out of time. The failure to deal with the threat will not only wipe out millions of rural livelihoods and add to poverty but could also cause food insecurity at a time when people are still trying to cope with another plague, ie the coronavirus.

Teacher's arrest

RIGHTS' activists in the country and progressive teachers' associations particularly in Sindh are attempting to defuse a situation following a new case of alleged blasphemy, which has at its centre Prof Sajid Soomro of the Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur. Not too long after Prof Soomro's arrest, the JUI-F, which has some support in Sindh districts such as Larkana away from its strongholds of KP and Balochistan, took offence at a social media post by Dr Arfana Mallah — president of the Sindh University Teachers' Association. The provincial leadership of the right-wing party wanted the same blasphemy charges brought against Dr Mallah, apparently an old ideological opponent of theirs, which threaten to turn Prof Soomro's life upside down. In a replay of the past, when angry crowds tried to force the registration of a blasphemy case against an accused, the Bhitai Nagar police station was besieged for some time.

If history is any guide, further pressure is likely to be mounted on the authorities in the coming days. Much has been said about the law, and the argument to prevent its misuse to settle all kinds of personal and political scores is a compelling one and substantiated by evidence. But, unfortunately, in recent times, there has been an all too visible increase in the reluctance to discuss the existing law, let alone taking steps to revise it. This is a result of the entrenched positions of people who take too much interest in punishing those they believe are violating the law and who are unlikely to be distracted by any reported instances of misuse. Those demanding fair treatment for an accused in the name of the law and principles of justice provided by religion are faced with a dangerous situation in the present case. They need much more than a call to Sindh's old values of tolerance and understanding to persevere. They need the state, the politicians and other powers to be at least neutral. They need a government that treats people equally.

Package for healthcare workers

THOUSANDS of healthcare workers in Pakistan are putting their lives on the line every day in the fight against the coronavirus. By end May, at least 1,900 had been infected. According to latest figures by the Pakistan Medical Association, 37 doctors and three paramedics have succumbed to the disease. In an acknowledgement of the dire risks they incur every day, the government on Friday announced a comprehensive support package for these medical professionals. Among its features is a Shuhada package from Rs3m to Rs10m for the families of those in the medical profession sacrificing their lives in the line of duty. Other aspects include tax exemption for front-line healthcare workers, provision of sufficient personal protection equipment, training for staff of public and private hospitals in critical care management of Covid-19 patients, prioritisation in testing them for the virus, etc.

With the total number of confirmed infections having crossed 142,000 and rising relentlessly every day, and more than 2,600 deaths — over 1,000 of them so far in this month alone — the stress on the healthcare system is becoming unsustainable. Reports are increasingly surfacing of packed-to-capacity Covid-19 wards and patients being turned away from hospital after hospital. Healthcare workers have little respite from their duties of caring for the sick, all the while filled with dread that they may unwittingly take the virus home and infect their own families. Any slip-up — perhaps an N95 mask reused once too often or a slight mistake in donning or removing PPE — can expose them to the contagion and its unforeseen consequences. On top of that, there have been several incidents of violence against healthcare workers by distraught family members of Covid-19 patients. It is therefore in the fitness of things that the government has finally come up with a holistic support package for these beleaguered professionals.

However, the best thing the state could have done for our healthcare workers was to listen to their urgent recommendations to bring down the infection transmission rate and flatten the curve so that the hospital network was not overwhelmed. After all, these medical personnel are the experts with a ringside view of ground zero: the health facilities where Covid-19 patients are being treated. Doctors have repeatedly warned of a catastrophe in the making, and through several press conferences pleaded with the government to enforce a

lockdown, and implored the public to observe the SOPs. Instead, the federal government politicised the medical professionals' sincere move to sound the alarm early on — we were at 'only' 10,000 cases at the time — as an attempt by the opposition to put pressure on it. Had the government not been so dismissive of their words, the burden on healthcare workers would quite likely not have become so crushing. Where we stand today, the elusive peak is nowhere in sight — only a situation becoming more precarious by the day.

Colonial symbols

IN the aftermath of the George Floyd tragedy, a movement has started in many parts of the world where protesters have been pulling down or defacing statues of figures seen as instrumental in the subjugation of colonised peoples. In the British city of Bristol, demonstrators recently toppled the statue of 18th-century slave trader and politician Edward Colston, and chucked it into the harbour. In several US cities, people have attacked statues of Christopher Columbus, the man who discovered the Americas, paving the way for European colonisation of the continents, and the marginalisation of its native peoples. Meanwhile, in Belgium statues of Leopold II have been targeted; this was the man who treated Congo as his personal fiefdom, and under whose watch millions of Africans were killed or maimed. Clearly, the time for revisiting the colonial era has arrived, as people of colour and former subjects of empire the world over question the violence their forefathers were subjected to — which still shapes attitudes towards minorities in many places — and ask for amends.

Far from being a benign influence, colonialism devastated cultures and upended societies as conquistadores and slavers exploited the 'new world' for profit. Indeed, today much of the wealth and power of the so-called First World is based on the blood, hard labour and riches of colonised, enslaved peoples. So oftentimes, when such states hold forth on human values, the hypocrisy is inescapable in the context of their own past. Even in our neck of the woods, while some in the subcontinent may have fond memories of the days of empire, the fact is that this was a period of great violence and upheaval. For example, Robert Clive — whose statue stands outside the British Foreign Office in London — has been blamed by historians for the Bengal famine in which 3m people are believed to have perished. Moreover, the British have yet to apologise for the Jallianwalah Bagh massacre. The fact is, there needs to be an honest appraisal

of the colonial period, with the former colonisers admitting the atrocities committed against native populations in Asia, Africa, the Americas and Australia. In addition, the hateful symbols of colonialism need to be put in museums so that future generations can learn from them. Surely, states must ask themselves: should statues of individuals responsible for untold misery and exploitation of coloured peoples be lionised and placed on high pedestals?

Haj decision

WITH the Islamic month of Shawwal drawing to a close, a key decision confronts the Muslim world: how to proceed with Haj, which is due to start at the end of July. While the Saudi government has not taken a decision yet on whether or not the pilgrimage will go ahead, some Muslim states have announced that they will not be sending hajjis this year due to the coronavirus threat. Among these are Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. Of course, the challenge is considerable. Last year, around two million believers made their way to the holy places to perform the annual pilgrimage. Enforcing the SOPs health professionals recommend — especially with regard to social distancing — is next to impossible given the massive number of pilgrims. As it is, the Saudi health authorities put in a huge effort to ensure pilgrims arrive and stay healthy during Haj. With Covid-19 now posing a serious challenge to global health systems, the risks involved with allowing even a limited number of hajjis will be considerable, especially when the pilgrims fan out across the world after Haj.

The decision is not easy, but the Saudi government should announce its policy soon for the sake of clarity. Instead of allowing large numbers of people from across the world, perhaps a solution can be found by only allowing a small, symbolic number of locals to perform the key rituals in Makkah, Arafat, Mina, etc so that the religious obligation is fulfilled. Allowing a large number of believers to congregate may complicate the situation further. And even if Saudi Arabia decides to proceed as usual, each Muslim country, including Pakistan, must assess the risks to its own citizens before allowing them to undertake the pilgrimage this year. Perhaps if ulema from different countries and schools of thought are consulted, and the advice of health professionals is kept in view, a solution can be found for the pilgrimage to symbolically go ahead, and ensure that Muslims' lives are not threatened by Covid-19.

Troubling projections

THE alarm bells are ringing at a deafening pitch as the latest Covid-19 projections for Pakistan come to light. Based on the rapidly rising rate of infections and daily deaths in the second week of June, the data tells a harrowing story. Confirmed coronavirus cases in the country are galloping towards the 150,000 mark — a trajectory which federal minister Asad Umar has warned may result in doubling the number of cases by the end of the month, with up to 1.2m by end July. The government's projections are indeed worrisome. Yet, figures revealed by an Imperial College London simulation are even more startling, as they model the worst-case scenarios for hundreds of countries: the UK data simulates that, in the extreme event that no action is taken to curb the spread, 2.2m people could die of Covid-19 in Pakistan between February 2020 and June 2021. The same analysis suggests that, with interventions and mitigation, deaths could be lowered by at least 40pc.

This data is not a prediction, but it clearly points to how critical a decisive, data-led mitigation strategy is in determining which path Pakistan takes. The government has repeated appeals for the public to wear face masks, practice distancing and understand the gravity of the crisis. Numerous times, the term 'smart lockdown' has been invoked to show how authorities will react to Covid-19 transmissions by sealing virus hotspot localities. More recently, and for the first time, an ambitious target of 100,000 daily tests — which is four times more than the number of daily tests being conducted at present — has also been announced. But as projections create panic and citizens flout SOPs despite repeated appeals, are these steps enough?

The death and doom unleashed by Covid-19 has brought a crisis of apocalyptic proportions to our doorstep. The situation demands unprecedented leadership, intelligent strategising and inclusive decision-making. Pakistan is running into a full-on horror show which will not let up if the government continues its policy of pleading and volunteer policing. This is the time for the government and opposition to abandon hostilities and work together to devise an overarching plan. The centre and provinces must be united in planning for what will be one of Pakistan's darkest periods. How can healthcare staff and infrastructure be boosted; what can be done to effectively keep people at home; what economic relief can be provided to those hit hardest; what arrangements can be made for

mass funerals; how will the psychological toll of these fatalities be lessened — are just some of the key challenges our political leadership should be addressing. The attitude of outright rejecting lockdowns despite strong evidence that lives can be saved is unacceptable. There are several good examples from other countries which can be applied in Pakistan. To avoid walking blindly into this fast-approaching disaster, the government needs to produce a concrete strategy.

