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June 2021

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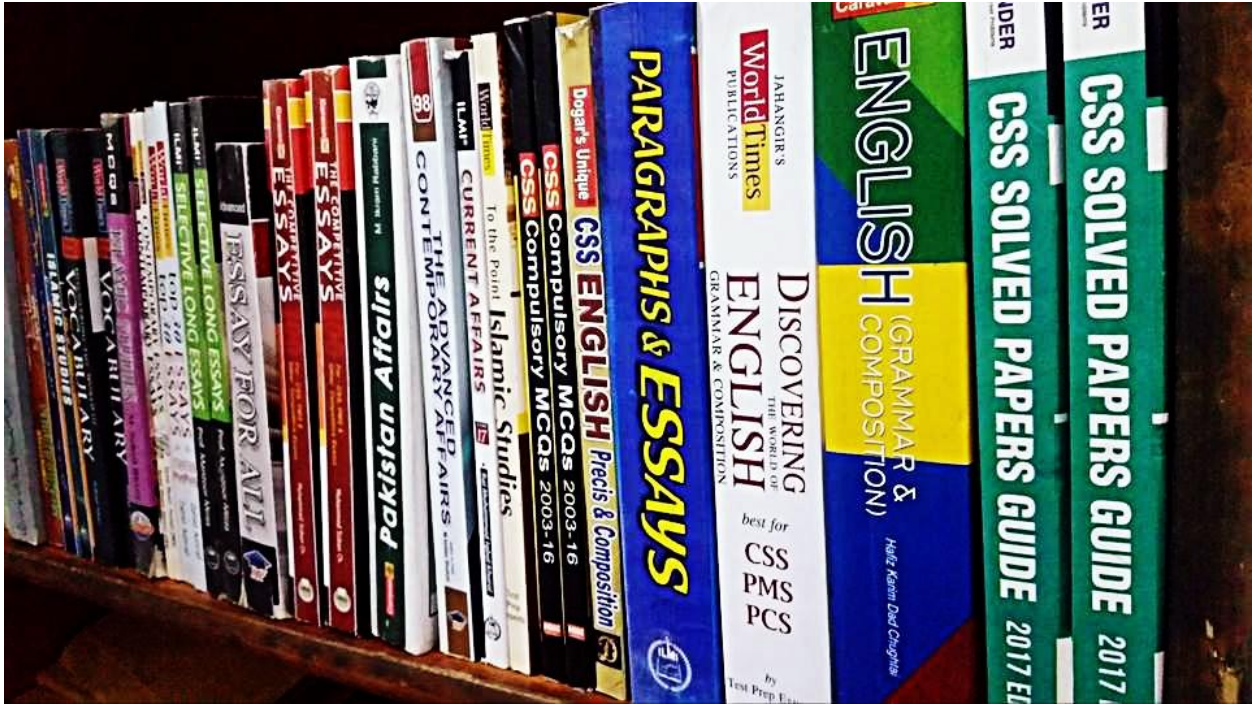
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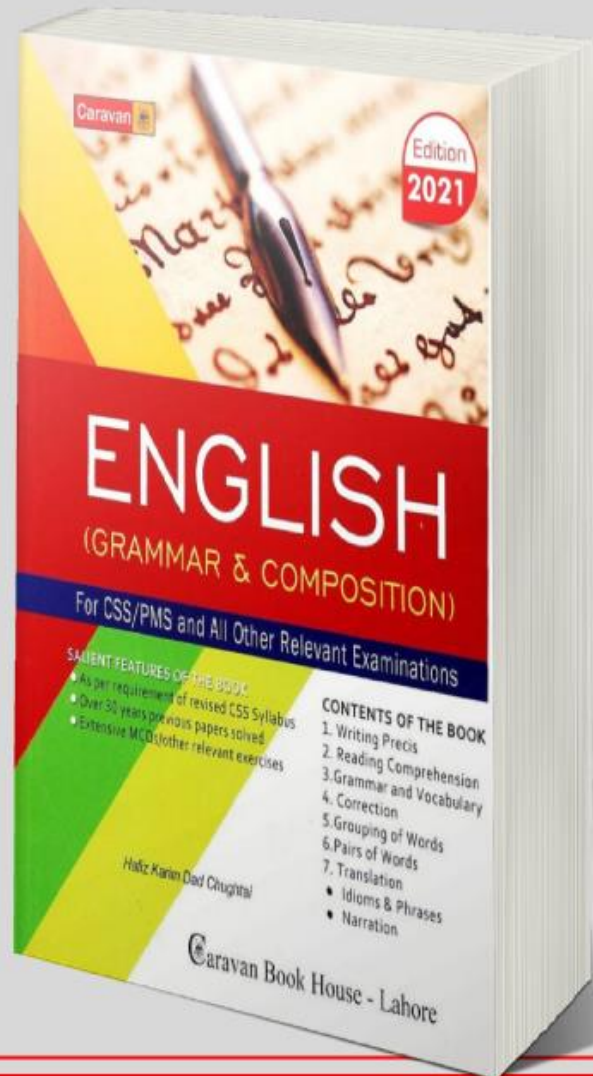
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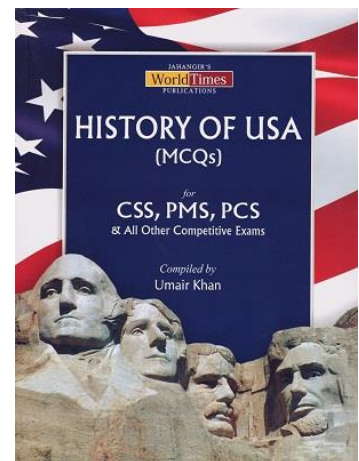
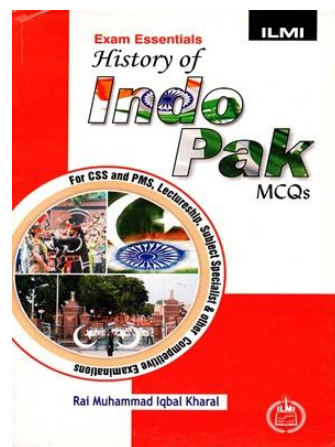
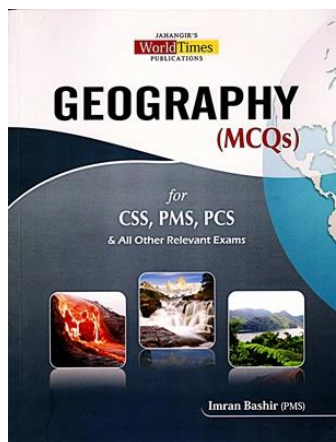
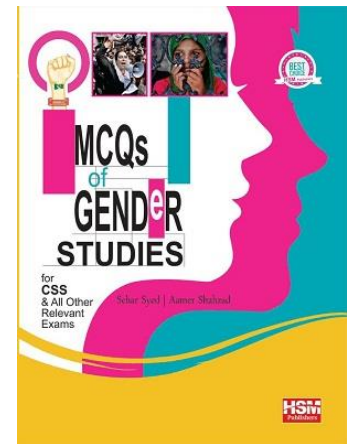
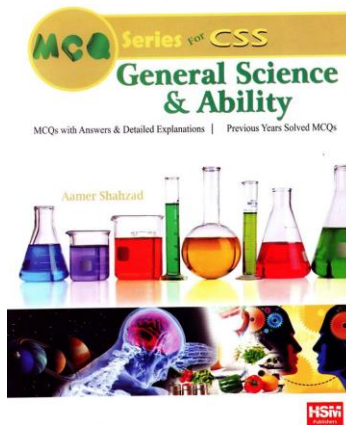
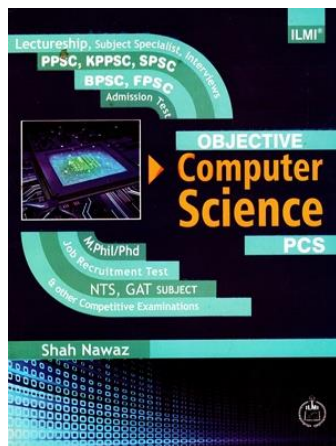
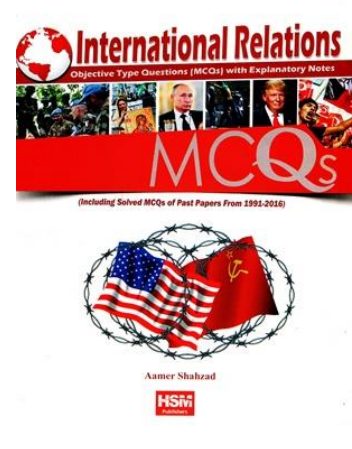
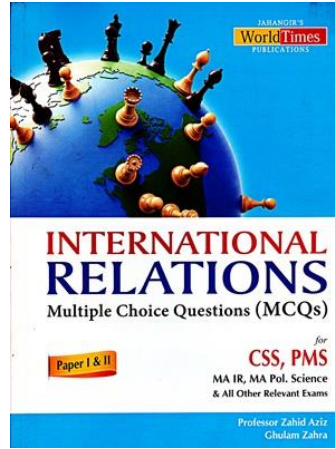
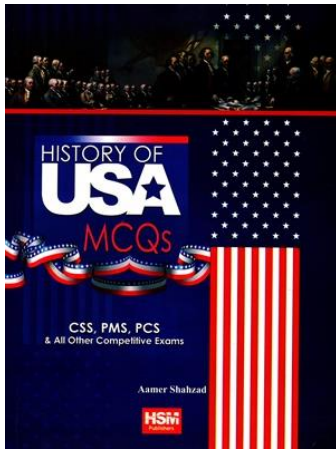


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Cry for help

THE fact that desperation born of extreme poverty can drive parents to murder their own children should shake the authorities out of their stupor to face a shocking reality. Last week, Multan police took into their custody a mother whose children died after consuming a toxic substance. The mother later confessed that she and her husband, who later took his own life, had poisoned their three children because of the family's poverty. There have been other, similar cases where penury has claimed its victims in violent ways. Last year in January, a father of four in Karachi set himself ablaze because he was out of a job. A month later, another man in the city, unable to pay his debts or his rent, took his own life. It is a matter of utter shame that there should be few forums to turn to for help in a country where such wretchedness and despair exist.

Several economic analyses, including by international bodies such as the IMF, have predicted that poverty in the country will grow. According to one calculation, we may soon see up to 85m people below the national poverty line. Food prices in the last two years alone have increased by more than a third while the Covid-19-induced slump in the job market has forced thousands of families in the country to go hungry. The prices of almost all edible staples — wheat, flour, sugar, pulses, oil and fruit — have been on the increase, with the government, despite all its talk of aiming to be a welfare state, not being able to do much. There is a need for greater introspection, and the state must ask itself why, despite all its efforts to introduce poverty-reduction initiatives, it has not been able to help those in dire need. The irony is that Pakistan is recognised as one of the most philanthropic countries in the world. The government needs to focus on holistic multidimensional programmes that address socioeconomic vulnerabilities rather than tackle poverty as a one-dimensional issue.

Tax revenues

LAST week, the FBR crossed what Prime Minister Imran Khan called a historic milestone by collecting more than Rs4tr in taxes (in the 11-month period from July to May) for the first time in a given fiscal year. The reported figure is around 18pc more than last year's Rs3.54tr. The increased tax collection is being showcased by the government as evidence of a recovering economy, which

continues to feel the effects of the ongoing pandemic. Notwithstanding the improvement in tax collection, which was stuck at around Rs3.8tr for the last three years, we still lag behind the revised tax target of about Rs4.7tr. That should be a cause of concern for the government since the National Accounts Committee now estimates the economy to expand by 3.94pc during this fiscal year against the original projection of 2.1pc. Though officials insist that the (revised) tax target will be achieved, their claim does not appear very plausible.

A break-up of the taxes collected by the FBR shows that sales tax grew by a hefty 28.3pc in the first 11 months of the ongoing fiscal because of the rise in fuel prices, increase in imports, and better economic conditions. Collection of duties by Customs posted an increase of 18.6pc while the federal excise duty was up by 11.55pc. However, income tax revenues have grown by just over 10pc in spite of a significantly large number of presumptive and withholding taxes. For next year, the IMF wants tax revenues to be closer to Rs6tr. With the economy projected to increase by 4.8pc, the collection of additional tax revenue will be difficult without imposing new taxes and cancelling several exemptions. This is why Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin, is trying to convince the IMF to lower its suggested target to nearly Rs5.5tr to make it realistic and achievable.

The new finance minister has time and again underscored the need for boosting tax revenues, saying if Pakistan were to sustainably grow at 7pc to create jobs and alleviate poverty it would have to drastically raise its tax-to-GDP ratio. Indeed, the current ratio of around 10pc, one of the lowest in the region and in the world, is at the heart of the nation's economic and financial woes. Without raising the tax ratio to a decent 15pc in the next few years, it would not be possible to bridge the fiscal deficit, offload debt or employ fiscal policy tools to push economic growth. Any serious effort to raise taxes anticipates wide-ranging reforms, especially improvements in the direct tax regime for making it robust and people-friendly, to broaden the tax net as well as create close linkages between the nation's tax policy and growth objectives. Ever since he was given the job, Mr Tarin has been pledging to move in this direction in the next budget. Will he succeed in delivering on his promises? Only time will tell.

Census Controversy

WHILE the Council of Common Interests may have approved the controversial 2017 census in April of this year, Sindh continues to have major reservations about the exercise. This is reflected by the fact that the Sindh government has written to the Senate chairman and the National Assembly speaker calling for a joint session of parliament to discuss the issue. According to the Sindh chief minister, the populations of Sindh and Balochistan have been undercounted. To back this claim, he has cited a Unicef survey which lists average members of a household at 7.2 for Sindh, while the census results put the number of the average household at 5.64. If these numbers are considered, based on the Unicef survey Sindh's population should be over 61m, while the official headcount says the province is home to just under 48m people. This is no small difference and will have a major impact on the division of resources. The MQM has also raised questions about the authenticity of the census.

While the CCI has decided to conduct a fresh headcount by the end of this year, the controversy that has persisted after the 2017 exercise needs to be addressed. If Sindh has such strong reservations over the exercise, then perhaps a joint session of parliament would be the best way to arrive at a judicious solution acceptable to all. Therefore, such a session should be convened without delay so that the issue is settled. Moreover, looking ahead, a more scientific and transparent method to conduct the census needs to be introduced so that controversies do not arise in the future. For this, technology can be utilised, while best practices of developed states where headcounts are largely straightforward exercises should be studied. What is more, the constitutionally mandated period of holding a census every 10 years needs to be respected. Unnecessary delays caused by political expediency create gaps in data which affect planning on a national level. The census is a huge exercise costing billions of taxpayers' rupees and hundreds of man-hours. The results of the exercise affect how resources are divided across the federation and how to plan for the future. Therefore, the process needs to be kept free of politics and controversy, while conducting the headcount before time is also a waste of resources. It is hoped that a positive consensus emerges from a joint session of parliament that can lead to an accurate headcount.

Karachi Street Crime

OVER the past few decades, Karachi has witnessed grotesque violence, including targeted killings, political, ethnic and sectarian violence as well as acts of terrorism. While thankfully levels of violence in the aforesaid categories have come down, street crime remains a major headache for the city's people. Criminals appear to strike at will, accosting people drawing cash from banks or ATMs; threatening people trapped in traffic jams; and shooting citizens over resistance to mugging attempts. On Monday alone, four people were killed while resisting muggers in the metropolis. So rampant has armed mugging become in the city that people are advised not to risk their lives and hand over their cash and mobiles/valuables to criminals. Moreover, concerns have been raised in the Sindh Assembly about the resurgence of armed gangs and the sale of narcotics in the Lyari area. MMA lawmaker Abdul Rasheed, who represents the area, told the house that police were doing little to curb crime in Lyari.

A solid strategy is needed to check the increase in street crime in Karachi. The city's new police chief Imran Yaqoob Minhas, who took office last month, told the media that battling street crime was his top priority. These intentions need to be translated into action on the ground. Patrolling should be increased while cameras should monitor points where muggers are known to strike. The police need to counter street crime aggressively as too many precious lives have been lost to trigger-happy criminals. As for Lyari, the state needs to ensure one of the city's oldest neighbourhoods does not become a hotbed for criminal gangs once again. There must be zero tolerance for gang activity and the sale of drugs in the area. Moreover, the state needs to offer alternatives to the impoverished area's youths so that they do not fall into the clutches of gangs. Along with better law enforcement, educational, sports and economic activities must be promoted in Lyari to ensure the area's people have avenues for upward mobility.

Draconian Media Law

MAKE no mistake: the proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority Ordinance — an apparent draft of which is doing the rounds on social media — is a declaration of war against journalists. It will, if enacted, erase all critical voices from print, electronic and digital platforms through a system of coercive

ensorship that will allow only a pliant media to survive. In other words, this naked attempt to control the narrative will eviscerate the very rationale for the fourth estate, which is to act as a check on excesses of power and function as a watchdog for the public interest.