Talking to the PTM

THE government has once again invited leaders of the estranged Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, an organisation working for the rights of Pakhtuns, to come to the negotiating table and discuss all contentious issues in a bid to resolve them. Defence Minister Pervaiz Khattak said in a statement that Pakhtuns belong to the same province and should collectively work for its betterment. PTM MNA Mohsin Dawar has welcomed the government's statement, saying that the PTM was always open to negotiations even though such efforts had previously failed. He, however, stated that the government should be represented by those who had the power to implement agreements. This is a welcome development. Many of the grievances aired by the PTM require a sincere hearing by the government. If there are issues that have burned through the reservoir of goodwill the state should have towards its citizens, and if the PTM has complained about them, then it is incumbent on the authorities to not only listen to these complaints but to also try and address them. At the same time, the PTM should hear out the objections of state institutions to the way it conducts its politics. Once the two sides have a basic appreciation of the canvas on which to hold negotiations, the process can start on a positive note. However, for now, the important thing is to proactively get the government and PTM representatives to meet face to face in a civil manner and agree on a broad agenda of talks — as a confidence-building measure, the state could discourage the vicious social media campaign against the PTM. The list of grievances on both sides is as well-known as it is long. It serves little purpose at this stage to dwell on them. Instead, both sides should express a genuine desire to work towards building a working relationship that can ensure — at the very least — that dialogue does not break down. Neither side should say or do anything that could damage the process in its infancy.

The state is meant to look after its citizens and address their grievances. Sometimes states use heavy-handed measures and often, as in this case, the

outcome is far from positive. What we need now is a healing touch that persuades the PTM that the redressal of its grievances is the top priority of the state. The defence minister has done well to take the initiative. The PTM must reciprocate fully.

Atlanta shooting

EVEN as the rage exhibited by protesters across the world over the tragic killing of George Floyd refuses to subside, the news regarding the death of another African-American at the hands of white police officers, this time in the US city of Atlanta, has unleashed more anger. Rayshard Brooks was shot by police while trying to evade arrest outside a fast-food outlet on Friday. Again, legitimate questions arise over the use of lethal force by the men in uniform against a suspect. Brooks' death in such tragic circumstances at a time when the world's attention is focused on police brutality and racism in the US has proved how deep rooted the problem is. It would not be wrong to ask if the police officers would have used such lethal force if Rayshard Brooks belonged to the majority community in the US. It has rightly been pointed out that strained race relations in America can be traced to centuries ago, when the ancestors of black Americans were brought to the country aboard slave ships from Africa. In fact, up till the mid-1960s, racial segregation laws continued to be on the books in the US. While there have been considerable improvements over the decades, the combative and partisan nature of President Donald Trump's politics has only resurrected the demons of racism which many might have believed to be a thing of the past.

Both in the US and the rest of the world, people are demanding an end to the glorification of colonial and imperial figures that played key roles in the subjugation, rape and murder of millions of people in Africa, Asia, Australia and the Americas. Moreover, people are sick of racist attitudes displayed by law enforcers in self-professed democratic societies and are demanding accountability. One doesn't know when those states that have been built on the legacy of colonialism and racism will come to terms with their history. But when they do, one hopes they will pledge to create more egalitarian societies.

Media: another blow

INDEPENDENT, truth-seeking journalists are all that stand between authoritarian governments and total lack of accountability. Little wonder, then, that the rise of 'strongman politics' across the world has seen corresponding attacks on press freedom in various ways designed to destroy journalists' credibility and stifle their voice. These dictatorial forces have now claimed the scalp of Maria Ressa, acclaimed journalist and CEO of Rappler Inc, a Philippines-based news website that is frequently critical of President Duterte. On Monday, a court in Manila found Ms Ressa guilty of cyber libel and sentenced her for up to six years in prison. Reporter Reynaldo Santos Jr and Rappler itself were found guilty of the same. The conviction pertained to a story published on the site in 2012 that referenced an intelligence report linking a wealthy Filipino businessman to various serious offences, including murder. Mr Duterte has been particularly incensed by Rappler's no-holds-barred coverage of his government's brutal 'war on drugs', which under the guise of law enforcement, gives police carte blanche to commit extra-judicial killings.

Governments seeking to hide their corruption and human rights violations from the world have weaponised anti-defamation and antiterrorism laws to go after reporters engaged in the lawful pursuit of facts. They deploy social media trolls to smear journalists and news organisations as traitors simply for publishing unpalatable truths, and use conveniently vague laws against 'anti-state' activity to hound them through the courts. Ms Ressa is the latest in a long line of journalists made to pay the price for holding governments accountable. In September 2017, two Reuters reporters from Myanmar were convicted under the country's Official Secrets Act and sentenced to seven years behind bars; they had been apprehended while investigating a massacre of Rohingya by security forces and Buddhist civilians in the country's Rakhine province. International pressure led to their release, but not before they had spent 511 days in prison. In Turkey, even now, four years after President Erdogan's media purge following a failed coup attempt, around 90 journalists remain imprisoned, mostly on spurious terrorism and defamation-related charges. Sometimes, the authorities do not even bother with the formalities. One example is Mahmoud Hussein, an Egyptian journalist working with Al Jazeera, who has been incarcerated without charge in his country for three and a half years now.

The media in Pakistan has been working under unprecedented pressure in recent years. Dawn itself has been repeatedly maligned for publishing properly corroborated news reports — once taken to court — and even on-the-record interviews with senior officials, simply because the content did not conform to the ‘sanctioned’ narrative. Shady business tycoons with connections in the corridors of power here have also brought completely untenable defamation suits against the paper for exposés of their criminality. An independent media is ultimately an ally of the people and therefore the bête noire of governments that look to serve themselves.

Punjab budget

PUNJAB’S budget for the fiscal year 2020-21 contains several headlines: significant relief in provincial taxes to businesses impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, much bigger public interventions in the social sector through the development programme and a large economic stimulus for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. Additionally, the budget offers substantial incentives for the construction industry, allows tax exemptions to private investors interested in collaborating with the government to jointly undertake new infrastructure schemes, and focuses on community development works for generating employment. The budget also carry some incentives meant to document the economy, besides making it easier to do business in the province. The purpose of all these measures is to rev up the provincial economy and create jobs by supporting businesses in turmoil because of the Covid-19 outbreak, which has wreaked havoc across the world, causing thousands of deaths and wiping out millions of jobs.

Indeed, Punjab in its budget for the next fiscal year proposes to do a slightly better job in dealing with the impact of the Covid-19 contagion on the people, the economy and businesses when compared to a similar exercise by the federal government. The province is not only aiming to mitigate the economic impact of the health crisis and reviving the economy through small interventions, it has also formed a framework for rolling expenditures that will allow it to release funds for development and current spending on a monthly, instead of quarterly, basis, against actual demand. The demand-driven fiscal management will help the province monitor and control its expenditures in an uncertain Covid-19 environment, which is likely to last at least until the end of the current calendar

year. But its entire plan to help prop up the sinking provincial economy depends on one variable: will the federal government succeed in achieving its tax target next year and transfer to the provinces their divisible tax pool share indicated in the federal budget? Punjab received Rs473.6bn less than its indicative share from the pool this year, forcing it to sharply cut its development spending. With the virus pandemic threatening to further depress the contracting economy, few expect the FBR to meet its tax target next year. With its own tax collection consistently falling for the last two years and almost 80pc of its income coming from the tax pool, Punjab will soon find itself short of the resources needed to implement its economic revival plan.

Islamabad accident

CONSIDERING the fact that relations between Pakistan and India are currently quite frosty, the recent episode in which two Indian High Commission staffers were involved in an accident in Islamabad will need to be handled maturely and calmly. Though exact details of the event are scant, the two Indians were apparently involved in a hit-and-run accident in which a pedestrian was seriously injured. The two suspects were briefly arrested, and Rs10,000 in fake currency notes were seized from them. In reaction to the Indian officials' detention, Pakistani diplomats have reportedly been harassed in New Delhi while police presence has been increased outside the Pakistan High Commission in the Indian capital for 'security' purposes. Another key incident in this recent chain of events was the expulsion of two Pakistani mission staffers by the Indians late last month. However, Pakistan reacted to this move calmly and did not engage in a tit-for-tat exchange.

Firstly, the matter in Islamabad must be properly investigated and handled as per the law if the Indian staffers are found to be in the wrong. Second, the matter should not be blown up out of proportion, and elements in the Indian media should refrain from hurling wild accusations that can further vitiate the atmosphere. It would be naïve to assume that bilateral relations will magically improve as there are a number of long-standing irritants that are poisoning ties between Islamabad and New Delhi. However, what can be done is for both sides to adopt a mature approach and prevent the situation from deteriorating any further. The accident in Islamabad should be handled with care, and hawkish elements within India must not be allowed to exploit a law-and-order issue and

turn it into one of 'national pride'. The trust deficit between both capitals is quite wide, but if seasoned diplomats from both sides handle the situation through official channels instead of engaging in media trials, incidents such as these can be defused and dealt with in a calm manner.

China-India clash

HIGH in the Himalayas, an explosive situation is brewing between China and India. In a clash between both militaries on Monday at the disputed frontier along the Line of Actual Control, at least 20 Indian troops were killed. No shots are reported to have been fired; the fatalities apparently occurred during hand-to-hand combat. Both states last fought a war in 1962, in which India was humbled; however, this front has been relatively quiet since the mid-1970s. This may change as there was some tough talk from Narendra Modi on Wednesday. The Indian prime minister threatened to give "a fitting reply" if provoked, while diplomats from both states have also issued strongly worded statements, though saying they would not escalate matters.

The recent border tensions between Beijing and New Delhi have been developing for several weeks. Troops from both sides had clashed in May, though senior Chinese and Indian generals had met earlier this month to defuse the crisis. It is apparent that these efforts failed to bear fruit, as Monday's deadly exchange shows. Beijing says India's men attacked its troops and intruded into Chinese territory "provoking and attacking Chinese personnel" in the latest confrontation. Unfortunately, India has a history of bullying its neighbours and trying to play regional hegemon. For example, discord recently arose between India and Nepal over a disputed region also in the Himalayas. Apparently, India is not happy with the territorial claims put forward by its comparatively tiny northern neighbour. Meanwhile, Pakistan has had to bear with India's provocations for over seven decades; to this day, our eastern neighbour continues with its salvoes across the Line of Control, which has resulted in the loss of several precious lives on our side of the LoC.

India may harbour superpower delusions and throw its weight around the region, trying to dominate smaller states while exhibiting outright hostility towards Pakistan, but militarily and economically, there is little comparison between India and China, with the latter having the upper hand, which is why India will need to

proceed with far more caution on this front. As Chinese officials have rightly said, both sides should resolve the dispute through dialogue. The fact is that instead of being a regional bully, India must learn to peacefully coexist with all its neighbours in the spirit of harmony and mutual respect; this includes solving all disputes — specifically border disputes — through dialogue instead of violence and threats. Pakistan has long stressed the need to address the Kashmir question at the table, a position India has arrogantly dismissed by repeating the fiction that the occupied valley is an ‘integral’ part of its territory. In a region with three nuclear states, war is not an option, something the jingoistic elements within the Indian establishment must realise. If India pursues the policy of live and let live, it will be a much better option for South Asia.

Model Town case

THE sixth anniversary of the brutal killing outside the residence-office complex of Pakistan Awami Tehreek chief Tahirul Qadri is a chilling reminder of how a clash of various interests, not least of them political, can turn a push for justice into a secondary exercise. Squabbling leads to a confused state that facilitates escape rather than the holding of a fair trial. The trend may not be peculiar to Pakistan but we witness it all too frequently in its various manifestations here. The June 17 Model Town anniversary is just one more blot on our ignominious calendar — just another instance of citizens being let down by the law of the land. There have been other incidents with smaller or bigger tolls indicating how very insecure and vulnerable to displays of unbridled street power, or deceptive murderous plotting backed by state sanction, Pakistanis can be at a bad moment. Take May 12, 2007, when Karachi was bathed in blood over an administration’s insistence on blocking a chief justice’s reception. Around 50 lives were lost. No one was ever held accountable from among the prime accused.

Six years after the Model Town killings in 2014, there are no answers to who ordered the firing. It appears that the old strategy of defusing the situation by diverting attention to less important actors and later resorting to a politicisation of the affair has worked well against the heirs of the 14 people shot to death and scores of others who were injured. Gullu Butt, a self-avowed vigilante swearing allegiance to the then incumbent PML-N government, was conveniently at the spot to divert early attention from police brutality under the provincial government of Shahbaz Sharif. Later on, Mr Qadri’s inability to delink the case from his close

ties with Imran Khan, who was straining to march on Islamabad, ensured only partial support for the Model Town victims in a deeply polarised Lahore — indeed a Pakistan where Mr Qadri was not actually gaining political ground. In power, Mr Khan and his party could never have been expected to take on the system that had led to the Model Town disaster. They confined themselves to targeting the Sharifs separately from the system. Those who rose up and fell before the police that day were always at a disadvantage as they were pitted against those enjoying state sanction. The political crossfire they were caught in made justice even more elusive.

Perks for lawmakers

THE unanimous approval by a Senate panel of a bill extending the facility of free business class domestic air travel to the family members of parliamentarians is not only shocking but also an insult to the millions of poor who have just lost their jobs owing to the economic shock of the Covid-19 outbreak. The explanation given by Farooq Naek, chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Revenue, that the changes made in the Members of Parliament (Salary & Allowances) Act, 1974, are merely procedural and will not be an additional burden on the exchequer doesn't hold ground and is unacceptable in the prevalent economic situation. The changes in the act, for example, allow the family members of all parliamentarians to avail 25 unutilised business class domestic air tickets in addition to annual travel vouchers of Rs300,000. Under the amended act, a parliamentarian not interested in using vouchers will be paid an allowance equivalent to the entitled value of the vouchers. Also, the tickets or vouchers will not have an expiry date.

It would have been much better if the committee had voluntarily renounced these and similar perks in an act of solidarity with the people affected not only by a major health crisis that has killed over 3,000 across the country but also the prevailing economic crisis. The senators are quite a rich lot by most standards even if the Senate panel chairman thinks otherwise; at least none of them needs free travel entitlement at the expense of taxpayers. It is not the first time that parliamentarians have formed an alliance, which cuts across political affiliations and ideologies, to protect their privileges or arrogate to themselves more perks, benefiting their families too. Nor will it be the last. However, the voters who they claim to represent in parliament don't expect such a blatant show of greed from

them — at least not when a large majority of Pakistani citizens are struggling to protect both their jobs and lives.

Convictions in the ‘Karachi affair’

IT has taken nearly a quarter of a century of a complex, stop-start investigation to shed some light on the epic cloak-and-dagger saga that became known over time as the ‘Karachi affair’. On Monday, a Paris court sentenced six men to prison for their role in a scandal involving kickbacks on an arms deal between France and Pakistan in 1994. A car bombing on May 8, 2002, outside what was then Karachi’s Sheraton hotel turned out to be a seminal moment in this tale, pitching it from being about financial misconduct to a possible act of revenge for unpaid commissions. Fifteen people were killed and several injured in the attack. Of the dead, 11 were French naval engineers working on a submarine project for the Pakistan Navy; they were leaving the hotel on their way to the dockyard when the explosives-laden vehicle rammed into their bus.

Given this happened the year following 9/11, at a time of burgeoning militancy in this country — and barely three months after Daniel Pearl’s murder — the attack was suspected of having been carried out by religious extremists. That may well have been so, considering the Musharraf government’s recent crackdown against several extremist organisations. However, French intelligence agencies later said their investigations turned up evidence of unpaid kickbacks in the Agosta deal by their government to figures in Pakistan’s corridors of power. That, they believed, was the motive behind the bombing. The deal for the sale by France of three Agosta military submarines to Pakistan was worth around €1bn; of this, some €50m were to grease the palms of some individuals in the top tier of the Pakistani military and political elite. In the 1990s, the giving of such ‘gifts’ was legal in France (the practice was criminalised in 2000, and president Chirac stopped the remaining payments to Pakistan). The illegality lay in the fact that some €2m were re-routed to France in ‘retro commissions’, allegedly to finance then prime minister Edouard Balladour’s presidential campaign. The court in Paris this week convicted three former French government officials, a defence contractor and two Lebanese businessmen for the crime. Mr Balladour and his then defence minister are soon to stand trial.

Meanwhile, the investigation at the Pakistan end into the financial corruption behind the Agosta deal exposed the then naval chief Adm Mansurul Haq as one of the principal intermediaries in the racket. As part of a plea bargain, he was compelled by NAB to return the ill-gotten gains he had thus far received, and forced into early retirement. While some other naval officials were also apprehended, there remain suspicions that a cover-up by Gen Musharraf's military government prevented all those culpable from being brought to book. Unfortunately, however, that is how most high-level investigations in Pakistan are conducted, skimming the surface, allowing the muck to fester and murderers to go scot-free.

Sindh budget

ITS resource constraints notwithstanding, Sindh's budget of Rs1,241bn for the fiscal year 2020-21 indicates the seriousness of Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah's administration in fighting Covid-19 and its negative economic impact on the poor and small businesses. It is commendable that Sindh has made sensible choices at a time when the country is faced with not only the virus contagion but also the threat of an unprecedented locust plague. The new budget, for example, sets aside a substantial sum of Rs20bn to put cash into the pockets of those affected by Covid-19. Similarly, health expenditure for the next year has been enhanced by 15.5pc. Even the 7pc increase in Sindh's current expenditure comes from higher Covid-19-related spending. Education is the only other sector — apart from health — where the cash-strapped government has raised allocations instead of reducing it. Additionally, the budget proposes interventions to stimulate small businesses in urban areas through soft loans, alleviate poverty, subsidise wheat flour and support farmers hit by locust swarms.

However, the sustainability of the provincial Covid-19 initiatives largely depends on the federal government's ability to collect its targeted taxes and transfer the province's projected share to it. Like other provinces, Sindh also depends heavily on federal transfers for almost 70pc of its revenue receipts. The FBR's failure to meet its target has caused a hefty shortfall of Rs227bn in Sindh's projected share, hurting its efforts to implement its development schemes. The reduced federal tax pool has compelled the province to not only slash its development spending next year by over 18pc but to also cut different current expenditures to make room for Covid-19 investments, and subsidise fertilisers, rice seeds and

pesticides for smallholder farmers. In his budget speech, the chief minister also spoke about the ongoing attacks on provincial autonomy extended by the 18th Amendment and the efforts being made to somehow force the provinces to give up part of their share from the divisible tax pool to benefit the centre. He rightly called for a unified stand against the once-in-a-century kind of challenges instead of sowing divisions. With Covid-19 and locust plagues threatening to kill people, pull apart the economy and cause widespread hunger, provinces must be made financially more independent than ever before. But they also need to work towards devolving powers to the local level for a better response to pandemics and locust plagues.