Thus, not only is it antithetical to the constitutionally protected right to freedom of expression but it also violates the right to receive information. It should in fact be a matter of shame for a government claiming to have come to power through the ballot, to envisage a media law more draconian than what a military dictator could have dreamt up. Media organisations yesterday unanimously rejected the proposed legislation, terming it unconstitutional and an extension of Gen Ayub Khan's infamous Press and Publications Ordinance 1963. "This has no place in a democratically elected dispensation," reads their joint statement.

Clause after clause in the proposed law is illustrative of the authoritarian mindset that underlies it. Repealing existing media-related laws, it would set up PMDA, an all-powerful regulatory body to exercise control over print, electronic and digital media, whose members would be appointed by the president on the federal government's advice. The PMDA can without notice order the seizure of equipment at a television station or the sealing of a media outlet's premises. It can for a host of loosely defined reasons, and without issuing a "show-cause notice and affording opportunity of hearing..." prohibit any person, print media, electronic media or digital media service operator from operating. Sanctions include up to three years in prison and a fine extending to Rs25m, or both. Anyone aggrieved by its decisions can appeal to a tribunal — again set up by the federal government. The Supreme Court alone will have the jurisdiction to question the legality of any step taken under the ordinance. Much as it applies to TV channels at present, under the proposed law, the licensing regime would also cover print and digital platforms. Along with licences, there will be NOCs to be renewed periodically — a sword hanging over their heads, plus an added financial burden at a time when the industry is already suffering crippling losses.

Journalists over the last few years have endured indirect censorship and outright violence for simply trying to do their job. Now an attempt is underway to replace these blatantly illegal tactics by legislation that ultimately has the same objective — to bludgeon the community into acquiescence. However, the government should know that the media in this country still has the spine and the integrity to stand its ground.

Delaying AJK polls

A NEEDLESS controversy is being dredged up over the upcoming elections in Azad Jammu & Kashmir. The PML-N and the PPP have both objected to a proposal by the National Command and Operations Centre to delay the polls due to the Covid-19 situation. The NCOC has written a letter to the AJK prime minister suggesting that a delay in the polls would enable a large number of people in the area to get vaccinated. The letter also says election campaign activity could lead to a surge in infection and therefore it may be better if the schedule is pushed ahead. The two parties, however, say that the PTI is deliberately trying to delay the elections because it is in a weak position and wants time to break away candidates.

While the fears of the PML-N and PPP may have some grounds after the experience of the Gilgit-Baltistan elections — in which the PTI successfully weaned away many electables from the other parties — the Covid-19 situation presents an altogether different argument. The NCOC as the apex body driving Pakistan's fight against the pandemic has worked in a professional manner since its formation in March last year. It has displayed an inclusive approach and has risen beyond partisan interests. To its credit, it has taken correct and timely decisions that have led to Pakistan successfully containing the infection to a level where it has not overwhelmed the country's health infrastructure. Therefore when the NCOC wades into political waters — which is what this letter to the AJK prime minister amounts to — it does so with a lot of credibility at its back. The elections are supposed to be held within 60 days after July 29 when the present set-up completes its term. The NCOC is in the middle of pursuing an aggressive vaccination strategy and its head Asad Umar has correctly said that at this stage the virus must be controlled through vaccinations and not through lockdowns. The PPP and PML-N should therefore display some flexibility in their stance. This would require the government to take these parties into confidence about the situation of the infection and vaccination in AJK and convince them to agree to a delay in polls. This would be the right approach to ensure that the people of Azad Kashmir remain safe from any further surge in the infection. Let us not convert a public health issue into a political one.

Dangerous gangs

THE tribal belt of south Punjab is virtually ruled by well-armed, violent gangs of criminals who operate with impunity from their riverine hideouts in katcha areas along the provincial border with Sindh and Balochistan. These gangs, small or big, are involved in all kinds of crimes ranging from robberies to smuggling to kidnapping for ransom to murders. They are patronised and protected by the local tribal chiefs. This problem of south Punjab makes it to the headlines every few years as no effort to get rid of the criminals has succeeded despite countless police actions and the loss of scores of lives. Another operation has been underway for the last few days against the notorious Ladi gang. It was launched after a video showing the brutal murder of two tribesmen, who were said to be police informers, went viral on social media. Though the police claim to have destroyed a few of the gang's hideouts and arrested some members, most of them, including their ringleader, are said to have fled to the mountainous region of bordering Balochistan.

Why has no action against the riverine gangs succeeded? There are multiple reasons for that. For starters, the tribal status of the region is a big factor hampering the extension of the Punjab police's writ to the areas where such gangs thrive. The Border Military Police are not trained or equipped to deal with them. Support and protection provided by the tribal chiefs to them is yet another reason. More importantly, the gangs are better armed with more sophisticated weapons than what the police have and know the escape routes. The government had to call in the army to quash the infamous Chotu gang and force its ringleaders to yield after weeks of gunfight and several deaths in 2016. A permanent solution to this decades-long problem can't be found without breaking the nexus between criminals and the tribal leadership as well as changing the legal status of the tribal areas to bring them under the jurisdiction of the provincial police.

Afghan endgame

AS the Sept 11 deadline for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan draws closer, genuine concerns are being raised by this country about the shape of things to come after American and Nato troops leave. Afghanistan remains

politically unstable; in fact, violent incidents involving loss of life continue apace. What Pakistan and many other regional states fear is a return to total anarchy in Afghanistan, and the after-effects of this in the region. These concerns have been amplified, among others, by Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, who told an Afghan delegation on Tuesday that all sides needed to “seize the historic opportunity” to reach a broad-based settlement. But the million-dollar question remains: are the Afghan Taliban — the most powerful force opposing the Kabul government — willing to listen to such advice?

At present, it appears that the Taliban are playing hardball. Their military victories on the battlefield against government troops have seemingly given the militia the idea that they can take power through force, bypassing the negotiating table. Moreover, as some observers have noted, Pakistan’s influence over the group appears exaggerated, as the Taliban are not this country’s proxy, and are very much independent actors. What they mean is that while Pakistan can urge the group to make peace, the decision would be that of the Taliban alone. Indeed, the situation does not look promising. Western forces are biding their time, waiting eagerly for the last flight out of Kabul. If a security vacuum is created in the country in the absence of a peace deal accepted by all Afghan stakeholders, the Afghan nightmare may continue indefinitely, with regional states left to deal with the mess.

In many ways, this situation mirrors what happened at the end of the Afghan ‘jihad’. A defeated Soviet Union cut and ran, while the Americans were also not keen to stick around for long after their ‘victory’. The result was an implosion in Afghanistan, the rise of the Afghan Taliban and the country becoming a hub for transnational militancy. The script may not be very different this time around, with newer, more ferocious players such as the local chapter of the so-called Islamic State entering the scene. Therefore, all countries — Afghanistan’s neighbours and global powers — must do whatever is possible to help formulate a lasting Afghan peace accord, though by no means should foreign forces get involved in nation-building. This might be easier said than done but the solution should be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led, with foreign states providing their good offices to facilitate agreement. Most of all, the Taliban must ask themselves if they want to prolong the war, or share power in a democratic manner. The militia should realise that even if they defeat government forces, other militant players will be quite eager to dislodge them from power in Kabul.

PakVac launched

THE news on the vaccine front in the country is adding to a cautious optimism that the worst of the third wave is over, or at least it is headed in that direction. Tuesday saw the inauguration of an antisera processing plant and the launch of 120,000 doses of PakVac produced locally from the Cansino vaccine concentrate under the fill-finish operation, which is the final step in the overall manufacturing process.

Meanwhile, concentrate for another 900,000 doses has been procured for processing.

According to the National Institute of Health, the aim is to produce 3m doses per month as well as the raw material for the vaccine. That would be sufficient for 3m people on a monthly basis to be fully inoculated as it is a single-dose vaccine.

Despite being the fifth largest internal market, Pakistan lags far behind in the biopharmaceutical industry that comprises vaccines and high-cost recombinant biological drugs. It imports all its vaccines, and produces only a few antisera such as for rabies and snake venom, based on simple technology that has been around for decades. No modern vaccines or any other biological products are produced from scratch in this country.

Until a few years ago, the measles vaccine was being processed here under the fill-finish function. The same facilities at the National Institute of Health have been revived for processing PakVac from the Cansino concentrate. The fill-finish step is a critical one that requires quality assurance and proper cold chain management for which CanSinoBio experts from China are lending their technological assistance.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a shifting of priorities in the health sector: one of them is the importance of funding vaccine research. International organisations, such as the WHO, and Gavi the vaccine alliance are also promoting the idea of helping countries operationalise their existing unutilised capacity to produce vaccines. Similarly, there is now a global will to assist with technology facilitation and transfer that can enable developing countries to produce their own vaccines and recombinant biological drugs. Pakistan must seize the moment to make up for lost time. The government should open up the

biopharmaceutical sector to public-private partnership, or even to the private sector independently, to develop the latest mRNA class of vaccines. It can incentivise such ventures by offering tax holidays, facilitating the import of machinery, etc. A window of opportunity is beckoning Pakistan, and the country must not squander it.

Trade deficit

PAKISTAN'S trade deficit has expectedly widened sharply during May, the ministry of commerce data showed on Wednesday. The gap between what the country sells to the world and what it buys from it 'ballooned' last month by 134pc to \$3.4bn from \$1.5bn a year ago. That the nation's import bill for the month shot up by a hefty 77.8pc to \$5.1bn during the month is attributable to last year's lower import base when the import bill dropped to \$2.9bn on the back of the drastically reduced domestic demand because of the Covid-19 pandemic and consequent economic shutdown to halt the spread of infections. The more than 25pc drop in the monthly exports also contributed significantly to the widening trade gap. The trade deficit has been increasing since December primarily because of faster growth in imports than in exports. Overall, the gap has expanded by 29.5pc to \$27.3bn in the 11-month period between July and April from \$21.1bn in the same period last fiscal year. Imports rose by 22pc to \$49.9bn and exports by 14pc to \$22.6bn. But the question is: should we be worried about the rising gap between what we import and what we export?

There's not much to worry about the rising import bill. This was expected. Two factors have played a major role in the increased import bill this fiscal from last year. First, the import of food, including wheat and sugar, and cotton have pushed imports more than was estimated at the beginning of the financial year. Next year, these imports are expected to moderate on better domestic crop yields. Two, the revival of economic activities and a surge in the demand for Pakistani exports has driven up imports of raw materials as well as machinery for technology replacement and capacity expansion. Moreover, the country's current account remains in surplus in spite of the widened trade deficit as the surging remittances have largely offset the impact of increased imports. The external sector is unlikely to face any serious financing challenge in the next one to two years if the remittances continue to grow at the same pace. But the long-term balance of payments stability requires the government to boost exports through

product and market diversification. Additionally, it must tweak its policies and learn to respect contracts it makes with investors to give confidence to investors for attracting longer-term, non-debt creating foreign direct investment flows to sustainably grow the economy.

Covid-19 & education

EDUCATION and learning have suffered substantial, and in some ways permanent, setbacks in Pakistan during the pandemic. Schools were intermittently closed due to rising cases and ensuing restrictions, and though private, high fee-paying schools managed to take teaching online so students were not totally left behind, public and low fee-paying schools missed out in a huge way. For these schools, digital learning was and is simply not an option. For millions of students, not only did learning and teaching not take place during the closure period, there was also the serious problem of lost learning that occurs when students disengage from school. When students return to schools after each closure, teachers confront lower levels of retention and have to reassess their expectations of how much a student can catch up given how badly schooling was affected.

Compounding the problem, a World Bank estimate suggests that around 1m children will drop out of school as a result of income losses during the pandemic. Given that 22m children in Pakistan are already out of school, the additional dropout figure represents an increase of almost 4.2pc. A study conducted on the disruption of schooling during the 2005 earthquake in the northern areas showed that an entire cohort of students from three to 15 years of age at the time of the disaster had lower academic scores four years later, despite substantial remediation efforts. The pandemic-induced school closures – which have coincided with the three waves of Covid-19 – have brought similar, if not worse, disruptions.

When it comes to decisions on education, the role of the government leaves much to be desired. Aside from the hue and cry over university and college examinations, there has been no conversation about or support extended to the millions of children who have been pushed out of the education process during the pandemic. Reopening schools when cases are low is simply not enough, given how high the dropout rate is. What efforts are being made to re-engage

students who have permanently left school? With households reporting a fall in income during the past year, what is the government doing to persuade poverty and hunger-stricken families that education is a priority?

The government has some serious work to do. As schools reopen, officials must acknowledge the terrible setbacks to education and devise a long-term plan. This strategy must address the digital divide as well as the huge blow to girls' education, already regarded as being of secondary importance in families where incomes are strained. Interventions must be planned around these challenges, given that with new variants and low vaccine coverage, a fourth and fifth wave are very real possibilities. As the government mulls its next steps for the educational sector, mass vaccinations and testing must be rolled out to ensure that future disruptions do not push learning towards an irrecoverable collapse.

Forgotten Rohingya

WHILE the plight of the Rohingya has been overshadowed by the Covid-19 pandemic and February's military coup in Myanmar, the fact is that the community remains in no-man's land, with many of its members lacking citizenship and its attendant rights. Around a million Rohingya refugees reside in Bangladesh, living in deplorable conditions, while others have sought refuge in countries across the globe. Many members of the community were forced to flee when the Myanmar military launched a pogrom against them in 2017. The situation was particularly tense in Rakhine state, with reports of rape and murder against the Rohingya rife. Myanmar faces charges of genocide in the International Court of Justice for these outrages. Meanwhile, the living conditions of the community in refugee camps are pathetic; several thousand have been dumped on a Bangladeshi island far from the mainland without job opportunities and proper healthcare.

While many in the international community have rightly slammed Myanmar's junta for overthrowing an elected government, the plight of the Rohingya must not be forgotten. Along with a return to representative rule in Myanmar, the international community must also demand justice for the Rohingya. For long Myanmar's ruling generals have pushed the xenophobic trope that the Muslim Rohingya are 'outsiders' in the Buddhist-majority nation, despite the fact that members of the community claim their roots in the country formerly known as

Burma go back generations. Even the quasi-democratic government of Aung San Suu Kyi did not have the courage to speak up for the fundamental rights of the Rohingya. It is these circumstances that led the UN to terming the Rohingya the most persecuted minority in the world. Myanmar cannot be allowed to disenfranchise an entire community, while those responsible for violence against the Rohingya must be brought to justice. In the meantime, countries that host Rohingya refugee communities must treat them in a humane, dignified manner and ensure that they have access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities.

India's abstention

ISRAEL'S recent brutal foray into Gaza and its targeting of Palestinians elsewhere in the occupied territories has elicited strong reactions from across the world.

While many of Tel Aviv's protectors and friends parroted the line that Israel has a right of 'self-defence' — even as the Jewish state mercilessly murdered children in Gaza — thousands of conscientious people of all faiths and nationalities took to the streets in cities across the world to condemn this butchery. However, some states that had formerly supported the Palestinian cause were conspicuous by their silence, apparently to please Israel. India is among this group; in a recent vote at the UN Human Rights Council calling for a probe into Israel's recent atrocities, India chose to abstain. This led the Palestinian foreign minister to observe in a letter to New Delhi that the abstention "stifles the important work of the Human Rights Council at advancing human rights for all people".

India's about-turn where the Palestinian cause is concerned is not new and has been decades in the making. Initially, spurred by a sense of Third World solidarity, India offered support to the Palestinians, with Yasser Arafat calling Indira Gandhi his 'sister'. However today, under the Hindutva banner India is a firm ally of Israel, with Benjamin Netanyahu boasting of the "deep friendship" between New Delhi and Tel Aviv.

Perhaps this is a natural pairing, as right-wing governments in both states have applied similar brutal methods in occupied Palestine and held Kashmir. Of course, the irony that Hindutva's founding fathers lionised the Nazis is lost on many. Today, India-Israel relations are clearly a marriage of convenience, with

both states sharing notes on how to brutalise the Palestinians and Kashmiris. However, regardless of such dicey friendships, people of conscience across the world will continue to raise a voice for the Palestinians, while the plight of the Kashmiris will also not be forgotten. State-sponsored brutality cannot snuff out the desire of the people of Palestine and Kashmir for freedom and dignity.

Environment in danger

THERE is no doubt that Prime Minister Imran Khan has elevated the debate on climate change and accorded it the status of a national issue by continuing to talk about it on regional and international forums. Several initiatives taken by the government such as the 10-Billion Tree Tsunami and the Ecosystem Restoration Fund have gained international recognition. Today, on June 5, Pakistan is the global host for World Environment Day and is launching the UN's Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. Other initiatives of the government include the launch of the Green Eurobond worth \$500m. In April, the government also pledged to transition to 60pc clean energy and convert 30pc of its vehicular fleet to electric by 2030. Soon after the announcement, it shelved imported coal projects intended to produce 2,600MW of energy in favour of hydroelectric projects that will generate 3,700MW. However, for these measures to have an impact, the government must have an integrated policy, infrastructure development, power production and agriculture framework that shuns a carbon-intensive approach.