Wali Babar murder case

POLICE in Karachi have finally arrested the prime accused in the Wali Khan Babar murder case. For over nine years, the suspect had managed to frustrate a search that suffered because of a lack of interest over extended periods. His arrest was accompanied by some ceremony in an era where it is now possible to talk about violence and illegal acts, allegedly at the hands of the MQM, and only after the latter sidelined its leader Altaf Hussain. Evidence suggests that Babar, who was a journalist at Geo at the time of his killing in 2011, might have been targeted because his work angered certain elements in a mafia-ridden Karachi. Babar and his courage will continue to be remembered in the chapters on journalism in Pakistan — indeed, over the years, many mediapersons have fallen in the line of duty. No wonder Pakistan is called one of the most dangerous places for journalists. But Babar's story brings in other factors too, such as the ethnic dimension that has been crucial to the rise of Pakistan's biggest city and the tensions within.

Initially, it was thought that Babar's killers might not get away with their crime and that they would be pursued more diligently than those who murdered other Pakistanis without the protective cover of a large media group. However, the almost decade-long hunt in a Karachi that has only recently slipped out of the hands of violent political elements shows that even high-level links do not always save journalists. In fact, there have been many in the media whose mysterious deaths have never been solved, indicating the reluctance of police to investigate out of fear that some prominent personalities might have had a role to play. The arrest, then, is a welcome step, and one hopes that justice will be done to bring

closure to the families of the many mediapersons killed at the hands of those who wanted to silence them forever. Unity among journalists is key to attaining this goal.

Ways of learning

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan is seeking ways to ensure the best possible answers to the country's education crisis brought on by Covid-19 so that academic activities in the country can begin again. He expressed his concern at a meeting called to discuss the disruption in the education sector. In fact, the government will have to try and be innovative at all levels of education. Indeed, it has shown some resourcefulness in this direction by launching an education channel recently, and reportedly has plans to introduce more such schemes. The education sector was the first one to be closed with the outbreak of the pandemic. It is still the most vulnerable of sectors, and the most deserving of protection because of the large number of young lives involved. The new world that has to emerge on the basis of sobering new realities will determine new models to follow. But at the moment a key strategy would be to try and improve technology and make it accessible to as many households as possible so that the greatest number of youngsters can benefit. Maximum protection is necessary as the country navigates a sensitive phase in public health, with the graph of infection going up.

It is true that the online system and other modes of distance learning such as the one that employs radio to reach remote areas are not quite equal to the classroom experience, particularly in a country not fully conversant with the idiom of modern technology. But at this time, there are not many options. Unfortunately, while many students and teachers have been availing internet facilities, the latter are out of the reach of several others. Protests have been held by college and university students, such as those from Balochistan where online learning is difficult on account of poor internet access and power failure. The government must address these issues as we are still some months away from returning to classrooms and lecture halls, perhaps even from experimenting with smaller classes in more spacious places.

Purchasing plasma

LIKE many other crises before it, Covid-19 has sadly brought out the worst in us. Reports have surfaced that some of those who tested positive for the coronavirus and have now recovered are selling blood plasma instead of making a donation as advised by the authorities. Some of them are said to have demanded tens of thousands of rupees for plasma from relatives of patients suffering from strong Covid-19 symptoms. There are reports that labs are enabling this illegal sale of plasma. The demand for plasma from recovered patients is growing as preliminary research suggests that antibodies in the blood of former Covid-19 patients can help other patients recover. That people are attempting to literally cash in on a pandemic is a tragic indictment of humanity. The anguish of those who are seriously affected by the coronavirus is seen by some as an opportunity to make money, turning what should be a voluntary act of donation into a clandestine commercial operation. Recovered Covid-19 patients should donate plasma as a noble gesture to help those suffering from a potentially fatal illness.

Even as these illegal transactions occur, the reality is that plasma therapy is not a cure for the virus. The federal ministry of health services has warned that plasma therapy could have dangerous side effects, including fluctuating temperatures, 'body aches, allergic reactions, transfusion-associated circulatory overload, bronchospasm, and transmission of diseases like HIV and hepatitis B and C'. Convalescent plasma, or CP, transfusions for Covid-19 patients is a line of therapy which is still in the experimental stages and should only be employed in "controlled settings as part of research protocol". According to government guidelines, those conducting the research must obtain endorsement and get a health facility approved by the health ministry in which the therapy can begin under supervision. Only those hospitals that have government approval to conduct this therapy can register their Covid-19 patients in clinical trials which have the approval of the relevant authorities. Furthermore, the guidelines suggest that a Covid-19 patient participating in a clinical trial can be eligible for CP treatment under a qualified physician. Under no circumstances should citizens be experimenting with plasma therapy without the approval of the designated hospitals. As desperate as some patients' families may be to see them recover quickly, buying plasma and transfusing it without the guidance of a qualified physician is both exploitative and dangerous.

Imran Farooq case

A DECADE after estranged MQM leader Imran Farooq was brutally bludgeoned to death in a quiet London neighbourhood, an antiterrorism court in Islamabad on Thursday sentenced three men to life in jail for the murder. Moreover, the court ruled that Muttahida supremo Altaf Hussain ordered the murder of the man once considered to be a close confidant of the party's founder. Though the case had been weakened by a delayed investigation, the decision is important as it has established in a court of law what many had suspected for decades: that behind the veneer of politics, Mr Hussain was running the MQM as a criminal organisation, particularly showing no mercy to internal dissent. In the mid-1990s, Azeem Ahmed Tariq, chairman of the MQM, was mysteriously murdered. His killers have yet to be found, though it is widely believed he was neutralised because he posed a potential challenge to Mr Hussain's leadership. Imran Farooq also had a reputation for ruthlessness and was at one time considered the MQM's key ideologue, before he drifted away from Altaf and was reportedly considering forming his own political set-up.

The conviction also provides an unenviable denouement of the MQM story. At one time, the united Muttahida ruled over Karachi and the rest of urban Sindh with an iron fist. Altaf Hussain was the uncrowned king of Karachi, with the nation's leading political parties, its establishment, as well as foreign forces wooing him and his party for their respective purposes. Its violent tactics were overlooked — such as during the May 12, 2007, riots — while it could shut down Pakistan's economic heart within minutes on the flimsiest of pretexts. And along with brooking no internal dissent, political opponents and members of the media also suffered if they dared to criticise Altaf 'bhai' and his party. However, things started to change in 2015, when the Rangers raided Nine Zero, the party's Karachi headquarters, while the final nail in the coffin came when Mr Hussain made an ill-advised speech in August 2016 in which he attacked the country itself. At this point, the powers that be had decided that enough was enough, and that Mr Hussain and his party had outlived their usefulness. In the aftermath of this controversial speech, the party was split into the loyalist London and mainstream Pakistan factions, the latter disavowing any links to the party founder.

There are lessons in MQM's rise and fall. Indeed, the party sent members of Sindh's urban middle class to the assemblies in a political landscape that had been dominated by the landed elite and members of traditional political families. Yet its penchant for criminality and violence proved to be its undoing, and now it appears to be a spent force. There is still a vacuum in urban Sindh, but anyone wishing to fill it will need to learn from the Muttahida's hubris.

Haj decision

THE Saudi authorities have finally announced what many had been fearing ever since it became clear that Covid-19 was not going to go away anytime soon: this year's Haj has been scaled back considerably due to the threat of the coronavirus, and only Saudis and foreigners residing within the kingdom will be able to perform the pilgrimage and associated rites. On Tuesday, the Saudi authorities announced that only 1,000 people will be performing Haj this year. This is a far cry from the 2m or so believers that flocked to the holy places year after year from the four corners of the globe to participate in the pilgrimage — one of the key pillars of Islam.

Though there is understandable disappointment over the move, it was the best possible solution in the given circumstances. While it is true that men and women from across the world save up all their lives to be able to perform the pilgrimage at least once, the circumstances this year are far from normal. Indeed, Haj rituals have been curtailed in the past, particularly in times of antiquity and mainly due to pestilence or violence, but this is perhaps the first time in the modern era that the pilgrimage has been scaled back so drastically. Masjid Al Haram was closed off to believers for several days in 1979 when Salafi militants occupied it during the siege of Makkah, but this was just after Haj had concluded. However, at a time when social distancing is essential, there was no other option but to limit the pilgrimage as ensuring that hundreds of thousands of people keep a safe distance from each other is next to impossible. Whether it is performing tawaf inside the Haram, or other key rituals at Arafat, Mina etc, people mingling in such close proximity makes it very difficult to observe SOPs. Even in more 'normal' times, controlling such large crowds is a considerable challenge for the authorities, as numerous fires and deaths caused by overcrowding at the jamarat over the years have shown.

The scaling back of Haj is a sobering moment for the Muslim world. During the pandemic, mosques around the world, including the two holy mosques in Makkah and Madina, have had to be closed off for mass prayers, and now with Haj being affected, it should serve as a moment of reflection for the Muslim world. Indeed, Haj is a symbol of unity where Muslims of all nationalities and colours gather, and where — temporarily — the differences of sect and school of thought melt away. This same spirit of unity is needed, especially with Eidul Azha coming up, to prevent the coronavirus from spreading further. If SOPs are followed, life will be able to return to normal sooner rather than later. Those who wished to proceed for Haj this year will hopefully be able to perform the pilgrimage in 2021.