At the moment, the bigger picture tells a story that is at variance with the government's stated intentions. Between 1994 and 2015, Pakistan's carbon emissions had increased by 123pc. Around 46pc of the country's total greenhouse gas emissions come from fossil fuels, followed by 43pc from agriculture. Ironically, more than 95pc of our coal-based power projects were commissioned in the past four years and are at different stages of development. Meanwhile, last year a long-term plan opted for fossil fuels for energy production, ignoring the possibility of renewable energy. No surprise then that by 2030 our carbon emissions are projected to increase by 300pc. Similarly, large projects including the Peshawar BRT — for which hundreds of trees were felled — and the Rs5tr Ravi City construction only add to the carbon footprint.

These gaping contradictions in development policy offset any potential impact of the government's eco-friendly plans by years and undermine our international

credibility. Similarly, the failure to impose a ban on the use of single-use plastics last year, exposed the government's weakness for favouring industrialist lobbies. Globally, the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events have increased, resulting in huge loss of life and property. Scientists have termed this decade the last chance to slow down a permanent rise in global temperatures. If Pakistan is to save itself from the apocalyptic effects of climate change, the government must show far greater seriousness in its purpose and execution of its plans. In the short term, up to 20pc of the projected 2030 GHG emissions can be reduced by decarbonising transport and agriculture. Provincial environmental protection departments also need to be overhauled and made fully functional and independent so that they can flag projects violating environment rules. If Pakistan does not act on a war-footing, it might squander its last chance to save itself from nature's wrath.

Misused law

THE acquittal of Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta by the Lahore High Court this week has once again underscored the deeply problematic and growing misuse of the blasphemy law. After spending seven years in jail, following the handing down of a death sentence to them by an additional district and sessions judge, the Christian couple has been acquitted of charges of sending a blasphemous text message to the complainant, a shopkeeper identified in some news reports as a mosque cleric.

Like many others before them, the couple spent nearly a decade locked away from their families, deprived of their freedom. At the time of her arrest, Shagufta worked as a helper at a school and earned a paltry Rs3,500 a month. Her husband, Shafqat, who is reportedly handicapped, owned a mobile repair shop. The couple from Gojra in Toba Tek Singh come from a very humble background, and one can only imagine how their four children must have fared during their prolonged incarceration.

Sadly, this story is not unique; others too have been falsely accused, languishing for years in jail, only to be acquitted by the higher courts. Asiya Bibi spent almost a decade in solitary confinement before the Supreme Court overturned her death sentence. At the moment, there are several individuals convicted of blasphemy by the lower courts, and awaiting justice from the higher courts.

The Supreme Court has often warned against false blasphemy accusations and even called on politicians to ensure that those jailed under these offences have not been wrongly accused. Yet, little progress has been made on this issue and citizens continue to spend too many years of their life awaiting justice.

Parliament must gather the courage to talk about these issues. Lawmakers must also confront how false accusations strip accused citizens of their freedoms with no redress. Moreover, in many chilling cases, an accusation of blasphemy alone — with no evidence or formal legal process — can result in violence and death. The cases of university student Mashal Khan and Christian couple Shama and Shahzad are just two examples of how such accusations lead ignorant people to take the law into their own hands. Salmaan Taseer, despite being a serving governor, too, was killed as a result of the same mentality, which prizes hate and violence over truth and justice. This trend must come to an end, and our lawmakers must unite to find a solution so that more innocent citizens do not suffer.

Payment to IPPs

THE government has finally paid the first tranche of the outstanding bills of 20 independent power producers out of the 46 generation companies with whom it had signed revised power purchase agreements months ago to secure future tariff concessions. The SAPM Power took to Twitter on Friday to announce that this represented the government's firm resolve to settle the issue of the power sector's circular debt once and for all. In all, the government has paid Rs89.2bn to the 20 IPPs or 40pc of their unpaid bills of Rs225bn. The first payment to the rest of the IPPs is being withheld owing to various reasons, including inquiries launched by NAB against power companies set up under the 2002 power policy for allegedly making excess profits of around Rs54bn. The disputed excess profits constitute just above 13pc of the total unpaid bills of Rs403bn the government owes to the 46 IPPs. The government had agreed to pay these bills in two instalments within six months of the revision in their PPAs as part of its plan to liquidate the power sector's growing circular debt that has already topped the Rs2.3tr mark.

The government decision to withhold payment defies all logic since the revised PPAs with the 2002 IPPs provided for independent arbitration under the

Arbitration Submission Agreement option on alleged excess profits for an amicable resolution of the dispute. The decision of the accountability watchdog to target particular IPPs is also surprising since the profit earned by the IPPs, according to Nepra, “would be higher or lower than the return on equity allowed to them” because of such factors as operational efficiencies, cost-saving measures, better project management, etc. NAB intervention in purely technical issues is uncalled for since the regulator had already started investigating allegations of excess profits. Pakistan has a very poor track record of honouring commitments made to investors, and has suffered immensely on this count. Consider the example of Reko Diq where an international arbitration tribunal slapped a fine of nearly \$6bn on Pakistan for revoking the agreement with Australian mining giant TTC, damaging the country’s credibility in the eyes of foreign investors. In order to avoid further damage, the government needs to tell NAB authorities to back off, and implement the agreements with the IPPs unless it wants to sour ties further with investors. The sooner the matter is closed the better for foreign investment in the country.

Drastic vaccine step

THE Sindh government’s decision to make Covid-19 vaccinations mandatory and to block the salaries of government employees who are not inoculated is indeed a drastic measure, as admitted by the province’s chief minister himself. The announcement has come as the country battles the third wave of the coronavirus with a vaccination rollout which this far has covered 3.7m individuals with one dose.

While the Sindh government has good reasons to fear a scenario in which vaccine hesitancy leads to a continuing threat from Covid-19 and lethal variants, the order to make it compulsory and to tie it to incomes needs to be re-examined.

In many countries, though SOPs such as mask-wearing and distancing are compulsory, vaccination itself is largely still voluntary. In the United States, for instance, officials are going all out to incentivise citizens to get a jab but are staying away from making vaccines compulsory so as not to overstep when it comes to individual liberty. In Ohio, the governor has announced a weekly \$1m prize draw that only vaccinated citizens can enter. In Maryland, state employees are paid \$100 if they get both doses. In New York, those who get vaccinated will

receive a seven-day Metro card and even tickets to a baseball game. The idea behind these incentives is to encourage people to get vaccinated voluntarily — an exercise that builds trust between citizens and the state.

In Pakistan, where citizen trust in public institutions is generally low, a coercive policy threatens to further undermine public trust confidence. This could have consequences for adherence to important public health measures. For vaccine sceptics, a mandatory vaccine order will fuel resentment and may be viewed as a form of state oppression.

The Analytical Angle: Vaccine hesitancy in Pakistan is growing. Here's how it can be tackled

Though the government could justify such measures in the interest of public health and safety due to the unprecedented nature of the threat, there are several other steps it can take to encourage people to get vaccinated voluntarily. This exercise will be contingent on building trust, educating citizens and giving incentives to persuade vaccine sceptics.

Though the Sindh government's early signalling when it came to Covid-19 prevention and SOPs was exemplary, the PPP's participation in mass PDM rallies was totally at odds with scientific advice and gave the wrong message to the population. The party needs to do better and act as a role model for citizens so that trust can be gained. A door-to-door awareness campaign is also critical, as is messaging from public figures and government officials. Conspiracy theories must be battled in all public spaces through ads, mainstream media and even mosque sermons.

Fear and mistrust can be overcome to some extent through awareness, incentives and trust-building measures. Penalties and punishments for vaccine refusals should really be a last resort. More importantly, the government must ensure there are enough free vaccines for those who want them.

Traces of Bollywood

LAST week, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Directorate of Archaeology & Museums finally took possession, after much back and forth, of the ancestral homes in old Peshawar of Bollywood legends Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar. On Tuesday, the city deputy commissioner issued a notification of the transfer of ownership of the

properties to the relevant provincial department under the colonial-era compulsory property acquisition law. It had been announced months ago that the locations would be restored and reopened as museums. The sites have over the years suffered grievous damage.

The news must have been met with mixed reactions. Pakistan's officialdom has always displayed a penchant for flaunting the country's richly woven tapestry of cultural heritage. On the ground, however, it is fairly uncommon to see this lofty rhetoric translated into action. Things might be inching forward, though. The PTI government has laid particular emphasis on tourism as one of the tools in the country's arsenal of 'soft power'. The KP government's promises in terms of the Bollywood stars' ancestral residences follows on other headlines such as the excavation some months ago of a Buddhist site in the area, and the opening of Peshawar's Sethi Haveli as a museum. True, grave problems and systemic inefficiencies remain, such as artefact theft and the failure to protect sites against defacement by an under-educated public. Still, one hopes that in the case of the Kapoor and Kumar havelis, legal tangles and officialdom's inadequacies are not allowed to stymie worthy projects. Other provinces must step up their efforts too; sites deserving of protection and display adorn the entire country. The Radio Pakistan building in Karachi is one worthy of mention because Sindh is in particular lagging behind in showcasing its ample heritage. The upper parts of the country have fared slightly better. For Pakistan to cement its place amongst thoughtful, civilised nations, documenting and preserving its history is vital. The importance of areas of endeavour such as archaeology and heritage preservation must never be underestimated.

Politics of numbers

WITH parliament going into budget session this week, the government and the opposition are preparing for some intense economic sabre-rattling in the coming weeks. Recent days have seen this sparring intensify in the wake of the government's announcement that it has attained a GDP growth rate of 3.9pc. The claim is hotly disputed by the opposition and has triggered a debate among economists and financial commentators because it has upended previous growth rate estimates by the State Bank as well as international financial institutions. While a consensus on this surprising growth rate may wait a while, the government has wasted no time in advertising it as evidence that the economic

turnaround has indeed commenced. From Prime Minister Imran Khan downwards, all officials and spokespersons are reinforcing the significance of this figure and claiming an even higher growth rate for the next year.

To counter this hype, the PML-N has launched its own economic offensive aimed at puncturing the government's feel-good moment. At a pre-budget seminar last week, the party's leadership provided a different data-based context to the state of the economy and how it compared poorly to the years that the PML-N was in power. These senior leaders used official data to show how inflation had skyrocketed, growth had stagnated, exports had barely moved up despite massive devaluation, tax revenues had shown negligible improvement, the tax-to-GDP ratio had gone down and poverty in real numbers had increased significantly. They argued that the PTI was being economical with the truth and using numbers and data without putting them in the larger context. This debate is now expected to go into higher gear as parliament becomes the focal point for the budget deliberations at a time when the government is promising more money for public-sector development and an emphasis on growth. Added to this mix is the political aspect of the economy in the larger context of the PTI's performance since the party took office in August 2018. The budget debate will enable the treasury and opposition benches to argue their case for and against the government's performance with actual hard data. It is an important debate at this juncture when figures tell a story that many believe is not translating into relief for Pakistani households. Those parliamentarians who can do their homework well, and who can arm themselves with credible and verifiable data to tell a convincing and digestible story will certainly be in a position to mould opinion and sway thinking.

The nation deserves to hear such an informed debate. Unfortunately, parliament has, in the last few years, rarely witnessed substantive debates, and has, instead, all too often descended into shouting matches and rowdy behaviour. Contextualising the state of the economy will help make sense of the data deluge that has started to flow into the national discourse.

Kashmir road map

THE road to peace in South Asia runs through Kashmir. This was the gist of Prime Minister Imran Khan's message while speaking to a foreign newswire on

Friday. “If there is a road map [on Kashmir], then, yes, we will talk”, the PM told Reuters while discussing Pakistan-India relations. Mr Khan added that if India was willing to revert to the status quo ante, before it moved to rescind the held region’s autonomous status in 2019, bilateral parleys could move forward. He also mentioned that Pakistan desired a “civilised” relationship with its eastern neighbour while observing that trade was the best path towards normalisation and poverty reduction in the subcontinent.

The prime minister was absolutely correct when he said in the aforementioned interview that India’s move in held Kashmir was “illegal, against international law and United Nations resolutions”. Pakistan has rightly raised the Kashmir issue in world capitals and international forums to highlight India’s brutality in the disputed region and give a voice to the oppressed Kashmiris, particularly after New Delhi rescinded the region’s special status. These efforts to give moral, political and diplomatic support to the Kashmiris should continue with full vigour until a just solution acceptable to the people of the occupied region emerges.

However, setting preconditions for talks with India may be counterproductive. The Pakistan-India relationship is an incredibly complicated one, and it is only through sustained dialogue that decades of mistrust and scepticism can give way to accommodation. Practically, we have witnessed in the recent past that quiet behind-the-scenes dialogue has paid dividends in avoiding a fresh conflagration in the subcontinent. Both states once again had come close to war in the aftermath of India’s 2019 Balakot misadventure.

However, today it has emerged that backchannel talks have been continuing — some say with the blessing of certain common friends — and a concrete example of the effectiveness of talks emerged earlier this year, after both states agreed to respect the 2003 ceasefire along the LoC, after numerous deadly exchanges. The peace process currently might be moving forward at a glacial pace, but in the Pakistan-India context, even talks about talks are better than bombastic rhetoric. Therefore, Pakistan’s emphasis on resolving the Kashmir question must continue and indeed be among the top agenda items in discussions with India. Yet flexibility and not insisting on preconditions may help carry the peace process forward and, in fact, work in favour of resolving the Kashmir imbroglio.

Advocating jirgas

GOVERNMENT representatives must choose their words carefully; they should not appear to be taking a stance contrary to established law. However, Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid appeared to do precisely that on Friday. Addressing tribal elders during a jirga at the South Waziristan Scouts camp, Mr Rashid described the jirga system as an excellent alternative dispute mechanism and said that laws should be enforced in the region in accordance with local traditions. Perhaps the minister was simply trying to be gracious to his hosts, or maybe he indeed believes that jirgas have a role to play in delivering justice.

Whatever the case may be, the fact is that the Supreme Court in January 2019 declared jirgas/panchayats ultra vires the Constitution when they operate as adjudicative bodies in civil or criminal matters. The verdict stated they could function as arbitration, mediation, negotiation or reconciliation forums between parties to a civil dispute. However, the minister's statement on Friday was a sweeping generalisation as to the functioning of jirgas. Moreover, there is one law for all, and it must take precedence over local traditions, not be subservient to them as he also seemed to suggest. After all, there are areas where women are disenfranchised as per 'tradition', or where swara/vani, the cruel custom of giving females to an aggrieved party to settle disputes is still acceptable. However, both practices are illegal and the authorities are becoming more effective at enforcing the law against them. By conceding anything to jirgas other than an extremely restricted role would be an irresponsible step. Such bodies, which completely exclude women even when standing in judgement in matters relevant to them, reinforce patriarchal social mores — often through brutal sanctions. There are numerous instances of individuals on the orders of jirgas even having been killed and women gang-raped in order to 'avenge' family 'honour'. Now that constitutional rights have been extended to the tribal districts, the formal justice system must be strengthened there so that outdated mechanisms of so-called justice are weeded out.

Opposition's demand

PARLIAMENTARIANS belonging to the PPP have demanded that the government take parliament into confidence about the emerging regional

situation in light of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Addressing a press conference, former deputy speaker of the National Assembly Faisal Karim Kundi and Senator Rubina Khalid said there should be no closed-door meetings on the issue and that parliament should be fully briefed. The opposition alliance PDM has also called for an in-camera joint session of parliament on the Afghanistan issue. These demands have come in the wake of reports that the US may be asking Pakistan for use of facilities including bases for military use. Pakistan has categorically denied agreeing to any such requests and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has said in no uncertain terms that as long as Imran Khan is the prime minister, Pakistan will never provide its territory for any US bases.

The situation in Afghanistan remains unstable as the peace talks between the US and Afghan Taliban have hit a roadblock. The intra-Afghan dialogue also appears to be a non-starter and violence is refusing to abate. Pakistan has played a central role in the peace process, including persuading the Taliban leadership to participate in it, and continues to urge all sides to agree to a power-sharing arrangement so that the country does not descend into chaos. However, officials in Islamabad have also voiced fears that if a civil war were to break out in Afghanistan once the US forces have withdrawn within their stipulated deadline, Pakistan could face adverse repercussions. In such an unsettled situation, it is important that the entire political leadership is brought into the loop as far as Pakistan's policy options and decisions are concerned. The opposition is justified in demanding that the government and its concerned institutions provide a detailed briefing to parliament and allow them to provide recommendations and suggestions for all possible scenarios. One way could be for the concerned authorities to brief the relevant parliamentary committees. This could be followed by an open debate in both houses. The policy on Afghanistan needs to be well-deliberated and bipartisan in nature. We should learn from the mistakes of the 1980s and 1990s and carve out a long-term approach to Afghanistan. The government has taken a sensible step in engaging all ethnic groups in Afghanistan as well as regional countries. It should follow the same approach towards parliament.

Another train tragedy

THE loss of over 40 lives in a train collision near Daharki in Sindh on Monday morning is a stark reminder of Pakistan Railways' abysmal passenger safety

record and the unfulfilled promises of successive governments to revamp its broken infrastructure. The accident also raises questions about the incumbent rulers' commitment to modernising the poorly managed railway, and refurbish its aging tracks and erratic signal system for improving passenger safety.

Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted that he was “shocked by the horrific train accident” and had ordered a “comprehensive investigation into railway safety fault line”. Is that enough? We have heard such words so many times before that they have lost their meaning. Everyone is well aware of why train accidents happen and what needs to be done. But no one in the government appears to be bothered about fixing the problems. It is, indeed, unfair to blame the current government for the huge mess the railway is in today. Yet, it should not escape scrutiny for its own contribution to PR's decline by passing the entire buck to its predecessors.

Pakistan has a long history of train accidents caused by a decaying railway infrastructure. Apart from major accidents, scores of minor incidents of derailments take place every year but are not mentioned in the news. Most of these accidents occur because of dilapidated tracks, a faulty interlocking signal system, aging rolling stocks, etc. A look at PR's record would show that the frequency of accidents, including fatal ones, has increased over the last few years owing to decades of underinvestment in rail infrastructure and the absence of passenger safety standards. The prime minister has repeatedly instructed the railway authorities to take steps to counter decades of neglect and ensure safety protocols, and to hold officials responsible for neglecting passenger safety, but nothing has come of it. Instead, the government has drastically slashed funds for railway rehabilitation in the last couple of years. Last July, it had promised additional funds for repairing the tracks and signal system, and purchasing new passenger coaches and locomotives this fiscal year. But the promise remains unfulfilled.

Political rhetoric aside, the administration appears as clueless about a revival strategy as any previous government. Apparently, it has been hoping that the promised Chinese investment of \$6bn in the Main Line-1, connecting Peshawar to Karachi, would save the dying railway. With China reluctant to invest its money in the project, the government does not have a strategy to fall back on to resuscitate the bankrupt department. With or without Chinese money, the job of putting the railway back on track will not be easy; it will take a long time, large investments and strong political will. Turning a company the size of Pakistan

Railways is never easy. However, the government can always start by investing in the rehabilitation of the infrastructure to save lives.

Sindh-centre sniping

A WAR of words between the centre and the Sindh government has been underway for the past several days, with both sides accusing each other of doing nothing for the province. Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah had written to the prime minister accusing the PTI-led federal government of harbouring “abject bias” against the province, while also criticising the proposed PSDP allocations as “lopsided”. Planning Minister Asad Umar hit back at the Sindh administration, claiming that “never before has any federal government in history ... spent so much money in Sindh”, while adding that the centre had earmarked funds for both the urban and rural parts of the province.

This testy exchange between the centre and the province would actually have been quite amusing for the people of Sindh had the situation on the ground not been so pathetic. The fact is that neither Islamabad nor the PPP-led provincial administration has done anything worthwhile for Sindh, as the infrastructure of the province’s rural and urban parts crumbles. The federal government has announced grandiose schemes for Karachi and other districts. But what has practically been done? Take the Green Line bus scheme. The federally funded transport project that kicked off in 2016 has yet to see the light of day as deadlines for its inauguration keep getting pushed back indefinitely. On the other hand, the Sindh government is also prone to announcing seemingly impressive schemes, often with funding from foreign lenders. Yet after nearly 13 years of post-Musharraf rule over the province, can the PPP in all honesty claim that it has brought positive changes to Sindh? Karachi, the provincial capital, is in an advanced state of disrepair, while even in the ‘interior’ of the province — which happens to be the PPP’s stronghold — health, education and civic facilities are in an extremely poor state. The fact is that instead of politicking, both the centre and Sindh government need to get down to the serious work of revamping the province’s infrastructure and civic services.

Basmati dispute

MORE than two decades ago, Pakistan and India had put up a joint front to protect the ownership of their 'shared heritage' by fighting an attempt by a US company to get an American strain of rice patented as basmati. The World Trade Organisation decided in their favour, denying the American company's application. Today, they are at loggerheads over who owns the unique, long-grain aromatic rice grown only in the subcontinent as India has applied for the grant of an exclusive GI (Geographical Indications) tag for its basmati rice at the European Union's official registry. If India wins this battle, Pakistan would not only lose the large EU market but also find it difficult to export its basmati rice to the rest of the world to the detriment of thousands of farmers and other people associated with the rice trade. At present, Pakistan exports basmati rice worth between \$800m and \$1bn, controlling almost 35pc of the basmati market share across the world. India, the only other global basmati rice exporter, accounts for the rest of the market.

The EU had given both countries an additional three months until May this year to settle the matter between themselves. The period expired, and India sought another three months for reaching a bilateral settlement of the issue. However, only a few on this side of the border expect a negotiated settlement since the two countries have yet to begin discussing the matter let alone agree on its resolution. This is in spite of the fact that Pakistani basmati farmers and exporters are strongly in favour of the two countries applying for joint ownership of the shared heritage of this region. Although the Pakistani variety of basmati rice has an edge over its Indian counterpart owing to its superior characteristics and better quality, as well as the EU's pesticide restrictions, some are not ruling out an EU decision in favour of India in case New Delhi declines the proposal for joint ownership of the basmati trademark. Pakistan has diluted its case because we have rebranded our basmati under different nomenclatures, failed to resolve the dispute between growers and exporters over the domestic GI ownership of basmati rice, and delayed GI legislation. Given the implications of an adverse EU decision for basmati farmers and exports, it is imperative that the government and other stakeholders work together as a team to prevent any such outcome.

Bahria Town violence

BEHIND the immaculate façade of Bahria Town Karachi, violence has been ongoing since years. Indigenous farming communities have been coerced into surrendering the land they have called home for generations and seen their livelihoods destroyed. Police contingents have raided goths and threatened those who continued to resist their strong-arm tactics, sometimes arresting them on spurious terrorism charges. Bahria Town personnel, along with local authorities, have overseen the bulldozing of villages, the destruction of tube wells, the uprooting of orchards and even the levelling of graveyards. All this suffering, the very erasure of a people's way of life and their history, scarcely found a mention in the media.

On Sunday, a different kind of violence took place at the sprawling gated community. The occasion was a protest called by the Sindh Action Committee against the real estate developer's modus operandi on the outskirts of Karachi. According to reports — of which this time there was no shortage— a mob broke away from the protesters gathered in front of the main entrance and pushed their way inside. They set fire to two international food franchises, a car showroom, realtors' offices, several vehicles and the main gateway itself.

The wanton destruction of property, and the panic and fear caused thereby, is condemnable. There must be a transparent probe to determine the identity of the perpetrators and look into why matters took such a turn despite the presence of police contingents who would have had advance notice that a large number of people and organisations from across the province, including nationalist parties, were going to converge outside BTK.

The SAC has pointed the finger of blame at Bahria personnel themselves for having staged the violence to sabotage their peaceful protest. Whatever the case may be, there appears a danger at this point that a legitimate rights movement, based in the very real deprivation inflicted by ruthless corporate interests hand in glove with the power elite, could be hijacked by groups with a broader agenda against the state.

One could ask why nationalist parties have suddenly shown up after being nowhere on the horizon in all the years Bahria was working to depopulate villages in the district. Those directly affected by the firm's seemingly

unstoppable expansion in the area could find themselves crushed in what could follow this new development. The events on Sunday have already provided the perfect excuse for law enforcement to crack down on locals.

But there is another danger, one the state must consider in the interest of Pakistan's future. The impunity with which Bahria and other powerful land developers operate, trampling the law and the rights of local populations, is straining the fragile bonds between the different ethnic groups in the country and also deepening the sense of socioeconomic inequality. Such a model of 'development' is unsustainable — and as phony as the replica Eiffel Towers that dot Bahria's gated communities.

Controlling polio

DESPITE the existing challenges to polio eradication efforts in the country, this year has offered some much-needed respite. So far, only one case of the wild poliovirus has surfaced in Balochistan, while eight cases of the circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2) have emerged in the country. Last year, 84 cases of wild poliovirus and 135 cases of cVDPV2 had been reported. The low number of cases have been reported despite the fact that for at least five months of 2020, polio vaccination campaigns had been suspended owing to Covid-19. Though this present reduction might be an encouraging sign, Pakistan still has a lot of ground to cover in terms of fixing a number of structural problems in its polio eradication efforts and tackling extremist mindsets that oppose immunisation.

Pakistan is only one of the two countries in the world where polio remains endemic, the other being Afghanistan. Pakistan came close to eradicating polio in 2018, but the disease has made an aggressive resurgence since 2019. This was attributed to a number of lapses in the polio programme and related government policies and infrastructure, according to the International Monitoring Board, the top global body monitoring polio eradication efforts. An IMB report released in February declared Lahore as the epicentre of polio transmission in the country and strongly criticised the provincial government's lapses. Meanwhile, attacks on polio workers by extremist groups have also witnessed a resurgence. In January, a policeman was killed in KP's Karak district; earlier, another had been killed in Bannu. Vaccination campaigns are underway in

districts of Sindh and Balochistan, and also in Islamabad. Polio workers are again risking their lives at a time when the third wave of Covid-19 has gripped the country. The authorities need to double down and boost awareness campaigns and improve the management of the polio-related infrastructure so that this disease can be defeated. As the IMB pointed out in its report last year, if Pakistan can battle Covid-19 effectively, why not polio?

Acid attack

AMONG the few crimes considered worse than murder is throwing acid on someone, scarring them physically and emotionally for life. In a landmark judgement in 2019, the Supreme Court described acid attacks as a “bigger crime than murder”. In the latest instance, a woman was attacked with acid in Lahore when she refused a proposal of marriage. The woman worked as domestic help and was accosted by the attacker when walking to her place of employment. According to the police, the suspect had threatened the woman before as well. In a case last August, a man and a woman threw acid on two women in Karachi over a property dispute. This is a deeply sadistic act, where the perpetrator’s motive is to cause the victim lifelong pain and emotional trauma. And it is no surprise that, given the intensely patriarchal structure of our society, the main victims are women who choose to exercise their free will to either reject a marriage proposal or defy some other form of male dominance. Though the frequency of such abhorrent attacks has reduced somewhat in recent years, they occur often enough, mainly because the state does not have clear laws to punish the perpetrators. They are also easier to carry out since corrosive substances are easily available for sale and the attack itself does not require a lot of force or precision.

According to independent estimates, between 1994 and 2018 some 9,340 people fell victim to acid attacks in the country. Although the Supreme Court threw out an acquittal plea of an attacker despite ‘forgiveness’ from his victim, the Acid and Burn Crime Bill, 2017, has yet to become law. The delay is incomprehensible as most perpetrators are able to slip through the many cracks in the country’s judicial system. The law must be passed and the authorities must also strictly regulate the sale of corrosive substances. According to the Supreme Court judgement, “Acid attack offenders do not deserve any clemency.” Still we await a law.

Ontario attack

IT is the stuff of nightmares. A Pakistani family that had moved to Canada apparently to build a better life was mowed down by a hate-filled, sick mind as they went out for their evening walk in the city of London, Ontario. This gruesome crime has sent shockwaves across Canada as well as Pakistan for its sheer barbarity. Four members of the Afzaal family lost their lives in this clearly Islamophobic attack, while a child survivor is receiving treatment.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has rightly termed it a “terrorist act” while a local police official says the family was targeted “because of their Islamic faith”. The attack in Ontario highlights the growing toxic nexus between Islamophobia and white supremacy in Western states, and the need for foreign governments to check this dangerous trend before more valuable lives are lost.

In many Western states, far-right groups and individuals have begun to assert themselves violently. Perhaps the bloodiest example of this was witnessed in the New Zealand city of Christchurch in 2019, when an Australian extremist went on a murderous rampage targeting some of the city’s mosques. Earlier, in 2017, Canada had witnessed an outrage when a white supremacist had targeted a Quebec City mosque. Moreover, hate crimes targeting Asian-Americans have multiplied in the US during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, while in March, US intelligence chiefs raised the alarm over possible domestic mass-casualty attacks against civilians by white supremacists.

There are different reasons for the growth of white extremism and terrorism. Much of this has been fuelled by conspiracy theories such as the ‘great replacement’ idea which roughly states that immigrants, particularly Muslims and people of colour, will ‘replace’ native Caucasians and Europeans. This hateful rhetoric has found many takers as immigrants move to the West in considerable numbers and in many cases, after years of hard work, establish themselves successfully in their new homes. For the far right, these immigrants are the perfect targets, as they are blamed for taking local jobs during periods of economic stagnation and ‘sully’ the local culture due to their faith and practices.

The response of the Canadian government has been admirable, as Mr Trudeau and senior members of the country’s political establishment have rushed to the

site of the tragedy to console Muslim citizens and condemn this act of terrorism. In many ways, this mirrors New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's impressive handling of the Christchurch tragedy. Leaders of Muslim states, including Pakistan, should learn lessons from their foreign counterparts on how to treat minorities with respect and compassion, particularly after terrorist attacks. The child survivor of this outrage must be provided the mental and emotional care he needs after witnessing such massive trauma. Western states need to do some serious soul-searching to counter the twin ogres of Islamophobia and white supremacist terrorism before more damage is done.

Farm productivity

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan says his government is enforcing an agriculture emergency in the country to extend maximum benefit to growers and eradicate cartelisation (by sugar mill owners). "We are going for an agriculture emergency to boost agro-yield that will help stabilise the economy. I firmly believe that the country will rise through the agriculture sector," he reportedly told a group of farmers who had called on him the other day. It remains unclear as to what he meant by 'agriculture emergency'. Probably, he was referring to the proposed interventions of Rs100bn spanning a period of three years under the Agriculture Transformation Plan recently announced to reduce farm input cost to encourage crop value-addition, enhance milk production, provide fertiliser subsidy, the construction of grain storage, and so on. These interventions are important to support agriculture in the short term. But they are not enough to make agriculture competitive and profitable for growers. For a sustainable and competitive farm sector, heavy investments are needed in research and development to develop new, high-yield, drought- and disease-resistant seed varieties, help farmers adopt modern technologies, improve soil fertility and water efficiency, etc.

Changing course

The cushion provided to the external sector by an unprecedented growth in remittances sent home by overseas Pakistanis has also reduced the country's dependence on IMF dollars in the near term. — AFP/File

SEEMINGLY nervous about the political fallout, the government has decided to delay the much-criticised IMF-mandated reforms and change the course of the economy from 'stabilisation' to growth from the next financial year.

The indication came from Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin who told journalists that the government had told the 'global lender that it will neither hike the electricity tariffs nor increase taxes' because it does not want to further burden the poor and salaried classes. Unveiling the annual Economic Survey of Pakistan 2020-21 that documents a government's economic performance for the outgoing fiscal year, Mr Tarin said both the government and the IMF want sustainable economic growth. But both disagree on the path that Islamabad must take to attain the objective. It is being suggested that Islamabad is trying to use its enhanced leverage with the US as the Biden administration prepares to complete the exit of US troops from Afghanistan by Sept 11.

The administration believes that its improved leverage with the US has given it some space to renegotiate the conditions of the \$6bn IMF programme as it plans to stimulate economic growth through heavy fiscal stimulus ahead of the 2023 elections.

The cushion provided to the external sector by an unprecedented growth in remittances sent home by overseas Pakistanis has also reduced the country's dependence on IMF dollars in the near term. This does not mean that Islamabad is going to terminate the programme. IMF support is important for Pakistan to access external funding as well as to get off the FATF's 'grey list'. Hence, the 'ongoing negotiations' between Pakistan and the Fund over the terms of the programme are likely to linger over a period of time. What happens next will largely depend on how the talks between Pakistan and Washington on future cooperation in this region progress.

Indeed, the minister was spot on when he pointed out that Pakistan needs to grow by 5pc to 8pc to alleviate poverty and create jobs for about 2m young men and women entering the market each year. Encouraged by an unexpected broad-based GDP growth rate of almost 4pc, which is almost double the target of 2.1pc for the present fiscal year, in an economy crippled by the Covid-19 pandemic, the government has decided to boost its investment spending on large infrastructure schemes to Rs2.1tr, including the federal share of Rs900bn and the provincial investment of Rs1.2tr. The new strategy will reverse the government's previous policy of drastically reducing public spending to slash its

budget deficit — this smacks of the plan employed by the previous PML-N administration to grow the economy during its tenure.

Political bartering

IN what appears to be a continuation of the unsavoury wheeling and dealing that is characteristic of Senate elections, both PTI and the opposition parties have 'rewarded' their allies for their support by appointing them as committee heads in the upper house. As a report in this paper says, the PPP has given the chairperson's position to five of the six senators who supported Yousuf Raza Gilani at the last minute, while the PTI gave the slot to the PML-F and PML-Q that have one representative each in the Senate, even though a party is entitled to one chairperson slot for every three senators. Similarly, the PML-N rewarded two JUI-F senators and one from the Jamiat Ahle Hadith. Four independent senators from former Fata now hold key positions, including the post of deputy Senate chairperson. Unsurprisingly, differences between the PPP and PML-N continue as both parties blame each other for throwing away the opportunity to chair key committees including human rights, law and justice, and interior.