Missing local link

OBSERVATIONS by a number of UN organisations put together in one volume by the UNDP have once again tried to make us confront a reality that we have been too shy to acknowledge. The assessment, Covid-19 — Pakistan Socio-economic Impact Assessment and Response Plan, says how a top-down authoritative style of governance can weaken the social contract between society and state.

The picture that emerges is not too different to the one regularly painted by the local press and other keen watchers. The study is populated with familiar dissatisfied traders affected by ‘unilateral’ government decisions, with medics having to work without personal protective equipment and people left at the mercy of an inefficient system of testing and tracking.

There are no revelations when it talks about the threat of mental health issues in the wake of Covid-19, about lost livelihoods — though coming from UN agencies these lines would sound almost like an indictment. The better option is the old but, in Pakistan’s case, seldom taken course of “political engagement and social dialogue, community empowerment and participation, and governance and rule of law ... these three together determine the state-citizen relationship, which eventually determines the implementation of the government’s response to such a crisis”. The objective is to build this “bridge between the government and the population”.

A cursory look based on the pointers given in this new, painful reminder shows just how guilty those in power have been. They have been jealously refusing to

share authority with those who can really make a difference at the most basic level. As the structural flaw is reflected in a lack of relief supply lines connecting to the people in times of emergencies, the country is still struggling to create a balance between the federal and provincial powers.

The debate on grass-roots empowerment via local government systems is restricted to the very contentious and controversial exchanges between the supporters and critics of provincial autonomy. The acrimony has to be taken out of the debate for the discussion to promise any meaningful progress. Legislations of the past — to be precise the 18th Amendment that has ramifications for power structures at all levels — have to be treated with full respect. The devolution of power has to be recognised as a ground-breaking move, reflecting the collective wisdom of parliament elected by the people of Pakistan. Avenues of empowerment at the grass roots must be created, and not blocked.

Increased testing needed

On multiple days since mid-June, official figures for coronavirus-related deaths in the country have been well over 100. According to press releases issued by the National Command and Operation Centre, 111 people lost their lives to Covid-19 on June 16 and 136 on June 17.

Just last week, the Covid-19 official death toll in a single day was 153 — the highest in 24 hours since the start of the outbreak in Pakistan at the end of February. As these figures continue to climb, the daily total tests towards the end of June stand at an average of 28,500, a number far lower than the 100,000 daily testing milestone the government has calculated for July.

It is evident that, much like the global trend in countries where Covid-19 cases have soared, Pakistan's daily cases and deaths are growing. In fact, the current scenario was predicted by healthcare professionals who had warned of a rise in coronavirus cases if restrictions were lifted at the end of May.

Although the authorities may argue that cases and deaths here are still lower than in many of the worst-hit countries — such as the UK where over 1,000 coronavirus fatalities have been reported in a single day at the peak of the infection — the reality is that Pakistan is still over a month away from what authorities and think tanks have estimated to be the 'peak phase'.

As we approach that dreaded period, the authorities must focus their resources on two key areas: increased testing capacity and data-driven decisions. Testing must be ramped up, and fast, in order to obtain a realistic picture of the spread of Covid-19. While 100,000 daily tests are not enough in a population of 200m, at the moment we are very far from even that target.

Increased testing and intelligent data gathering are the only tools the government has to enforce the smart lockdowns it views as its mitigation strategy. These figures are the roadmap; in the absence of accurate data, any strategy will be flawed.

Diplomatic spat

PAKISTAN-India relations, already in the throes of an extended cool phase, have over the past few days deteriorated further as New Delhi has initiated a quarrel with this country, possibly to deflect attention from its internal and external crises. On Tuesday, the Indians asked Pakistan to reduce staff strength at the high commission in New Delhi by half. Pakistan answered in kind, based on the principle of reciprocity. Tension had already been increasing: on Monday two employees of the Indian mission in Islamabad returned to their country after they were involved in an accident in Islamabad, in which a pedestrian was hurt. Fake currency was retrieved from the Indians. A few weeks ago, two personnel of the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi were declared personae non grata by the Indians. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi issued a stern warning to India on Wednesday, saying this country would respond with full force to any “misadventure”.

Regarding the scaling down of diplomatic strength, India has alleged that Pakistani diplomatic staffers were involved in “acts of espionage”, and has trotted out the old bogey of support for “cross-border terrorism”. Pakistan has denied these charges emphatically, stating that this country’s diplomatic staffers “always function within the parameters of international law and diplomatic norms”. Whatever India’s spurious reasons, it seems that those who call the shots in New Delhi have chosen to vilify Pakistan in order to deflect growing domestic criticism of the BJP-led government over its bungled handling of both internal and external problems. Like many countries across the globe, India has been hit hard by Covid-19, with hospital beds unavailable in major cities such as Mumbai and

Delhi. On the external front, India has suffered an embarrassing rout in its recent skirmish with China along the LAC. There are growing calls inside India for 'revenge', and the response to the stand-off with China by the normally tough-talking Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been seen as inadequate, especially by the ultra-nationalists. Thus, in an effort to look 'strong', the Indian establishment has cooked up the latest crisis with Pakistan.

Regardless of the grandstanding of hawkish Indian elements, Pakistan should respond maturely to New Delhi's provocations. The government has made clear that adventurism will not be tolerated, and extremist Indian hawks would do well not to beat the war drums. Meanwhile, despite the reduction in diplomatic strength on both sides, it would be wise to keep open unofficial or backchannel communications, so that animosities do not spiral out of control. Such efforts have worked in bringing down the temperature in tense times in the past. The message from Islamabad should be clear: while this country will defend itself against all hostile acts, it desires peace in South Asia, and will keep its lines of communication open in case India wants to talk.

Tax exemptions

NOT all tax exemptions — the indirect, off-budget expenditures governments accrue by removing or reducing assigned tax liabilities that a person or a business is required to pay on income, property or transactions — are bad. Policymakers everywhere use them to attract new investments in one or more sectors of the economy, support struggling businesses, develop infrastructure, help people or boost growth. Sometimes such exemptions are necessary to make a country's tax regime simpler, more progressive and less opaque, and to reward compliance. But such concessions often become a drag on government budgets, undermine fair competition and discourage fresh investment, besides slowing down growth in underdeveloped countries like Pakistan. Why? Because the authorities don't have the capacity or will to design tax expenditure in a transparent manner to affect firms' investment decisions and fuel economic growth; instead, they cater to one power lobby or the other for various, including political, reasons.

Tax exemptions have always remained a popular tool for successive governments in Pakistan to shower favours on business lobbies for their support

in spite of pressure from multilateral lenders to curtail these indirect expenditures in view of their impact on government budgets. A report by the FBR, Tax Expenditure 2020, estimates the total cost to the national exchequer of income tax, sales tax and customs duty exemptions allowed during the current financial year at Rs1.15tr. This is around 3pc of GDP and more than 29pc of the total projected tax collection of Rs3.9tr. However, the report doesn't go beyond cost estimations and fails to analyse the impact of this huge expenditure on new investments, industrial output and economic growth. Indeed, some of these exemptions — like customs duty concessions on industrial raw materials or machinery — might have had a salutary effect on domestic industrial production and companies' investment decisions. But without a cost-benefit analysis of each concession for the sector or firm for which it was meant, their continuation amounts to groping in the dark. For a developing country, it is never advisable to thoughtlessly allow generous tax exemptions; it is not easy to assess their economic impact or prevent their abuse by powerful vested interests. When and where it is necessary to allow a tax concession as an incentive for investment or for any other reason, it should be done in a transparent fashion — instead of shrouding it in secrecy like the Gwadar port deal — and after considering its potential effects on the economy and the business environment.

Unjustified detention

WHAT began as a farce is becoming more so by the day. It has been over 100 days since Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman, editor-in-chief of Jang group, was arrested by NAB in a 34-year-old property case in March. Since then, his bail petition has gone unheard with five bail hearings either cancelled/postponed for one reason or another. The first time, the bench was unavailable; twice, one of the judges was on leave; another time, a new bench had been formed and had not had time to read the case file. The most recent such hearing was on Monday; it was adjourned after a few minutes because some paperwork by NAB was missing from the file of one of the judges. Now the next date is July 7. The arrest itself was completely uncalled for. Mr Rahman had appeared before NAB for the second time to answer questions about the property in question — which the accountability body alleges was illegally leased to him by Nawaz Sharif in 1986 — when he was suddenly taken into custody.

It is an ordeal designed to test the patience and break the will of the individual at its centre. But as everyone in the media knows, this is about far more. It is about sending a message to 'troublesome' journalists and media houses who dare to question the modus operandi of powerful organisations like NAB, that such 'investigative instincts' could cost them dearly, where both revenue streams and peace of mind are concerned. Our dysfunctional judicial system further exacerbates the travails of the targeted individuals. All manner of outrageous accusations, including treason, have been levelled at journalists for doing their duty, simply because their work has threatened to expose the officially sanctioned narrative for being a sham. The state seems determined to grind down the media into a supine uniformity, all reading from the same script and peddling the same fictions. It should know there still remain journalists in this country determined to hold their ground in protecting their hard-won freedoms.

Air crash report

THE preliminary report into the PK-8303 air crash largely bears out earlier suspicions; but it has also thrown up more questions.

Some of them, it is hoped, will be answered in the final report as this is an ongoing investigation, and little to no analysis can be expected at this point. Other questions, pertaining to more fundamental aspects of commercial aviation in Pakistan, are not part of the investigation's purview but they demand a separate, brutally honest, solution-driven inquiry.

PK-8303 was flying from Lahore to Karachi on May 22 when it crashed 1,340m from the runway threshold in its second attempt at landing. The first one had seen it come in with its landing gear retracted, engines furiously scraping the tarmac and sparks flying. The pilots' decision to do a 'go around' turned out to be disastrous because, as per the report, the engines show evidence of having been damaged in the belly landing.

The aircraft, unable to maintain the required height, crashed minutes later in a nearby residential locality. Ninety-seven people on board, and later one person on the ground, lost their lives. Two passengers miraculously survived.

According to the aviation minister, “overconfident pilots” and air traffic control officials were responsible for the crash. The findings thus far do indicate catastrophic mismanagement in the approach protocol.

The crew, to quote the report, “did not follow standard callouts” and when the ATC advised them twice to discontinue the approach on account of excessive height, the “landing approach was not discontinued”.

Moreover, air traffic control officials who witnessed the “scrubbing” of the engines with the runway “did not convey this abnormality to the aircraft”. Some inexplicable actions by the crew will certainly be probed further. For instance, why did the pilots lower the landing gear at 2,200m only to retract it at 530m?

The crew may also have been distracted instead of focusing single-mindedly on their approach to Karachi; according to the minister, they were discussing the pandemic even during the landing phase. Moreover, the co-pilot appears to have made no attempt to correct the captain or counter his decisions in any way. All in all, there was a total failure of crew resource management on the flight deck.

The PK-8303 crash did not happen in a vacuum: it is inextricably linked to the rot within PIA and its regulator, the Civil Aviation Authority. When the aviation minister presented the preliminary investigation report before the National Assembly, he also made a shocking revelation that of 860 active pilots in the country, 262 had appeared in exams through proxies.

So far, he said, PIA has decided to ground 150 of its pilots for possessing ‘dubious’ licences issued by CAA. There must be a root-and-branch overhaul of both organisations and the problems that bedevil them — or else another tragedy like that which befell PK-8303 is inevitable.

Premature optimism

REPORTS that Covid-19 cases in Pakistan have been falling in recent days should be viewed with caution. According to data released by the National Command and Operation Centre, the past few days witnessed between 4,000 to 5,000 daily cases as compared to mid-June which saw between 5,000 and 7,000 cases.

If reviewed without context, these figures do look promising. However, the same period in which coronavirus cases supposedly declined also witnessed a sharp reduction in tests. Where authorities had conducted north of 31,000 in a single day around mid-June, in the past few days the numbers have fallen to below 25,000. In fact, according to one NCOC press release on June 25, the total number of tests was below 22,000.

While officials are eager to pat themselves on the back and are marvelling at what they claim is the success of ‘smart lockdowns’ or achievement of ‘herd immunity’, the celebrations are premature if not entirely unjustified.

The true picture of Pakistan’s Covid-19 infections can be understood through simple calculations. One likely factor behind the fewer positive cases is that fewer people are being tested. The focus of the authorities should not be on the number of people testing positive, but rather on the number of tests being done and the percentage of total tests versus total positive cases in a single day. This percentage mid-June was between 18pc and 22pc, which meant that 18 to 22 out of every 100 people tested were Covid-19 positive. In the last five days, that percentage has been recorded at between 16pc to 20pc — a 2pc reduction which can hardly be claimed as a victory when testing was reduced by a third.

One official suggested that although there is no policy to have fewer tests, the fact that tests are being reduced simply on account of “fewer people coming to the hospital with symptoms” cannot be the basis upon which to claim success.

As we know, and much like the global trend for Covid-19 cases, community transmission is rampant. Testing must be ramped up; in the case where fewer suspected Covid-19 patients are seeking tests at hospitals, it must be done in communities to assess how widespread the infection is. A reduction in testing at this stage, when the government and healthcare experts fear a peak around mid-August, is unacceptable. Authorities must make good on their commitment to increase testing to 100,000 daily and sustain this over a prolonged period. Only then can victories and losses be documented.

A heavy price

IT is unfortunate that Radiullah alias Amiray from Tehkal in Peshawar district has found himself in the company of those who mock the police system. But unlike

Salahuddin Ayubi, the infamous ATM thief from Gujranwala whose antics cost him his life, Radiullah is lucky to have survived the brutish humiliation and beating inflicted on him by police for his undoubtedly appalling behaviour. The details of the fresh case show that even countless pledges and attempts to improve policing haven't had much effect on those tasked with enforcing the law. The footage that has found its way into homes across the country shows demeaning images. Such cases may tarnish the KP police's reputation as an arguably more professional force than its counterparts in the rest of the country. Action was only taken after the chief minister ordered the IG to do so. Four policemen have been suspended for allegedly torturing Radiullah after he angered the officials with his taunts in a video message that went viral. The man who appears in a second set of video footage is Radiullah too, but after he has been stripped of his clothing — and the dignity that every human being is born with. Judicial notice has been taken of the incident amid public outrage which manifested itself in street protests in some places.

The incident is likely to reignite the discussion on how the KP government has not been able to follow up on the Police Act, 2017, to ensure greater autonomy for police in the province and consequently greater accountability of police personnel. The absence of the much-promised public safety commissions is probably going to be lamented as the terrified cries of a man stripped bare pierces the conscience of those who still retain their ability to be shocked. But what about justice for Radiullah? Back in the ATM theft case in Punjab last year, the deceased Salahuddin's father forgave the policemen. Maybe the few good people around can ensure that this time round a trial will be held.

Slip of the tongue?

POLITICIANS are known to make embarrassing statements, and then row back by saying they were misquoted or that their words were taken out of context. But when a country's prime minister speaks in parliament, with the eyes of the world on him, there is very little room for error, and words must be weighed carefully.

Speaking in the National Assembly on Thursday during the ongoing budget session, Prime Minister Imran Khan raised many an eyebrow when he referred to slain Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden as a 'shaheed' (martyr) just after saying he was "killed" in the 2011 Abbottabad raid. While the opposition in the house

quickly pounced on him for making this grave error of judgement, the international media has also run with the story, using the prime minister's words as a peg.

Two senior members of the cabinet have — going into damage-control mode — referred to Mr Khan's words as a 'slip of the tongue', but perhaps it would be better if the prime minister himself cleared the air.

It should be reiterated that Osama bin Laden's killing on Pakistani soil by American forces was without doubt an extremely low point in this country's history. The Saudi militant, who earned his stripes in Afghanistan in the US-sponsored 'jihad' against the Soviets, evolved into one of the world's most dangerous men, overseeing a deadly terrorist network that wreaked havoc around the globe.

Therefore, bestowing the title of martyr upon him is unwise, and will not help to improve Pakistan's image among the comity of nations. Mr Khan has in the past avoided labelling the late Al Qaeda chief as a terrorist, and his views on militants have often been described as ambiguous. But in the given circumstances, especially with hostile actors looking to make things difficult for Pakistan, the prime minister must send a clear message that Osama bin Laden has done no great service to Pakistan or the Muslim faith, and certainly does not deserve to be called a 'shaheed'.

Interest rate surprise

THE State Bank has done it again. For the third time, it has held an unscheduled meeting of the Monetary Policy Committee and decided to slash the key policy rate by 100 basis points. With the move the total interest rate reduction since mid-March, when the lockdowns and disruptive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic hit Pakistan, comes to 625bps. This is, quite possibly, the sharpest monetary easing in the country's history, since it represents a near halving of the policy rate in a matter of three months. And this may not be the end of the cycle either as further rate cuts in the months ahead remain a distinct possibility.

There is little doubt that the situation facing the country calls for extraordinary measures. The rate cuts have been well received by the business community and have had a significant impact in terms of easing debt-service expenditures of

the government, though specifically quantifying the impact is difficult. The economy is now in the midst of a slowdown the likes of which we have never seen before, with the growth rate plummeting to negative territory, and the clouds of uncertainty that have produced this plunge far from lifting. At the same time, the global economy is also undergoing a sharp deceleration, with ominous implications for the sources of Pakistan's external earnings: remittances and exports. The optimistic take on elevated foreign investment in FY2020 owes itself almost entirely to the renewal of telecom licences earlier in the fiscal year, so this data is hardly likely to persist much into the future, or serve as a driver of future growth.

The times call for using all available levers to help the economy, but that doesn't mean that the dangers associated with these moves have receded. Lax monetary policy risks creating asset bubbles, and coupled with the tax incentives given to the property sector, the benefits could easily prove elusive for the real economy as money flees for speculative returns on offer in property and stock markets instead. It can also adversely impact the exchange rate, which is already under pressure. The State Bank says that with reserves finding strength in the past week through \$1.5bn worth of (debt-creating) inflows, coupled with a stable current account and external financing requirements met comfortably, this danger is manageable. We can only hope it is right. It would be wrong to fault the decision to slash rates so steeply, but it is equally important to emphasise that the State Bank must remain mindful of the dangers associated with such moves. Pakistan has to now undertake another round of steep macroeconomic adjustment of the sort that was just being completed when the pandemic hit, and coupling this with the imperative to shore up a flagging economy will prove to be a tough high-wire act.