Senate committee chairpersons enjoy several perks and privileges, but they also have a key responsibility to control committee business which is essential to the legislative process. Why then, are these chairperson positions being handed out as though they were personal thank you tokens, and not based on merit? Are the senators on whom these positions have been bestowed the correct choice? Senate committees are the forum where legislative details are ironed out and where issues of national significance and public interest are discussed. The Senate's responsibilities are divided amongst these committees, which fulfil the critical role of reviewing amendments or challenging executive bodies on key issues. The selection of chairpersons, therefore, should be based on merit. Unfortunately, this business of rewarding allies with chairperson appointments has become as common a practice as that of horse-trading and vote-buying in the Senate. This political bartering is an exercise all political parties are only too happy to indulge in. As the opposition parties scuffle, the PTI has managed to secure the chairperson position of the human rights committee for itself — a post that should have been held by an opposition member as governments can deviate from impartiality in addressing human rights violations often perpetrated by their own agencies. Lawmakers should end this unscrupulous trend. But,

instead of doing the right thing by the public and making appointments on merit, the lawmakers have dealt a blow to the spirit of democracy.

Baghlan Massacre

FEARS that Afghanistan will plunge into a torrid whirlpool of violence once all Western troops leave in September unless a peace deal is struck are growing. The latest outrage emerging from Afghanistan is the massacre of 10 mine-clearing workers late on Tuesday. According to eyewitness accounts, a group of militants entered a demining camp of the foreign NGO the HALO Trust where the workers were staying in Baghlan province and asked if there were any members of the Hazara community in the group. Though no one dared answer, the killers quickly went about their butchery; by the end of it, 10 men had been killed. The death of the workers is particularly painful; they were among those who risked their own lives to make the land safe for their compatriots — and were made to pay a heavy price. While the Afghan government has blamed the Taliban, the militia have denied involvement; the head of the NGO says the Taliban actually intervened to end the violent episode. A spokesman for the Afghan Taliban has termed the attack a “brutality” while the local chapter of the self-styled Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for this crime.

Considering the sectarian outlook of IS, there is good reason to believe their claim. Just last month, members of the so-called caliphate massacred around 80 schoolgirls belonging to the Shia Hazara community in a Kabul school. With the murder of the mine-clearing workers, the terrorist group seems to be sending a clear message of their plans should Afghanistan return to complete lawlessness. These violent episodes should jolt the Afghan government as well as the Taliban into redoubling their efforts towards reaching a peace deal. The two sides recently met in Doha, but it seems progress in the negotiations is far too slow. Time is of the essence, as without a peace deal acceptable to all Afghan factions there will be nothing to stop bloodthirsty outfits like IS from wreaking havoc in all parts of the country, and beyond its borders.

Poor health indicators

IF the coronavirus has taught the world anything, it is that the old maxim 'health is wealth' is true. Though Pakistan has fared relatively better than other countries in terms of mortalities caused by Covid-19, the infection has still extracted a huge toll on the public by reducing their already limited access to healthcare facilities. Unfortunately, investment in public health has never been a top priority for those in power. Hence, the health-related findings of the latest Economic Survey hardly come as a surprise. According to the data, Pakistan lags behind its neighbours, even war-torn Afghanistan, in the most basic health indicators. The country has the lowest life expectancy in the region — 67.3 years. On the other hand, it has the highest infant mortality rate — 55.7 out of 1,000 live births in the region, as compared to 46 in Afghanistan, 28 in India, 25 in Bangladesh and only six in Sri Lanka. Similarly, the under-five mortality rate remains the highest in the region. In Pakistan, 69 children (per 1,000) die before their fifth birthday, as compared to 60 in Afghanistan, 34 in India, 30 in Bangladesh, 28 in Bhutan and seven each in China and Sri Lanka. And yet, public health spending remains far below international standards. According to the Economic Survey, health expenditure in 2018-19 was 1.1pc and 1.2pc in 2019-20. The WHO recommends that governments spend at least 6pc of their GDP on health.

The pandemic brought with it great adversity, but it also proved to be a litmus test for health systems around the world. In Pakistan's case, it turned out that the public health infrastructure needed considerable investment and improvement in disease surveillance, diagnostic facilities, training of health personnel in critical care of patients and vaccine development. The fact that Pakistan fared relatively better than other countries in terms of the Covid-19 infection should not make it complacent. The government must learn from the pandemic's lessons, and seize the opportunity to make a lasting impact on the lives of millions of Pakistanis.

Rep Omar's tweet

In this file photo, Representative Ilhan Omar, D-Minnesota, participates in a panel during a campaign event for Democratic presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders in Clive, Iowa. — AP/File

CONGRESSWOMAN Ilhan Omar's comparison of Hamas and the Afghan Taliban with the US and Israel has raised a media storm in her home country. The Muslim lawmaker of Somali origin has been lambasted not only by rightist trolls, but also by her Democratic colleagues, while she has received death threats as well. All it took was a tweet in which Ms Omar said that "unthinkable atrocities" have been "committed by the US, Hamas, Israel, Afghanistan and the Taliban".

Along with being called anti-Semitic, Democrats have urged her to "clarify her words" while a senior Republican lawmaker has termed the statement "anti-American". Rep Omar, meanwhile, has shot back by decrying the "offensive ... Islamophobic tropes" deployed against her.

Behind all the noise, the American lawmaker's comments are quite interesting. The comparison of sovereign actors such as the US and Israel and Hamas, which won an election, and the Afghan Taliban, which once ruled Afghanistan with limited recognition, may not be apt. But there can be little denying the fact that Washington and Tel Aviv have indulged in actions not too dissimilar — and at times even worse — than the Palestinian and Afghan groups. So, instead of feigning horror at the comparison, the American political establishment needs to dig a little deeper.

Hamas is a legitimate entity, ruling over Gaza and resisting Israeli occupation. As for the Afghan Taliban, while their violent tactics and enforcement of obscurantist codes during their rule over Afghanistan can hardly be justified, they are stakeholders in their homeland, which is why the Americans have signed a peace deal with them. Moreover, the targeting of civilians either by states or non-state actors is totally unacceptable.

Now, let us examine briefly the record of the US and Israel in the international arena. Over the last several decades, America has been instrumental in destabilising a number of Muslim states, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya. Whether in the name of fighting terrorism or bringing 'democracy' to these states, America's uninvited military adventurism has resulted in massive death and destruction for the peoples of these countries. As for Israel's conduct, on countless occasions Tel Aviv's brutal onslaughts against the Palestinians have been described by experts as falling within the definition of war crimes. This has included the slaughter of children as well as other defenceless segments of the Palestinian population. Therefore, instead of pillorying Rep Omar, perhaps her

colleagues in Congress need to discuss these ugly realities in a democratic manner.

Feel-good budget

WE have been here before. Every time a government gets some fiscal space it immediately shifts gears to growth, ditching politically unpopular reforms. The 'growth-friendly' budget, based on an expansionary fiscal policy, for the next financial year rolled out on Friday is no different. After pursuing contractionary economic policies during the last three years — and getting nowhere, the PTI-led administration has decided to switch to growth as the 2023 elections draw closer. In the new budget, the incumbents have revisited their spending priorities, decided to increase development investment by a hefty 40pc to Rs900bn while offering a slew of significant tax incentives and relief to businesses, and announcing some schemes to put a bit of money in the pockets of low-middle-income segments. That is in line with what Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin had promised a day earlier — a combination of the bottom-up and trickle-down approaches for supporting the poor and incentivising businesses. It is another story that the policy still appears tilted more towards the trickle-down philosophy than the bottom-up approach.

Apart from political considerations, the build-up of an unexpected growth momentum during the present fiscal year on the back of major monetary stimuli, provided by the central bank to help businesses cope with the impact of Covid-19, and significant improvement in the external sector have helped the government reverse its contractionary policies. The planned US exit from Afghanistan has also enhanced Islamabad's leverage with Washington. So for the government the time is ripe to defer IMF-mandated policies and change course to create a feel-good effect. How these factors play out is anyone's guess.

More than the above-mentioned factors, the success of the budget for 2021-22 hinges on the ability of the government to raise estimated tax revenues of around Rs5.83tr, up by 24pc from the projected collection of Rs4.69tr during the outgoing year. The target is ambitious, given the fact that the government has let go significantly large revenues through its tax incentives, and is difficult to achieve if the performance of the FBR in recent years is anything to go by. A look

at the Finance Act 2022 shows that the government plans to achieve the 'additional revenues' through a 30pc increase in income tax and sales tax. That will require tough decisions and serious efforts to broaden the tax base by bringing untaxed and under-taxed sectors such as retail into the net. This is something that many governments, including the incumbent, have tried many times in the past and failed because of their fear of the political fallout of the move. The failure to achieve the targeted tax revenues will force the government to slash its fiscal stimulus or borrow more to finance its development package. Similarly, the targets for non-tax revenue collection and privatisation yields are also on the higher side. Hence, the scepticism about Mr Tarin's overall growth-budget plan.

Covid strategy

AS Pakistan reaches the milestone of 10m coronavirus vaccine jabs — with over 2m people fully vaccinated — there are fresh challenges for the government. Earlier this year, as the world and the region raced to procure vaccines, Pakistan lagged behind. Despite initial delays, the government has now ramped up procurement and said it will receive over 18m donated or purchased doses from China and Covax.

Now that vaccines are being made available and supply issues are being addressed, there are new tests for the government in the shape of vaccine hesitancy and efficient distribution. How does the government plan to pursue its ambitious target of vaccinating 70m citizens, and what measures is it taking to ensure large numbers of people are safely vaccinated without glitches?

A recent news report highlighted one part of this dual challenge, revealing that 300,000 citizens failed to return for a second dose. An official from the Ministry of National Health Services suggested that some died before getting the second dose; or that they contracted Covid-19 between the doses and thus were hesitant. One reason was that the negative propaganda about the vaccine was keeping citizens from getting their second jab.

NCOC chair Asad Umar said that a call centre would be set up to contact hesitant citizens and persuade them. But more must be done to combat this hesitancy. It is no mean feat, considering how rampant the dangerous anti-polio vaccine propaganda has been despite decades of investment and awareness-

building. For this reason, all-out efforts must be made by both federal and provincial officials to engage citizens.

Coercive measures, such as blocking SIM cards, are not only ill-advised, they are also counterproductive as it would cut off citizens' communication channels altogether. It is critical for the government to demonstrate to members of the public how badly health, business and education have suffered during the pandemic. To do this, engaging citizens from each of these sectors to act as role models for others could have positive results. The public must also know that with developing countries successfully vaccinating a majority of their population, travel curbs on Pakistan could remain in place for fear of variants.

Aside from the challenge of communicating the consequences of vaccine refusals to the public, the government also has the gargantuan logistical task of administering the vaccine safely and efficiently at centres across the country. Not only must authorities ensure the vaccine is stored and maintained according to scientific guidelines, they should also devise a strategy that prioritises efficient service.

Though the vaccination drives in major cities are managed well, the challenge will come when the government expands centres into smaller cities and rural districts. Across the world, a successful vaccine roll-out is imperative to protect against the virus and drive herd immunity. Pakistan must play its part by ensuring equitable vaccine access.

Women in Balochistan

THE Balochistan government seems to be taking steps to improve women's integration into society and the workforce in the province. In October 2020, the provincial cabinet approved the Balochistan Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Policy, 2020-2024. To implement this policy, the government has launched the Governance and Policy Project Balochistan that aims to improve gender integration into the public sector. The project has been launched with help from foreign donors to ensure the comprehensive application of the gender empowerment policy which would help pave the way for achieving SDG 5 that relates to gender equality. Women across the country are disenfranchised to a large degree because of patriarchal values that are ingrained in every sector and class. In the case of Balochistan, the tribal culture reinforces the barriers that

already exist. The overall literacy rate for women in Pakistan is around 52pc while only 33.5pc of women in Balochistan are literate. Similarly, the number of women dying in childbirth is far higher in the province; 758 women out of 100,000 die during childbirth in Balochistan against a national average of 272. This gloomy picture is also a result of the overall underdevelopment in Balochistan that is far worse than in the other provinces.

Against this backdrop, the provincial government has done well to involve international rights organisations for improving gender integration. The GPP project is expected to directly benefit the provincial Women Development Department and the ombudsperson on workplace harassment appointed under the Balochistan Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2016, and would equip these departments to carry out the desired changes and build their capacity for actively working towards the protection of and mainstreaming women in the public sphere and the provincial workforce. A key aspect of the project involves carrying out a gender-based analysis of government departments and a baseline women empowerment survey. This will help fill in the gaps in efforts required for uplifting women as women's rights groups working in Balochistan often complain about the lack of official data. However, all said and done, foreign support will only set the framework for gender integration. It is the provincial government which will have to follow through with its plans. One hopes that this impetus to integrate disenfranchised women of the province does not dry up when there's no more funding.

Deprived of cricket

THE federal cabinet has disallowed PTV to enter into an agreement with an Indian company for broadcast rights to telecast the Pakistan-England cricket series starting next month in England. It has been a settled matter that PTV always telecasts the Pakistan team's matches wherever they are being played to ensure that cricket fans in the country are not deprived of the opportunity to see their team in action. However, now the cabinet has thrown a spanner in the works. The reason cited is that as long as India does not reverse its illegal actions of Aug 5, 2019, Pakistan cannot improve ties with it. Therefore, PTV should not enter into any contractual agreement with any Indian company even if it means not telecasting the bilateral series.

The cabinet decision is strange. This is not really a decision that should concern the cabinet. PTV is an autonomous organisation with a board of directors fully authorised to make these decisions. By taking the decision to the cabinet, the PTV board and the information minister are signalling they are not empowered enough to run the affairs of PTV. The cabinet should have sent the decision back to PTV. However, the cabinet in its wisdom decided to link the decision to its foreign policy objectives which does not make much sense. Sports should be kept away from politics even if India is following such an unwise policy. The government, unfortunately, is trying to flex its nationalistic muscles at the expense of its own citizens' rights. It should review this decision and allow PTV to negotiate the best possible agreement with the company so that the people of Pakistan can enjoy watching their team's performance in England. PTV and its newly formed board composed mostly of government personnel, should not forget that it is financed by taxpayer money. Since it cannot provide the taxpayer independent and credible news and current affairs — despite tall claims by the government of converting it into a BBC type organisation — it should at least not deprive citizens of cricket.

Power shortages

WE have surplus generation capacity and we have frequent electricity shortages — particularly when the demand peaks in summers. Sounds like a paradox? Indeed, it does. The recent forced power cuts experienced by hapless consumers across the country were no surprise. People have suffered sudden blackouts of long duration before, and there is no guarantee these will not be repeated next year or the year after.

The other day, SAPM on Power and Petroleum Tabish Gauhar took to Twitter to explain the reasons for the recent blackouts. According to him, a combination of factors — a 20pc increase in demand, the reduced supply of hydropower from Tarbela owing to sedimentation removal, the diversion of 550 MW of additional electricity from the national grid to K Electric and not enough gas for RLNG-based generation due to lack of LNG storage infrastructure and pipeline constraints — caused the crisis. The heatwave and disruption in the coal supply to the Sahiwal plant following the Ghotki train accident further aggravated matters. But none of these factors justify the pain that power consumers suffered

for days in the scorching heat; rather, these indicate a huge mismanagement of the power sector.

Why was Tarbela's maintenance delayed? Why was enough gas not diverted to RLNG-based plants in Punjab when the authorities knew that Tarbela's maintenance could run longer than anticipated? Why isn't additional coal stored in Sahiwal to keep the plant running in case of disruptions? The entire episode shows that those charged with overseeing the energy sector are not doing their job properly. They did not plan in time to ensure the availability of fuel for increasing generation to meet the rising demand. And they found themselves at sea when the current crisis erupted.

There is no doubt that the power mess is too large to tackle in a short period of time. It is also true that surplus generation capacity is no solution to our power woes. The unending power shortages show that the outdated sector is poorly managed and is in dire need of across-the-board governance and structural reforms besides massive investment in T&D networks. Since coming to power almost three years ago, the PTI is still struggling to formulate a credible action plan for repairing the sector and cutting its losses.

It has recently renegotiated agreements with power producers to reduce their tariffs and allocated Rs118bn in next year's budget for energy sector development, especially the transmission of electricity and utilisation of excess generation capacity. Nonetheless, the three-year performance of the government on this issue has been abysmal. It has made scant progress on energy sector challenges, but has vociferously criticised its predecessor for contracting surplus generation capacity. It is high time that governance and structural reforms were introduced in the energy sector unless the government wants to leave an even bigger mess when its term ends.

Suicide in Thar

THARPARKAR is an appropriate case study for examining the factors that lead some people to the desperate, final act of ending their lives. The district, according to a recently concluded five-year study on suicides in Sindh, topped the list with 79 cases. When the figure was disaggregated according to gender, the area also registered the most number of female suicides in the province, with 48 women ending their lives compared to 31 men. Recently, the Sindh Mental

Health Authority, with financial assistance from the Thar Foundation and technical input from psychologists, the provincial health department etc, has launched a 'psychiatric autopsy' of the suicides that took place in the area from 2016 to 2020. The objective of the first-ever such exercise in Pakistan is to uncover the reasons why so many in the district chose to end their lives.