Airlines' concern

THE report of Etihad Airways becoming the third major Gulf airline to 'temporarily suspend' its flight operations from Pakistan till July 1 as 30 Pakistanis arriving in Hong Kong earlier this week were found to be infected by the novel coronavirus is quite disconcerting. Some of the passengers who tested positive for the Covid-19 infection were asymptomatic, and all but three of them had to be admitted to hospital. All the passengers had travelled by Emirates, which was quick to stop its outbound flights from Pakistan till July 3, only two weeks after the resumption

of its limited operations in the country. Earlier, Fly Dubai, a budget airline, had also suspended its operations until Aug 1 because of the fast spread of the infection. Nevertheless, Emirates and Etihad are continuing their inbound passenger and cargo operations in addition to special outbound flights taking back UAE nationals. The resumption of their services from this country depends on the implementation of the “required additional measures to satisfy all parties”.

In another case, one of the three infected passengers arriving in New Zealand days after that country had reopened for business after declaring victory over the Covid-19 plague had travelled from Lahore. These reports would have reminded many people of a recommendation issued by the World Health Organisation in 2014 that all Pakistanis travelling outside their country should be administered the polio vaccination. This was not surprising when we consider that several polio cases had erupted in the country and that the virus here was also believed to have spread to countries like Egypt. With the number of coronavirus infections going up and set to cross 200,000 cases, and with the death toll reaching 4,000, many questions have been raised regarding the government’s decision to relax monitoring of both outbound and inbound travellers. Recently, South Korea has also temporarily banned most people from Pakistan and Bangladesh from entering the country after it recorded increases in coronavirus cases from those two states. It has also halted non-scheduled flights between South Korea and the two countries, though diplomats and those travelling for urgent business purposes are exempted from the entry suspension. If effective measures are not implemented immediately to stop infected Pakistanis from boarding outbound flights, chances are that the foreign airlines would extend the suspension of their services from Pakistan; in fact, a number of countries could put stricter restrictions on us to protect themselves.

Costly oximeters

AS knowledge of Covid-19 grows, our understanding of the infection’s symptoms and the tools to measure these with has simultaneously expanded. Soon after Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic by the WHO, a large part of the messaging on the early signs of the coronavirus focused on three major symptoms: a persistent dry cough, flu-like symptoms and fever. As Covid-19 cases and deaths in New York City escalated, a doctor penned an opinion piece for The New York Times in which he described how many patients could avoid

ending up on a ventilator — and even escape death — by measuring their oxygen saturation levels using a simple oximeter at home. The article was widely read and soon, with hospitals at full capacity and cities running out of ventilators, pulse oximeters were flying off the shelves. Later, research suggested that mask-wearing could greatly reduce the rate of transmission.

The demand for these items, especially oximeters, is also high in Pakistan, where citizens fear that because of the growing number of cases, hospitals may become inundated. An Aga Khan University Hospital doctor advised people to buy a pulse oximeter and check oxygen saturation levels at home after every few hours. “Any Covid-19 patient with saturation below 90pc must rush to a hospital. Otherwise, if saturation is fine, they need not worry,” he said in an interview. In this situation, having a pulse oximeter at home to easily check oxygen saturation levels is a reasonable step to stay ahead of the virus. However, the price of the instrument — which was earlier available at pharmacies for Rs4,000 to Rs5,000 — has now doubled. Much like some recovered patients who are profiting during the pandemic by selling their convalescent plasma for hundreds of thousands of rupees, medical supply sellers, too, have hiked up prices of oximeters. Prices for purchasing or renting CPAP machines and oxygen cylinders have also gone up, as have rates of face masks. Sadly, these prices are doubling despite the government giving tax and duty exemptions for the import of many diagnostic items and PPE for a period of three months in order to reduce rates in the domestic market. Authorities must not only crack down on those who are profiteering, but also ensure that this medical equipment is available, as it can prevent patients from falling critically ill. Strict action must be taken against pharmacies and vendors that are minting money at a time when public desperation is high.

Petrol’s slippery slope

AFTER a month of wrangling, the aggravated shortage of petrol at pumps around the country is finally set to be resolved as the government retreats from its position and has agreed to raise prices at the pump by a near historic amount.

The shortages arose once the government reduced prices in May, at the insistence of Prime Minister Imran Khan who said he wanted to bring down fuel prices in a bid to curb inflation and pass on to the public the benefits of lower

international oil prices.

But the move sparked immediate protests from oil companies and refineries who argued that the downward price revision had been made on the basis of month-old prices, and the prevailing international prices, as well their direction, at the time were sharply upward. It would not be possible for them to arrange cargo deliveries in the month of June at the price the government had notified in May, they said.

On the last day of May, the government notified a second decrease, and the minister petroleum — Mr Omar Ayub — went on the offensive on the media calling the oil companies a ‘mafia’. This aggressive turn in the sequence of events was followed up by law-enforcement action against oil executives after they were accused of ‘hoarding’ supplies.

Through all this, oil imports slowed to a trickle and supplies ran short around the country, creating long lines and dry-outs at pumps. The dispute dragged on all through June as consumers jostled for space at the pumps. The oil industry held its ground that arranging fresh supplies under the notified price was not possible, while the government served up fines and hostile rhetoric. Negotiations swirled around measures to reform the pricing mechanism, but a consensus on current prices could not be hammered out.

Then suddenly on Friday night the government caved in and passed through the single largest oil price increase the country has seen in many years. In a hurriedly called press conference, the minister and the prime minister’s special adviser on petroleum appeared together and took the defensive position that international oil prices had seen more than a 100pc increase in the last month, as well as offered the bizarre comfort that despite the price increase, the oil companies would continue to suffer.

With their first point they have confirmed what the oil industry was arguing all along: that under the notified price in May it was impossible to arrange for fresh supplies. With their second point, they have given the impression that their minds are less focused on solving problems and more focused on trading and deflecting blame. It is no longer possible to see the events of the past month in the oil-marketing sector as anything other than gross mismanagement by the government. Let’s hope things return to normal now.

Intolerance inside

IN a landmark resolution, Prime Minister Imran Khan approved funds for the construction of a Hindu temple in Islamabad. The decision has been hailed as a step in the right direction, creating a pluralistic and tolerant Pakistan, in line with the vision of this nation's creator. It follows in the wake of other encouraging acts, such as the reopening of an ancient temple in Sialkot, which had been sealed for 72 years; and the inauguration of the Kartarpur Corridor, which allowed Sikh pilgrims to cross the border and visit one of their religion's holiest sites. But despite these progressive steps, Pakistan is no sanctuary for religious minorities, and contradictions and hypocrisies abound. The misuse of the blasphemy law disproportionately targets religious minority groups and individuals, and provides cover for extrajudicial violence. There are continued instances of forced conversions and marriages of minority women and underage girls. Minority places of worship have also been attacked or ransacked by terrorist groups and unruly mobs in recent years.

In this wave of religious intolerance and opportunism, Muslims are not spared either. As noted in a recent op-ed in this paper, religiosity continues to grow in the country, often aided or enabled by the state. Only recently, the Punjab government sent a notification making university graduation in the public sector conditional on studying the Quran, even though a law mandating the study of the Holy Book in the province's educational institutes is already in force. Such actions cannot create a more religious, moral or law-abiding society; they only lead to an artificial sense of religiosity, allowing the self-righteous to persecute others on the basis of not being 'good' or not 'good enough Muslims', and create distraction from pressing issues. Aside from serving as a place of worship and gathering for the Hindu community, the recent decision to build a new temple in the capital city provides deep symbolic value, but until the root of intolerance and bigotry is not removed, symbolic actions will not amount to lasting societal change.

'Dubious licences'

PAKISTAN'S commercial aviation industry is embroiled in a scandal unprecedented in scope. Indeed, the affair of the pilots' dubious licences has

even eclipsed the findings in the preliminary investigation report of the PK-8303 crash. Minister for Aviation Ghulam Sarwar Khan's stunning admission on Wednesday that of 860 pilots, 262 had appeared in exams through proxies has left not only this country but the world aghast. On Friday, Mr Khan gave further details. Of the 860, he said, 753 were working in Pakistan and an inquiry is underway into their suspect credentials, while the rest are flying for foreign airlines. No less than 450 of the 743 are working in PIA; the remaining are employed by local private airlines, flying clubs, etc. According to him, the 262 pilots found to have taken exams through proxies have been indicted by a board of inquiry and will be barred from flying. The opposition has roundly condemned the minister for bringing these facts into the open. While this will admittedly have a grievous impact on the country's aviation industry, the public has a right to make an informed choice when it opts to take to the skies.

Meanwhile, the International Air Transport Association has expressed concern over the "serious lapse in the licensing and safety oversight by the aviation regulator" — and rightly so. The Civil Aviation Authority is solely responsible for licences issued to all pilots receiving their training in Pakistan. Moreover, every airline selects instructors from within the pilots employed by it, who are then approved by the CAA, and the final check flight is monitored by a CAA inspector. In that respect, every licence issued by the CAA is 'genuine'. The 'dubiousness' lies in the fact that certain elements within the CAA, particularly in its licensing and IT departments, have gone beyond international regulatory guidelines to deliberately queer the pitch so as to make the examination procedure perverse and convoluted. The option to take recourse to unfair means thus becomes that much more tempting, enabling pilots to 'pass' the exam while corrupt CAA personnel line their pockets. This is not to say that the pilots are blameless, but the buck stops with the regulatory authority.