The figures cited above tell but part of the story: they denote only completed suicides registered with the district health office and police. They do not include attempted suicides, nor completed suicides that may not have been reported as such due to the stigma attached to this act. Moreover, the unfortunate fact that attempted suicide is criminalised in Pakistan, attracting one year's imprisonment, naturally leads to cover-ups. Sadly, it also inhibits people from seeking the help they need to address their suicidal ideation. The report on the five-year study cited above pointed to mental illness, domestic problems and poverty as the main factors that drove people in Sindh to commit suicide. A number of mental health experts have also linked the troubling incidence to climate change and the consequently increased frequency of prolonged droughts in Tharparkar. The local economy in the desert area is heavily dependent on rainfall and erratic weather patterns are having an impact on livelihoods and pushing many deeper into poverty. Significantly, the segment of Thari society where most cases of suicide are found is in the lower-caste Hindu community. Women, possibly due to gender-related pressures in an oppressive society, are more likely to make attempts at committing suicide. The psychiatric autopsy should enable a more in-depth analysis of the events leading up to the suicides and the risk factors that contributed to them. Suicide must be decriminalised, and a more empathetic approach adopted to understand why some people turn their backs on what is a very human instinct for survival, and deliberately choose death over life.

Water woes

THIS past week saw a discussion on a water management system that, if properly implemented, should go some way towards addressing Pakistan's extant and emerging environmental concerns. In recent years, the country's climate change-related challenges have been marked by a devastating cycle of floods and drought, with water becoming an increasingly scarce resource. A large part of the problem is storage capacity: during a virtual dialogue organised by the World Wide Fund for Nature-Pakistan in Karachi on Thursday, SAPM on

Climate Change Malik Amin Aslam stated that currently, the country's water-storage capacity is just about 10pc, as compared to the world average of some 40pc. The Ministry of Climate Change, in collaboration with the Federal Floodwater Commission, under the Ministry of Water Resources, and WWF-P, is responsible for implementing the Recharge Pakistan project launched earlier. The programme is related to floodwater management and building climate-change resilience. Comprising three phases, each spanning a decade, interventions aim to directly benefit over 10m people, and indirectly improve the capacities of a further 20m people across 50 vulnerable districts in the country, envisioning improved water- and food-security, and sustainable livelihoods by 2050.

According to Mr Aslam, the government has decided to fund Recharge Pakistan this year and spend "at least a billion rupees on two or three pilot sites". However, as with many of the good intentions announced by the state, everything will depend on official capacity and resolve. The creation of small dams and water-storage reservoirs have been on the agenda for years, particularly in Sindh, but little action has been seen on the ground. Apart from the infrastructure-building challenges, there is the problematic societal misassumption about water being a plentiful resource. Then, the efficient use of water will necessarily encompass an adaptive farming sector. It is to be hoped that this well-meaning initiative is underpinned by serious thought on associated issues. Without a holistic approach, Pakistan's water woes stand little chance of being addressed in a sustainable fashion. The consequences, as water becomes even scarcer, will be devastating.

Middle East's plight

THE Middle East is geopolitically and economically perhaps the most important region of the world, home to much of the globe's energy supplies, and also one of its most unstable areas. In the postcolonial era it has hardly seen peace, with one war after the other shattering any chance of normality. Much of these disturbances are due to the involvement of the erstwhile colonisers, such as the UK or France, or of new 'empires', such as the US, the world's sole superpower, or its regional clients, namely Israel. Moreover, a lack of representative rule in most states has created a dystopian situation, with the region's people craving political and social freedom. Much of this ferment gave way to 2011's Arab

Spring, though the people's desire for democracy was quickly snuffed out by the anciens régimes, in many cases backed by the self-declared champions of democracy in the West.

Perhaps the sorry plight of the people of the Middle East, particularly the Arabs, was best illustrated by the merciless pounding of Gaza by Israel last month, when Tel Aviv unleashed its brute force against the defenceless Palestinians in full view of a global audience. This sad spectacle has become a recurring nightmare for the Palestinians, with few states having the courage to confront Israel for its brazen crimes. While Benjamin Netanyahu, who oversaw the recent butchery in Gaza, was sent packing on Sunday due to internal tumult in Israeli politics, will Naftali Bennett, his successor as prime minister, prove to be a peacemaker? One should not bet on it; after all the American-origin Mr Bennett is a major advocate of illegal settlements, alongside being a hawk where the Palestinians are concerned.

The fact is that unless Israel's patrons in the West, as well as its newfound friends in the Arab world, put pressure on the Zionist state to stop indulging in the mass murder of Palestinians every few years, there will be little chance of reviving the long-dead Arab-Israeli peace process. And unless the Palestinian question is resolved judiciously, the cycle of violence will continue indefinitely. Israel must also be reined in and prevented from violating the sovereignty of regional states such as Syria and Lebanon, where Tel Aviv feels it has to target Iranian forces and their proxies. However, such foolhardy behaviour on the part of Israel can spark a much bigger confrontation, which is why the international community must keep an eye on Tel Aviv's trigger-happy activities and prevent it from spoiling regional peace. Apart from restraining Israel, the states of the Middle East should themselves agree to respect each other's sovereignty and prevent outsiders from meddling in the region's affairs. Saudi Arabia and Iran can lead this effort, which could help stabilise Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon, where both sides have been indulging in proxy conflicts.

Thoughtless eviction

The demolition was the outcome of a Supreme Court order after [last year's devastating rains][2] that inundated Karachi, with storm-water drains resembling raging rivers. — White Star/File

IT IS always the poor who end up paying the price for the questionable policies of the government.

On Sunday, a large number of children, displaced from their abodes situated along the Gujjar and Orangi nullahs, protested outside the Karachi Press Club against the demolition of their houses. The demolition was the outcome of a Supreme Court order after last year's devastating rains that inundated Karachi, with storm-water drains resembling raging rivers.

Earlier in the year, the Sindh High Court had issued a stay order following a petition filed by civil society organisations and a few individuals representing home owners. It argued that these houses had been leased to the residents by the government at the time. However, the Supreme Court, while hearing the matter on Monday, disposed of the petition on grounds that land along these nullahs could not be leased by law. It instructed the authorities to continue with the eviction operation. Hence, the demolition of houses situated within nine metres on either side of the Gujjar and Orangi nullahs will continue. When this exercise is completed (before this year's monsoon, according to the plan), at least 100,000 people would perhaps have been rendered homeless. As many as 21,000 children would be out of school and living under the open sky.

True, there is reason to be concerned at the location of these homes and the link between encroachments and urban flooding. But what has the government done to provide these dwellers, who have toiled all their lives to earn enough to buy the property offered by a previous government (albeit on dubious terms), with alternative housing? Though the government is now promising Rs20,000 per month for two years in lieu of compensation, it is hardly worth the adversity they have to undergo — even if the government provides the sum.

Resettlement itself under the Naya Pakistan Housing Scheme is far from certain with the project still in its nascent stages. Evicted people live under the open sky, without shelter, kitchens or bathrooms. There is no security for them. On the other hand, the authorities hardly seem to bat an eyelid when it comes to large residential schemes being built on land forcibly taken from poor landholders, including housing societies located on the outfalls of the drains supposedly blocked by poor working-class settlements. This is economic apartheid and might sow the seeds of class-based and ethnic unrest in the city. The authorities should reconsider their approach.

Cinema ‘industry’?

THE vast gap that often exists between the state’s intentions and its actual efficiency was evident in the third Pakistan International Film Festival, held over the weekend at Karachi’s Frere Hall. Arranged by the Karachi Film Society, the festival was tag-lined ‘Women’s Edition, 2021’ as befits contemporary discourse. A pity, then, that since all the films to be screened date from pre-Covid days, they rather disingenuously had little to offer with regard to either focusing on women beyond the usual, or contributing to the debate on women’s empowerment in its current iteration. Further, somewhat bizarrely, none of the screenings scheduled were held at all, reportedly because of Covid protocols. What did take place were panel and general discussions — lofty speeches comprising mainly rhetoric. Senator Faisal Javed, for example, said in the inaugural speech that the prime minister has approved an entertainment and film policy that is “soon to be launched”. He raised the facts that finances, and the low number of cinema houses, are amongst the hurdles but did not explain any government plan. He pointed out that Pakistan has no dearth of talent; again, though, there were no specifics — such as, theoretically, setting up film departments in major educational institutions, or a specialised film academy focusing on the academic and practical aspects of the discipline.

Yet the matters discussed did contain kernels of hard truths that need reflection. In addition to investment, training, and screening capacity, what the industry needs first, as the senator mentioned, is for it to be treated as precisely this, and therefore be made the recipient of incentives and facilities that are offered to other industry sectors on the state’s priority list. Similarly, rules to ensure royalties were mentioned — a long-time demand of industry professionals, as yet largely unmet. The potential is there, but harnessing and jump-starting it will require a multipronged, cohesive effort. Till the state is prepared to put in this effort, perhaps it would be better if the rhetoric were kept to the minimum.

Centre-Sindh tension

FEDERAL Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry launched a blistering attack on the Sindh government during his recent visit to Karachi and accused it of incompetence and embezzlement. He also asked the Supreme Court to ensure

implementation of Article 140-A of the Constitution which pertains to local governments. He accused the PPP government of financial impropriety and called Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah a ‘puppet’.

The spokesmen of the Sindh government responded by hurling accusations against the information minister and the PTI government at the centre. This mutual acrimony has once again vitiated the atmosphere between the federal and Sindh governments and will lead to further tension and lack of cooperation at a time when both sides need a better working relationship. This tension is not new. It had surfaced with vigour during the early days of the Covid-19 outbreak when the Sindh government under Murad Ali Shah had reacted proactively while the federal government dithered and vacillated. Chief Minister Shah had moved swiftly towards lockdown and strict policies in order to slow the spread of the pandemic. These different approaches between Islamabad and Karachi had triggered a war of words that needlessly politicised the handling of the pandemic.

It is obvious there is no love lost between the two parties. Prime Minister Imran Khan has been a vocal critic of former president Asif Ali Zardari as well as Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, while the PPP leadership has been raking the PTI over the coals ever since it formed the government in 2018. In fact, it was Mr Bhutto-Zardari who first coined the term ‘selected’ for the prime minister. The political rivalry therefore runs deep and the last few years have done nothing to dilute it. The two parties cooperated briefly while constituting the Karachi development package but this process also fell victim to mutual distrust and blame. This state of affairs has now reached a point where the citizens have to suffer because the two governments cannot bring themselves to coordinate their policies.

Against this backdrop, it is rather perplexing why the information minister decided to launch an unprovoked attack on the Sindh government. If he was trying to fire up his party’s voter base in Sindh, he may want to first consider how his party — which has a significant presence in Karachi in terms of public representatives — has paid so little attention to it. However, such an adversarial state of affairs is not sustainable without damaging the working of the federation. The leadership of both parties need to cast aside their personal likes and dislikes and build a relationship that can enable them to be civil to each other and keep the centre-province system running smoothly. In order to do this, the information minister and his party colleagues should resist the urge to unleash torrents of criticism on the Sindh government and the PPP should reciprocate.

Punjab budget

PUNJAB is where the battle for power will be fought in 2023. Punjab is also where PTI parliamentarians are perhaps most discontented with the 'austere' policies of their government and looking towards their leadership to give them something to sell to their constituents burdened by inflation, eroding incomes, job losses and development infrastructure gaps. PTI allies in the province are also not happy with the way the government has treated them. It is, therefore, natural for the ruling party to focus on Punjab in the run-up to the elections and execute public works schemes that are important for voters and can improve its candidates' prospects. The Punjab budget 2021-22 is a major policy step in that direction. Apart from announcing a three-year district development package of Rs360bn to engage its legislators and complete schemes proposed by them, the government has enhanced development funds by more than 66pc to stimulate growth in line with federal strategy. Among other major initiatives, it seeks to launch the Universal Health Insurance project to cover the entire province by the end of 2021 and speed up investment in social and economic infrastructure. Additionally, it has decided to continue hefty tax concessions to protect businesses and provide relief to urban middle-class households during Covid-19.

With just two years left to create a positive impression, the Buzdar dispensation, which has earned flak for what its critics refer to as incompetence, is all set to go full throttle on its planned spending spree from the start of the new fiscal. Political motivation notwithstanding, the province is in dire need of public investment to repair deteriorating infrastructure, as well as qualitative and quantitative improvement in public service delivery. The infrastructure gap has expanded and service delivery depreciated since the PTI's ascent to power, a major reason why the government hasn't succeeded in diminishing popular political support for the PML-N, especially in the central and northern districts of Punjab. Indeed, the incumbent administration has made a few 'soft interventions' over time to shift investment focus to human development by spending more money on public health and education, and digitisation of the provincial economy in contrast to its predecessor's penchant for large infrastructure schemes. But the experience of the last few years shows that 'wholesome' improvement in human development indicators is not possible without building the economic infrastructure to create jobs and alleviate poverty. Political compulsions seem to have taught the rulers of Punjab the same — albeit belatedly.

Haj decision for women

WHILE this year's Haj will again be marked by a limited number of pilgrims, the Saudi government's decision to allow women to perform the rite without a mahram (male guardian) is indeed a major step forward. Though many schools of thought — including the Jafari, Shafi'i and Maliki fiqhs — already allowed women to proceed for Haj without a mahram, the Hanafi school, which is followed by the majority in Pakistan, does not. While people are free to act upon the juristic rulings of their respective schools, the Saudi decision definitely makes it easier for women without male relatives wanting to perform the pilgrimage to do so. Earlier, many women wishing to go for Haj who were not able to travel with husbands, sons, brothers or other close male relatives were barred from performing this important tenet of the faith. However, prospective women pilgrims will have to hold off on their plans for now, for the kingdom has, for the second straight year, announced that only Saudis and resident foreigners will be able to perform Haj due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Saudi government has said 60,000 people will be allowed to perform Haj this year.

Over the last few years, Saudi Arabia has begun to lift the many curbs it had placed on women's social freedoms in a campaign overseen by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The removal of the mahram clause for women pilgrims is part of this series of events. Regarding the overall Haj situation, it is indeed a point of concern that the Muslim world's most important annual event has had to be scaled down again. Where once millions from across the world were able to participate in Haj, now only a few thousand from within the kingdom will do so. However, the need to protect people from Covid-19 has necessitated the decision, and it is hoped that with increased vaccination worldwide and a decrease in cases, foreign pilgrims will once more be allowed to perform Haj.

Shameful behaviour

THE brawl in the National Assembly this week is an unfortunate yet fitting metaphor for the state of political debate in our country.

During the session, our MNAs, though adult men and women, behaved no better than unruly children having a go at each other in the playground because they

didn't like what the other was saying. Punches were thrown, budget documents lobbed from the treasury benches to the opposition and vice versa, and the most unsavoury, gendered curse words were liberally dispensed. The principle of decorum and sanctity of parliament was absent as charged MNAs flailed their arms about and unleashed aggression.

Scuffles, sloganeering and name-calling are not new occurrences in the hallowed halls of our parliament. But during this session — in which opposition members were expected to make their budget speech — the sergeants-at-arms were called in to maintain order and protect lawmakers from each other.

Some observers were quick to point out that, in fact, these fights are not unique to Pakistan, and are seen during parliamentary proceedings in other countries too. None of this, however, is a justification for why our elected representatives should behave like hooligans, or why such conduct during Assembly proceedings is becoming normalised. While MNAs certainly have the right to register their protest in the Assembly, violent and aggressive behaviour is unacceptable. It sends a dangerous message to the voters of the respective parties. If neither the treasury nor the opposition benefit from such behaviour, why do we see it continuously being played out during Assembly sessions? And what kind of message does this send to the outside world about the state of Pakistan's democracy?

Our lawmakers individually and collectively must do better. Both sides have some serious thinking to do when it comes to communication, as these episodes only undermine the public's trust in institutions. And as the ruling party at the centre, it is, unequivocally, the PTI's responsibility to set the tone for civilised debate in the Assembly. Its own speaker is utterly powerless when chaos ensues. Challenging government actions is the work of the opposition, and its criticism can, if the government wishes, result in a robust debate. Here, the opposition, too, must be mindful that its criticism does not veer towards personal attacks and insults.

Of late, the ruling party has repeatedly questioned why the opposition should be allowed to speak if it does not let the prime minister speak in the Assembly — an attitude that reflects high-handedness and creates the impression that, to the government, parliamentary debate is irrelevant. Both sides must restrain volatile elements in their parties. They should allow saner voices to engage on the issue of debate and create space for opinions to be aired and heard. The energy spent

on shouting matches can be put to far better use, given the serious challenges that face our country.

Sindh budget

A CURSORY reading of the Sindh budget 2021-22 reinforces the impression that Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah's government has got its development preferences right. Health, education, agriculture, irrigation, labour, small and medium enterprises, women development and social protection for the poor are the main areas the PPP government appears to be focusing on through enhanced allocations in the budget. Yet the document also cements the perception that the party needs to work hard to improve its capacity and competence to execute the development interventions it proposes in the budget, instead of hiding behind the pretext of resource constraints because of the shortfall from federal transfers. Instead of competing with an uncooperative centre to prove its credentials as a more pro-people administration through higher allocations, it is better to work on building its capacity to use whatever funds it can get to execute schemes for improving public service delivery in the province. There is no doubt that the uncertainties caused by Covid-19 during the current fiscal year and the lower-than-targeted federal and provincial revenue collection must have affected spending priorities and decelerated work on the projects announced. But that does not justify the Sindh government's inability to fully utilise whatever money it had in its coffers. It is especially scandalous because the socioeconomic infrastructure in the country's largest city and business hub, Karachi, is collapsing with every passing minute.

The Rs1,477.9bn provincial budget based mainly on expectations of increased federal transfers of Rs869.7bn, higher provincial tax revenues of Rs304.9bn and enhanced foreign project assistance of over Rs71.5bn is largely an extension of the priorities the government had set for the outgoing fiscal year. Allocations for health, education, irrigation, agriculture and other priority areas have been raised significantly. The government has further proposed a considerably large sum of Rs30.9bn for its pro-poor social protection and economic sustainability programme and decided to invest in automation of tax payments to create ease for taxpayers and boost collection. Women, special children and IT-based start-ups will also get a small share from the provincial resources. The decision to raise the minimum wage to Rs25000 a month and the pay of provincial

employees by 20pc need to be appreciated. In short, Mr Shah's spending priorities are commendable. But the question is: will he be able to deliver on his promises to the people? Doubts remain. Especially because Sindh is perceived to be controlled from somewhere other than the chief minister's office.

West on China

IN what seems like a distinct return to Cold War rhetoric, the Western bloc has issued back-to-back statements targeting China from the platform of the Group of Seven and Nato. Beijing, meanwhile, has replied to the West in the same coin. G7 leaders meeting in the UK lambasted the People's Republic for what they termed excesses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, while calling for "peace and stability" across the Taiwan Strait. Beijing is particularly sensitive about all three areas and considers criticism in these issues as meddling in its internal affairs. The G7 also called for a new investigation into Covid-19's origins. Meanwhile, at the Nato summit in Belgium, the military grouping seemed even more direct when it criticised China's martial activities. Though the Nato secretary general said he did not want a new cold war with China, the summit communiqué stated that Beijing poses "systematic challenges to the rules-based international order and to ... Alliance security". On the other hand, China has termed the G7 statement "baseless accusations" while Nato's concerns were akin to "slandering China's peaceful development".

Of course, there are genuine concerns about reported human rights abuses in Xinjiang, targeting the Uighur Muslim community, as well as crackdowns against pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong. But the problem with groupings like the G7 and Nato is that they choose to pillory geopolitical rivals, while keeping silent about friends and partners. For example, Israel's frequent butchery of defenceless Palestinian civilians, as well the authoritarian tendencies of several Middle Eastern kings and potentates escape censure by the Western bloc, simply because these actors are allied with the West. If respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are the cornerstones of foreign policy — as they should be — then friends and foes must be treated the same on these counts. Moreover, increasing confrontational rhetoric against states like China and Russia is dangerous and risks igniting renewed conflict. The world order needs stability and mutual respect, not more confrontation and sabre-rattling.

Poll bill reservations

THE Election of Commission of Pakistan has expressed serious reservations about the electoral reforms bill bulldozed through the National Assembly by the government last week and has termed many of the amendments in the bill in violation of the Constitution. In a rare move, the ECP publicised a meeting it held on the bill and detailed its objections in a press release. It also compiled a document — reported in detail by this newspaper — that gave feedback on each amendment of the bill. The ECP said it had communicated its objections to the parliamentary committee deliberating on the bill but these objections were not factored into the text that was adopted by the National Assembly. The opposition too has rejected the bill.

Some of the objections raised by the ECP should elicit deep concern among all stakeholders. The commission says the electronic voting machines require a thorough debate in parliament in light of the pilot project conducted by it. This debate has yet to happen. There are many issues with the EVMs that remain unaddressed and therefore the commission cannot guarantee their usage will lead to the holding of free and fair elections. It has similar objections to the right of vote for overseas Pakistanis and also a genuine concern regarding the amendments that will take powers away from the ECP and hand them over to Nadra. It is clear from these and various other reservations that insufficient thought has gone into the contents of the bill.

The government should have consulted the ECP before drafting it so that all the concerns that the commission had could have been addressed. The opposition too was not taken on board for a detailed debate before bringing the bill for voting. Such shoddy handling of this crucial bill by the government has generated needless controversy at a time when electoral reforms require a buy-in from all political parties. The amendments also suggest that the government is pushing its own priorities, without allowing other stakeholders to point out the obvious weaknesses. The end result, therefore, will be the opposite of what the intended result was supposed to be — a law that helps built trust among all parties on the electoral process.

There is still time to rectify the matter. The government should now invite the opposition as well as the ECP to give its detailed input on the basis of which a thorough debate should take place. The aim should be to build a consensus and

make amendments in the bill accordingly before it can be finalised for voting. Reforming the electoral process is vital for Pakistan, and doing so by taking everyone on board is equally important. There is time available so there is no need to rush into it. Hopefully, the government can rise beyond its partisan approach and do the right thing.

E-fund transfer fee

THE State Bank's decision to withdraw the facility of free of cost digital fund transfer services is disappointing and will thwart efforts to boost the still nascent digitisation of payments for documentation of the economy. The central bank had extended the facility to consumers of banking services when Covid-19 broke out last year, stopping banks from charging a fee on the digital transfer of money. The idea was to facilitate people during the lockdowns and encourage the use of e-banking channels. The step was appreciated and banks saw a substantial surge in internet banking along with the use of plastic money for purchases from e-commerce platforms. For instance, the volume of e-banking transactions rose by around 26pc from 236.1m at the end of March 2020 to 296.7m at the end of December. Likewise, the value of transfers also grew by just under 23pc from Rs17.5tr to Rs21.5tr during that period. Although paper-based transactions, which had collapsed during the lockdown period, are resurging again, their number remains below the March 2020 level. Banks also benefited from the decision as they had fewer customers to deal with in person, which brought down their operational costs.

There is no doubt that virus-related mobility restrictions and the fear of getting infected contributed significantly to the popularity of e-transactions; the suspension of the heavy fee charged on them proved to be a major incentive for consumers to shift to mobile banking. Therefore, it is feared that the decision to allow banks to "recover their costs to help them in building sustainable innovative business models" will at best weaken this shift to online banking and at worst reverse the gains made. The State Bank has exempted transactions totalling up to Rs25,000 per month per account from any charge but that means little to the majority of internet banking users. Even though the overall internet transaction charges allowed are nominal for now, it is going to negatively impact endeavours for digitisation of the economy. As banking sector regulator, it is the State Bank's job to protect the interests of the banking industry. But at the same time, it has

certain obligations towards consumers of banking services. It would have been much better if the central bank had told the service providers to continue to share a very small bit of their savings with their customers through free of cost e-banking services. After all, it is the customers' money that helps them make massive profits.

Gaza bombed again

MEMORIES of last month's savage assault by Israel targeting Gaza had not yet faded when earlier this week news flashed that Tel Aviv had once again bombed the Palestinian enclave. This time the 'justification' used by the Israeli military machine was that Hamas, the armed movement and political group that rules Gaza, had sent incendiary balloons into the Jewish state. Hamas, meanwhile, said it had resorted to the move in reaction to a provocative march on Tuesday in which extremist Jews had marched close to Jerusalem's Muslim quarter shouting 'death to Arabs' to observe so-called Jerusalem Day, which celebrates Israel's 1967 occupation of the holy city. Israeli police had facilitated the far-right marchers by violently clearing the path of protesting Palestinians; over 30 Arab demonstrators were injured by the police.

The fact is that an Israeli government that bears great animus towards the Palestinians and influential, racist far-right Jewish groups form a toxic combination that does everything possible to make the lives of the Arabs incredibly difficult. And when Palestinians react to these unbearable conditions and violent provocations, they are accused of threatening the security of Israel, paving the way for Tel Aviv's brutal military to butcher the Palestinians. While Israel talks of neutralising Hamas, in the last violent episode in Gaza over half the total deaths were of civilians, many of them children, as per UN figures. But unfortunately, Palestinian lives appear to be cheap, with few in the global community having the courage to take Israel to task for this frequent murder of non-combatants. Those who were thinking that there might be a change in Israeli tactics with Benjamin Netanyahu's exit have been proved wrong. Naftali Bennett, the new prime minister, has signalled that he is equally willing to spill Palestinian blood. Multilateral bodies, the self-declared champions of human rights in the West and the ever-inert states of the Muslim world must all be asked if the Palestinians have to face death and ignominy for eternity.

KCR rigmarole

THURSDAY'S proceedings in the Supreme Court clearly demonstrated how divided the stakeholders are when it comes to giving Karachi a mass transit system worthy of a city of 20m. The Supreme Court's order was realistic and modest. All it did was to ask the Sindh government to finalise within a month such basic issues as the completion of PC-1, the signing of contracts and the issuance of work order so that construction could begin on underpasses and flyovers for the Karachi Circular Railway. After a court order as far back as early last year, the Sindh government had said it had given a contract to the Frontier Works Organisation to pursue the project. However, on Thursday the FWO counsel informed the court that no PC-1 had been finalised and that it had received no funds from the provincial government. The response of the Sindh advocate general was that the FWO wanted some changes in the plan and believed some sections of the KCR route needed to be elevated. A greater surprise was in store when the FWO's 494 group commander said that his organisation had consulted experts and come to the conclusion that it was not feasible to build underpasses and bridges in some areas and that it would be better if the KCR tracks were elevated on those sections.

Frankly, the court's concern notwithstanding, let us forget the KCR dream. After decades of discussions all we have is the bare truth made available before their lordships. The Japanese had offered all technical and financial help, and there were moments when the CPEC, too, appeared to be in the picture, but all we have now is a lack of consensus on the fundamentals among the parties concerned. The truth is the KCR project isn't backed by political will. In Lahore, we saw what political will can achieve by overcoming all hurdles. The KCR, too, can become a reality if someone had the will to make the dream come true. There is none.

NA peace — for now

AFTER a session of utter pandemonium and a distasteful war of words, normalcy finally returned to the National Assembly on Thursday. There was no shouting or rowdy behaviour as Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shehbaz Sharif made his budget speech, challenging the government on its key financial

commitments. Mr Sharif spoke for nearly two hours, with treasury bench members silently listening to his criticism. At one point, the speaker directed Murad Saeed, one of the PTI's chief agitators in the Assembly, to take a seat in order to let Mr Sharif finish his speech. It is miraculous how, just days after the ruling party and the opposition were at each other's throats and would not stop at anything to tear the other down, the two have agreed to a 'peaceful coexistence'. This announcement was made by the government following a meeting between the PTI and opposition MNAs at Parliament House, in which the latter agreed to withdraw the no-confidence motion against the deputy speaker, Qasim Suri, and the government agreed to form a committee to review the passage of 21 bills which the opposition said were passed 'in haste'. Both sides agreed that no individual would be targeted or insulted during the budget speech, and that parliamentary party leaders would ensure that their MNAs respected parliamentary norms in the Assembly. The change of tone of the ruling party lawmakers is indeed remarkable, for just days earlier, they were bullish about denying the opposition the floor and adamant to teach it a lesson for preventing the prime minister from speaking during previous sessions.

How did this U-turn come about? Was public criticism of the shamefully aggressive behaviour during Wednesday's session really what pushed both warring sides to the negotiating table? Though this explanation would be welcome, it appears unlikely, as ruling party MNAs and ministers were uncompromising in the aftermath of that mayhem. Who 'empowered' Speaker Asad Qaiser to engage both sides and broker a truce, when for months he had watched helplessly as madness descended on each session? What was it that finally brought about maturity and agreement between the two sides? Could it be the intervention of a third party?

Though this new vow of civility is welcome, it remains to be seen how long it will last. The toxic relationship between the two sides is not lost on anyone. The government leaves no stone unturned when it comes to calling opposition members names and heaping all shades of allegations on them. The opposition parties, too, try to outdo the ruling party by resorting to the same. The sad reality is that in both cases it is democracy that loses. A dysfunctional parliament, where political civility is entirely absent, only amplifies political cynicism and delegitimises the political process. Our elected representatives should not need reminders about engaging in behaviour that casts democracy in an unfavourable light.

India uranium theft

REPORTS emerging from India about the theft of uranium and possible sale on the black market should be a cause for concern for the international community. According to reports in the Indian media, police had arrested members of a gang in the eastern state of Jharkhand who were trying to sell several kilos of uranium — a key ingredient of nuclear weapons — while a similar incident occurred recently in Nagpur, Maharashtra.

Pakistan's Foreign Office has rightly highlighted this important issue, calling for a "thorough investigation into such incidents" while adding that the reports "point to lax controls ... as well as possible existence of a black market for nuclear materials". Considering the nature of these reports, the international community must not remain silent and demand answers from the Indian government. An EU spokesman when questioned about the possible proliferation activities said that the bloc "is aware of the information and understands that the Indian authorities are investigating".

The fact is that reports of possible proliferation must be taken very seriously. For example, the use of nuclear material by non-state actors in a 'dirty bomb' has been raised by the international community as a threat to global security. Moreover, certain states have pointed fingers at this country for supposed lax security protocols when former IAEA chief Yukia Amano had said that Pakistan "is an experienced user of peaceful nuclear technology" during a visit to Karachi in 2018. Also, Western states have questioned Iran's nuclear activities, whereas the Islamic Republic insists it is not pursuing atomic weapons. The point is that there should be one standard where nuclear safety is concerned.

If the Indian state itself has arrested individuals involved in possible proliferation, then the international community, through the IAEA, must demand a thorough and transparent probe to ensure sensitive atomic material does not fall into the wrong hands. The Indian government must speed up the pace of investigations and make the findings public, otherwise fears of a nuclear black market will only grow.

Pakistan has every right to be concerned that nuclear material does not fall into the hands of non-state actors working against this country. If the international community continues to maintain its silence on these alarming reports, it will give

credence to the belief that those who control the global order choose to cherry-pick issues of concern. Where nuclear safety is concerned, this position is simply not tenable.

More vaccines needed

THE vaccination rate in the country has slowed in recent days and could result in a crisis if not addressed efficiently. After hitting the 130,000 mark for doses earlier this week, vaccine centres across the country on Thursday inoculated only 55,728 people, which includes 46,113 individuals who received their second shots. Less than 10,000 received their first jab that day. Though SAPM Dr Faisal Sultan initially dismissed concerns of a shortage, a special meeting of key federal government figures held later indicated otherwise. A press release issued after the meeting suggests measures are being taken to start the process of availing credit lines with the country's development partners so that timely payments can be made to vendors for a smooth supply of vaccines. Importing the vaccine requires liquidity, a requirement Pakistan can only partially address through domestic financing. There have been significant challenges for the government in approaching creditors such as the World Bank and ADB. Foremost is the fact that neither lender would approve financing for vaccines that are not WHO-approved — a reality that up until a month ago complicated matters for vaccine supply in the country. Only recently has the WHO approved two vaccines from China, which is where Pakistan hopes to get the majority of its vaccine supply from. These lenders also have stringent procurement rules regarding transparency and tenders which the National Disaster Management Authority, which has been tasked with procurement, must fulfil.

As the government approaches creditors and suppliers, it must ensure transparency in vaccine delivery and timelines so that members of the public do not find themselves groping in the dark. The most vulnerable and elderly must be prioritised for first and second doses, and at the same time, through awareness-building measures, the public must be kept engaged to make sure that interest in getting vaccinated does not wane. The time between when creditors are approached and the final financing is disbursed can often be a period of months, so the government needs to factor these realities in when it utilises its resources to expand vaccine operations and distribution.

It is a pity that Pakistan has as yet managed to administer only 12.7m doses in total, with just over 3m people fully vaccinated. With a target vaccine population of 70m, the total doses required are 140m — a figure that means that the road ahead for Covid-19 inoculation will be a long one strewn with several challenges. Many developing countries were dealt a blow when Covax vaccine delivery grounded to a halt earlier in the year, and most are still struggling to secure supplies as manufacturers fulfil commitments to richer countries that were the first to place orders and pay for them. As the economically weaker countries struggle with vaccinating their large populations, richer nations should know that the failure to curb Covid-19 will result in economic damage for everyone.

Balochistan protest

THE clashes outside the Balochistan Assembly on budget day were unfortunate. But they had been waiting to happen. The growing political polarisation in Pakistan means that the party at the centre or in the province will do anything to inflict damage on its opponents. And what better way of hurting one's opponents than denying opposition lawmakers uplift funds for schemes that affect the voting preferences of people in their constituencies? What else could harm their electoral prospects more than the failure to bring their constituents safe drinking water or get a street or two paved? After all, these considerations go a long way in determining voting patterns in our society. Thus, it is not surprising that governments try to spend money on small, public works schemes through their own legislators or their potential candidate from a particular constituency. The current process of choosing and implementing local development schemes is fraught with corruption, and in many cases adds to developmental throw-forward in the shape of incomplete projects. Yet that is the reality of our politics.