The PK-8303 tragedy has opened a can of worms: a thorough overhaul is called for, both in PIA and the CAA. Besides the licensing fiasco, there is also the issue of what becomes of investigations into air accidents, and not only the ones that have claimed lives. There have also been several non-fatal incidents in recent years in which inquiries, if begun at all, have been mothballed. Why? To cite but one example, an ATR-42 skidded off the runway at Gilgit airport in July last year. Thankfully, all passengers remained safe, but the aircraft had to be written off. The CAA has much to answer for.

NFC appointment

IT was obvious to everyone that the presidential order appointing the prime minister's adviser on finance as a member of the 10th National Finance Commission and authorising him to preside over the deliberations of the NFC in the absence of the premier, who also holds the finance portfolio, wouldn't withstand judicial scrutiny. The adviser's appointment as a stand-in for the federal minister for finance and the illegal TORs seeking to slash provincial shares from federal tax resources anticipated political opposition and legal challenges. Therefore, the Balochistan High Court decision last week invalidating Hafeez Sheikh's appointment for being unconstitutional wasn't a surprise. Nor did the ruling against the agenda other than determination of the formulae for vertical and horizontal division of tax resources between the centre and provinces, set in the notification that constituted the new commission, shock anyone. The "President of Pakistan and NFC are bound to fully implement the Constitution ... Hence, the federal and provincial governments should utilise joint efforts in order to strengthen the federation rather than racing for a major share of NFC," the court ruled.

The PTI government has seldom tried to conceal its dislike of devolution of administrative powers to the provinces under the 18th Amendment or their greater fiscal space under the seventh NFC, which continues to operate despite the expiry of its five-year term in 2015. It wasn't unexpected. The increasing expenditure — especially on account of debt payments, and internal and external security — and shrinking tax collections have widened the resource gap in the past two years. In a contracting economy, the centre is struggling to pay its bills. Even austerity measures and expenditure cuts aren't helping. Such gimmicks can help only so much. Instead of enlarging the size of the tax pie by widening the net to meet its rising expenditure, the government, like its predecessor, wants the provinces to contribute funds to pay for growing security expenses, SOE losses, subsidies, debt repayments and the development of Azad Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan and KP's tribal districts. Even if the provinces agree to pay 7pc of the undivided tax pool at the cost of their own development as demanded by the centre, the problem will remain. The solution lies in urgently expanding the tax net for doubling the existing tax-to-GDP ratio and not in ambushing the provinces through unconstitutional ways.

Long hot summer

AT the height of the blazing Karachi summer, a grim annual ritual is playing out in the bustling metropolis. As the sun beats down mercilessly on the city and high humidity makes conditions stifling, long power cuts — announced and unannounced — have become routine across the metropolis, heaping further misery upon the frazzled dwellers of Karachi. K-Electric, the city's sole power supplier, says the additional cuts are due to furnace oil and gas shortages. However, the federal government does not appear to be buying its explanation. The power division, for example, says inadequate distribution and transmission capacity of KE has exacerbated the crisis. The Sindh government, meanwhile, has pointed the finger at Islamabad, blaming it for short fuel supplies. As the stakeholders shift the blame, the people of Karachi have to bear the consequences in suffocating heat.

While load-shedding in the summer months is an excruciating experience every year, this time, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, power cuts are putting increased pressure on the people. With partial lockdowns still in place, many people continue to work and study at home. Moreover, many patients are also self-isolating at home, so there is an added urgency to solve the issue without delay. Already there have been protests against the power cuts in several city areas, as people have been compelled to take to the streets due to the scarcity of electricity and water. To prevent further deterioration of law and order, and for the sake of public health and well-being, the crisis needs to be addressed immediately. The KE chief met the Sindh governor on Friday and assured him the situation would be resolved soon, while Nepra has also taken "serious notice" of Karachi's power crisis. Instead of pointing fingers at each other, all stakeholders — the centre, the Sindh administration as well as KE — need to identify the problem and resolve it quickly so that power cuts are brought down to a bare minimum, or eliminated altogether.

PSX attack

AFTER a considerable lull, the spectre of urban terrorism returned with full force to Karachi on Monday morning, as Baloch separatist militants stormed the Pakistan Stock Exchange.

According to security forces, four attackers were neutralised while three security guards and a police officer laid down their lives in the line of duty. The proscribed Balochistan Liberation Army has reportedly taken responsibility for the act of terrorism, while security officials in Sindh — as well as the country's foreign minister — have accused India for activating 'sleeper cells' in Pakistan.

The symbolism of the target cannot be missed. The PSX represents the beating heart of economic activity in the country's commercial capital, and is located in an area where the State Bank of Pakistan, the Central Police Office, and other major public and private institutions are based. Clearly, hostile actors are trying to send the message that the country's economic nerve centre is vulnerable.

However, the police, as well as private security guards, must be lauded for their bravery and alacrity, which may have prevented a bigger disaster.

Security officials say the attackers came with food and water, indicating that they may have intended to take hostages and prolong the PSX siege. The Sindh Rangers chief says the assault bears a similarity to the November 2018 assault on the Chinese consulate in Karachi, in which BLA attackers were also involved.

Moreover, speaking after Monday's incident, he said that Indian intelligence was developing a 'nexus' between Baloch and other separatists, as well as elements loyal to MQM-London, adding that the violence targeting Rangers personnel in Sindh earlier this month, believed to have been carried out by Sindhi separatists, was part of the same agenda. The city's police chief also pointed out that law enforcers had received advance intelligence reports of a possible attack on PSX.

Karachi has witnessed a large number of bombings and other acts of terrorism, mostly orchestrated by jihadi and sectarian militants, over the past two decades or so. This is apart from the ethnic, political and sectarian killings that destroyed the city's peace from the mid-1980s onwards. Too many precious lives — of law enforcers as well as citizens — have been lost, pushing the city towards a vortex of violence. From Monday's attack, as well as other smaller-scale incidents over the past few days, it is clear that attempts are being made to destabilise the metropolis.

Security forces must remain alert and step up intelligence-gathering activities to thwart the plans of subversive elements. The possibility that hostile states are looking to stir up trouble in Pakistan at a time when the geopolitical temperature

in the region is rising cannot be discounted, which is why security organs must be proactive.

Moreover, if the reports that different separatists and political militants have joined forces are true, then the state must adapt its counterterrorism policy accordingly.

Affordable housing

THE World Bank will support the Punjab government develop a housing policy to improve access to affordable housing for low-income groups as part of the province's broader post Covid-19 economic recovery effort. Although provision of low-cost homes has been the cornerstone of the PTI's election manifesto, housing and infrastructure development have acquired greater importance in the wake of an economic recession as the revival of construction activity, once the pandemic subsides, can help drive growth in 40 or so connected industries. According to some estimates, the construction of 100,000 housing units in the country can increase GDP by around 2pc. Additionally, the construction industry is the largest employer of skilled and unskilled workers after agriculture. Thus, promotion of a sustainable housing supply will help mitigate risks like climate change, public health and inadequate infrastructure investment arising from unplanned urban expansion. The project can help the province find housing solutions to address barriers on the supply and demand side of the housing value chain, and serve as a model for other provinces.

Increasing supply of affordable housing for low- to middle-income groups has been on top of the agenda of almost every political party since the 1970s. Successive governments — both federal and provincial — have not only invested in public housing schemes but also have, from time to time, given policy and fiscal incentives to attract private capital to low-cost housing. Nevertheless, housing shortages in the country have grown and are now estimated to have reached 10m units. The PTI has promised to build 5m housing units in its five-year term but is sure to miss the target with zero houses built so far. However, the government expects the incentives it announced as part of a construction package will kick-start building activity in general and woo private investment in housing for low- to middle-income people in particular. To encourage investment in low-cost housing, the government has also set aside Rs30bn as subsidy in its

budget. Additionally, the provinces have given several tax concessions to builders and developers. But these measures are unlikely to work unless a longer-term multipronged strategy, which targets private investments in affordable, low-cost housing solutions for different income groups, is evolved. That will not only require restructuring of the incentive package but also entail federal, provincial and local agencies implementing measures across the entire housing value chain from access to land with basic infrastructure to planning and building regulations, and construction and mortgage finance.

Human trafficking

PAKISTAN has been downgraded from 'Tier 2' to 'Tier 2 Watch List' in the 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report by the US State Department. Despite passing significant laws in 2018 — the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act and the Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Act — there is clearly a long way to go in protecting the rights of victims of human trafficking and smuggling. Law-enforcement officials may have been empowered with the passage of these new laws, but the TIP Report notes that conviction rates remained low when compared to the magnitude of the problem. Moreover, when it came to pervasive issues such as bonded labour, particularly in brick kilns, law enforcement and the government continued to turn a blind eye to the plight of the victims. Last year, 19,954 trafficking victims were identified, showing a slight increase from the previous year, but there was a decrease in victim-protection measures offered by the government. Another significant finding in the report was that undocumented and refugee men, women and children were particularly vulnerable to falling prey to the human traffickers' web of deceit.

Human trafficking is a transnational issue, involving millions of people, yet Pakistan remains one of only a handful of countries that is not a party to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. Those who are sold false promises of employment, marriage, or a chance at a better life in other countries, particularly in Europe and the Middle East, soon wake up to that fact that they fell for a mirage concocted by the traffickers: they often find themselves tricked into a life of debt bondage, forced labour or sexual slavery in their new countries; or they work in exploitative conditions on a contract basis, with little to labour protection, and no means of escape. There have also been instances where boys and men have been tricked

or coerced into joining armed movements abroad. The government clearly has a huge issue to tackle.