What happened in Quetta was just another reminder of the growing political split across the country and the widespread misuse of taxpayers' money for boosting the electoral prospects of the ruling party or parties. Sadly, no party is above this kind of politics, which punishes people for voting and electing their opponents. Nor is this a new phenomenon in Pakistan. We have seen opposition parties frequently raise the issue of governments blocking the release of funds for uplift schemes in the constituencies of their lawmakers. When in opposition, the prime minister had expressed his disgust with federal and provincial controls over the uplift portfolio and promised to devolve the job of development spending — at

least a big part of it — to where it belonged, ie the local governments. He has not kept his word. His party was unable to implement this in KP where its government made it legally mandatory a few years back to transfer some 30pc of the entire provincial development portfolio to the local governments. The major factor behind the failure of the experiment was opposition from the party's own legislators who would not want to lose this important tool to influence the voting choices of their electorate. Without the creation of a financially and administratively empowered third tier of government, ugly episodes like the one witnessed in Quetta will continue.

Silent victims

THE deafening silence of political authorities, including leaders from the religious right, on the Mufti Azizur Rehman case, demonstrates yet again the low priority that is accorded in this country to justice and human rights and dignity.

The fact that a septuagenarian cleric, suspected of sexually molesting a madressah student, is on the run with his whole family and that not a single word of condemnation has been uttered by Maulana Fazlur Rehman who heads the political party to which the alleged abuser reportedly belongs, is simply appalling. What is also beyond comprehension is that the administration at the madressah where the mufti taught thought it best to dismiss him, telling him to pick up his belongings and leave, instead of handing him over to the law. Did his political affiliation play a part in this?

There are all too many examples of madressah students who have been sexually assaulted or beaten within an inch of their lives. The state seems to have turned a blind eye to these cases and many others like them. For instance, the perpetrators of the Kasur child pornography ring still remain at large, and the real criminals behind the Balochistan University scandal remain unscathed by the law.

Meanwhile, the cries for help are getting louder. According to the latest report by NGO Sahil, at least eight children were abused every day last year, an increase of 4pc from the previous year — but these have just been the reported cases, with social and cultural taboos, or the fear of reprisal, preventing victims or their families from coming forward and reporting a range of abuse — from rape, pornography to sodomy, etc. Besides there is little public awareness of child

protection laws and the families of the young victims are reluctant to turn to the police that itself is a product of the same cultural milieu, and not trained to treat such cases with the seriousness and professionalism they merit. The state must wake up.

KP budget

THE KP budget 2021-22 is a sort of please-all document that hands out something to almost everyone in the hope of pushing growth with the help of a large but exaggerated development stimulus of Rs371bn. The growth strategy is in line with the ruling PTI's renewed focus on economic development through an expansionary fiscal policy ahead of the 2023 elections. The budget focuses on acceleration of recovery, employment generation, improvement in human development indicators and public service delivery. Besides, the Rs1.12tr spending plan seeks to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on people and businesses. The government plans to increase the provincial tax revenues by a hefty 54pc to Rs42.3bn without imposing any new tax while giving significant relief in 30 provincial services, agriculture land tax, motor vehicle registration fee, urban immovable property, etc. It has also announced a district development programme for accommodating public works schemes suggested by its lawmakers to help their electoral chances. A scheme has been developed for extending loans to young men, women, IT professionals and entrepreneurs. The scope of the province's flagship universal health insurance is being extended to the merged districts of the former tribal areas and 1122 emergency response services are being expanded to the tehsil level. Likewise, a food support programme is being set up. Additionally, the budget aims to undertake pension reforms that will save Rs13bn and help move towards contributory pension schemes. That will help the province cut its future pension burden and create space for more meaningful pro-poor interventions.

The most important steps the government plans to take in order to implement its development priorities relates to its decision to release 100pc funds for uplift schemes from the very first day of the financial year. That should improve development spending and help to optimise the utilisation of funds. However, some challenges remain. The first risk to the development spending plan arises from the exaggerated estimates of resources available. For example, the budget estimates the receipt of over Rs34bn from other provinces to assist it in the

accelerated development of the merged districts of ex-Fata. These funds are unlikely to materialise before the finalisation of a new NFC award. The other major challenge is lack of capacity to spend money efficiently. The province is projecting utilisation of just 53pc — Rs168.8bn — of its original annual development programme of Rs317.9bn during the outgoing year. There is little evidence that it can spend the targeted amount next year.

Poll consensus

LEADER of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shehbaz Sharif has written a letter to Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja urging him to convene an All Parties Conference to build consensus on electoral reforms. He has warned that the PTI government's unilateral actions to force its electoral reforms bill without any consultation with stakeholders would make future elections controversial.

This letter comes in the wake of the ECP's reservations over the electoral reforms bill bulldozed by the government in the National Assembly last week. The ECP has pointed out that various amendments in the Elections Act 2017 included in the bill constitute violations of the Constitution. The commission has also stated that it had conveyed these objections to the NA parliamentary committee but they were not reflected in the text of the bill that was adopted by the Assembly.

The bill will now be discussed in the Senate committee before being put to vote in the upper house. However, it is necessary that before such a vote, a proper process of consultation takes place. The committee of the Senate will be the right forum for such a deliberation, but the suggestion by Mr Sharif that the ECP should call an APC also carries weight. Electoral reforms are the need of the hour and they must be adopted by the broadest consensus possible. In this respect, an APC will allow all political parties an opportunity to give their input and thereby acquire a stake in the reform. The ECP must also satisfy itself that all amendments fulfil constitutional requirements and do not encroach upon the powers of the commission. The government may want to consider this suggestion seriously so that its bill can garner a buy-in from all relevant stakeholders.

At this stage, however, the debate over the bill appears to be following predictably partisan lines. The government has in recent weeks also criticised the ECP on various issues, and the environment too does not seem very conducive for a constructive resolution of this controversy. This is exactly why there is a greater need to show flexibility by all concerned. If the government is reluctant to take part in an APC on electoral reforms, then it must ensure that parliament can be used for a similar purpose. What is required is for the opposition and the ECP to have access to a proper forum where their respective reservations can be discussed in detail. If some amendments in the bill go against constitutional requirements, then the government must address them at this stage and amend the bill accordingly. Similarly, concerns of the opposition, which have prompted Mr Sharif to write to the chief election commissioner, should also be addressed with a spirit of accommodation. It is in everyone's interest that the electoral reforms bill is passed with consensus.

Global displacement

THE number of globally displaced persons shared by the UN's refugee agency in a report released on Friday is sobering and reflects the toll man-made disasters take on humanity. The UNHCR says over 82m people are displaced across the world. This number includes internally displaced persons and according to the report, the total reflects the fact that one per cent of humanity is uprooted. Conflict and persecution are the primary factors driving people to flee their homes, with global hotspots such as Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen topping the list of countries where instability is causing displacement. Even the Covid-19 pandemic failed to slow down the number of people fleeing instability, with the UNHCR head observing that "everything else has stopped, including the economies, but wars ... and violence ... and persecution ... have continued". Turkey happens to host the highest number of refugees (3.7m) while Pakistan and Uganda tie for third place (1.4m refugees each) where providing shelter to the displaced is concerned. Moreover, it is a matter of great concern that 42pc of the globally displaced are under 18. In the vast majority of cases, these minors will be robbed of their childhood and deprived of basic rights such as health and education.

Of course, the main solution to stemming this massive tide of human displacement is to resolve the conflicts that are causing people to leave their

homes. However, this is easier said than done and in many of these cases, such as Afghanistan, the conflicts go back decades. In fact, a UNHCR official recently told the media in Quetta that fresh instability in Afghanistan may fuel a new influx of refugees into Pakistan. Along with making sincere efforts to resolve the conflicts that cause displacement in the first place, the international community must do more to provide succour to refugees, as more often than not countries with resource constraints, such as Pakistan, are left in the lurch to care for millions of displaced persons.

Describing OBL

THE foreign minister's recent refusal to call Osama bin Laden a terrorist in an interview with an Afghan media outlet is perplexing and defies logic. There are times to be diplomatic and parry sticky questions. However, this certainly didn't appear to be one of those instances.

Asked by Tolo News if he disagreed with the prime minister's reference to Osama bin Laden as a 'martyr' in the National Assembly (during a discussion on the US operation in Abbottabad that had killed the Al Qaeda chief) last year, Shah Mahmood Qureshi stated that the prime minister's remarks had been taken out of context. On being asked if he (Mr Qureshi) regarded him as a martyr, he said: "I will let it pass".

Mr Qureshi could have used this opportunity to clearly state that Pakistan considers the late Al Qaeda mastermind a terrorist. However, his non-committal comments sent the wrong message to a global audience.

Pakistan's top leadership needs to be absolutely clear when it comes to describing fighters like bin Laden.

Once upon a time, during the heady days of the Afghan 'jihad', bin Laden and other 'Afghan Arabs' like him may have been in the good books of the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan due to their usefulness against the Soviets. But in the post-9/11 era, bin Laden's activities fell within the purview of terrorism. At one time, Al Qaeda was considered public enemy number one for governments around the globe, with the terrorist outfit staging bloody attacks across the world, and targeting civilians without discrimination.

Furthermore, after Osama bin Laden's death, though Al Qaeda's destructive prowess may have waned, other, even more bloodthirsty militants took its place, as Al Qaeda became the prototype for militants worldwide. For example, the self-styled Islamic State group, that emerged from the deserts of Iraq, was basically the new avatar of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Also, bin Laden was an ideological hero to many militants in Pakistan, who had no qualms about taking on the state and spilling the blood of the innocent. Few would disagree that bin Laden was the most influential religious militant of the current era, inspiring terrorist groups across the world with his ideology and tactics. Therefore, there should be no 'ifs' or 'buts' and the message our government should be sending to the world is that Osama bin Laden was very much a terrorist.

A neglected sector

THE PTI legislators joined forces with opposition lawmakers in the National Assembly the other day to take their own government to task for completely neglecting the agriculture sector during the debate on the budget for the next fiscal year. The lawmakers were critical of the government for setting aside a paltry Rs12bn for a sector that the Economic Survey of Pakistan 2020-21 describes as indispensable to the country's economic growth, food security, employment generation and poverty alleviation. The criticism stemming from their concern is not out of place. Decades of official neglect and underinvestment have left this key sector of the economy, which contributes 19.2pc to the GDP and employs 38.5pc of the country's labour force, in a shambles. For many years now, the agricultural growth rate has been slowed down by urban settlements poaching on cultivable land, changes in the weather patterns, spiking input costs, fragmentation of landholdings into small subsistence farms, water shortages, poor seed quality, low use of modern technology etc. Thanks to declining productivity and the increase in rural migration to the cities, the country has become a net food importer. The government has done little to reverse the situation.

The federal government has recently approved an agriculture transformation programme. But the details released so far relate mostly to the targets for increasing crop yields and milk production it has set for the next three to seven

years. It is a plan that does not take the ground realities into account. Nor does it inform us how the government plans to fight the challenges mentioned above. The entire agriculture policy matrix at the central and provincial level has for years revolved around doling out inefficient subsidies that are mostly pocketed by large landholders, middlemen and investors, or fertiliser producers instead of reaching the smallholders. In spite of the proposed agriculture transformation plan, for example, we don't see any initiative in their next budgets to finance research to develop high-yield seeds or help smallholders access modern technology or cheaper credit for inputs, or support a shift to value-added crops. Nor has the government chalked out any programme to help subsistence farmers 'commercialise' their produce. No transformation strategy can succeed without involving the small growers since subsistence agriculture constitutes the bulk of the farm sector.

Modernisation of the agriculture sector, then, requires an immediate shift from the current subsidy-based strategy to the adoption of new approaches and heavy public investments. It also demands that the government give tax and other incentives to the private sector to set up agro-based industries and invest in cold chains to minimise wastage and supply disruption from farm to consumers. Thus, it is not without reason that lawmakers on both sides are asking the government to come up with a comprehensive plan to transform the sector.

Air safari

THE resumption of PIA's air safari flights to Skardu will hopefully attract international and domestic tourists, allowing them to enjoy the scenic mountain ranges that this country has to offer. The first air safari flight that flew from Islamabad airport earlier this week, after a hiatus of 14 years, had on board 91 tourists from 13 countries. The revival of the tourism industry has been one of the PTI government's top priorities, and the re-launching of the air safari is among several initiatives taken by the authorities to boost local and international tourism. Others have included the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor and the inauguration of the Heritage Trail, both in Punjab. Home to the meeting point of three mighty mountain ranges, the Himalayas, the Karakoram and the Hindukush, Pakistan has been blessed with some of the world's most magnificent peaks. The air safari will fly over the second highest peak in the world — K2 — the elusive Nanga

Parbat and the Broad Peak glacier before landing in Skardu for a break and then fly back to Islamabad.

However, for this initiative to be a resounding success, the government must resolve the country's civil aviation crisis on a priority basis and improve the services of the national flag carrier. Last year's plane crash in Karachi, the issue of the fake licences and the ensuing ban on PIA by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency for failure to follow the necessary safety standards remain a matter of grave concern. Flying in mountainous regions requires both exceptional piloting skills and top-notch aircraft maintenance. After last year's crisis, the country's aviation sector has yet to prove to the world that it has both. Meanwhile, the government should consider launching infrastructure projects and expanding internet coverage in northern Pakistan. It is good that the authorities are working hard to exhibit the country's natural beauty, but they should also take steps to provide travellers with basic modern amenities so that their stay here is comfortable along with being memorable.

PM's views on rape

NOT once, but twice, has the prime minister of this country articulated deeply problematic views about rape. The public outcry the first time around evidently did not make him reflect on his words and consider how they reinforce society's misogynistic outlook in which women, unless kept on a 'tight leash', can legitimately be held responsible for sexual violence by men. Instead, he has proceeded to articulate his opinion on the subject on a far bigger platform than a local telethon as was the case earlier.

In an interview with HBO that aired Monday, while responding to a question about the growing incidence of rape in Pakistan, Imran Khan referred to the concept of purdah in avoiding temptation and said: "We don't have discos here, we don't have nightclubs, so it is a completely different society, way of life here, so if you raise temptation in society to the point and all these young guys have nowhere to go, it has consequences in the society." He then went on to add: "If a woman is wearing very few clothes, it will have an impact. It will have an impact on the men, unless they're robots."

Given his government has strengthened the law against rape and also expanded its earlier unrealistically narrow definition, Mr Khan clearly considers rape a

serious offence that merits severe punishment. However, his understanding of the impulse that leads to it is simplistic, contradictory and illogical. Can the prime minister explain the epidemic of sexual violence against children, both girls and boys, in the country — including against madressah students — as an outcome of “temptation” brought on by skimpy clothing? In any case, the definition of modest attire is an extremely subjective one, for vulgarity lies in the eyes of the beholder. Moreover, most rapists are known to their victims; sometimes, sickeningly enough, they are members of the immediate family. Can incest be explained by the victims’ appearance?

It can be argued that Mr Khan’s view reflects the prevailing mindset in society that reduces rape to a consequence of sexual frustration provoked by the victim’s appearance. But there is a difference between an ordinary member of the public and someone in a position of authority taking a stance that appears to condone rape, in a manner of speaking, and puts the onus on the victim. It reinforces a dangerous narrative that seeps into how sexual violence is investigated and prosecuted, and deters victims from coming forward in a society where the crime is already massively under-reported. Those who do so are made to endure humiliating interrogations by the police and in court that make them feel defiled all over again, as though they ‘asked for it’. Rape is a crime primarily of power rather than lust, rooted in a contempt for others’ bodily integrity. There can never be any justification for it.

Gas concerns

CONSUMERS face the prospect of ominous blackouts next month owing to the closure of two gas fields in Sindh, the drop in hydropower from dams and furnace oil shortages. The matter is complicated because of the insistence of one of the two RLNG terminal operators, Engro Elengy, to pull out its FSRU (floating storage and regasification unit) from June 29 for maintenance when electricity demand is at its peak. The withdrawal of the terminal will force the shutdown of RLNG-based plants, exacerbating the power supply gap. The company will replace its FSRU with a bigger vessel but resumption of RLNG supplies will take at least 10 days. In case of a glitch it may take even longer. What alternative would the cash-strapped government have to cover the generation deficit during that period? It would have to stop gas supplies to sectors like fertiliser and purchase expensive LNG spot cargoes to operate RLNG-based plants, and/or

use more expensive furnace oil. Or it can opt for massive blackouts at the expense of its popularity.

In any case, the economic and financial cost to both government and consumers will be formidable. Therefore, the government wants Engro to delay terminal maintenance — dry docking — for a few months when RLNG demand for generation recedes and the power shortfall becomes manageable, or coincide the vessel replacement with the planned shutdown by gas companies. Engro's refusal isn't surprising. At this point, the replacement vessel will cost the company way less than what it has to pay in colder months. It also fears risking payment of a premium on its insurance cost if maintenance is deferred further. The operator says it couldn't carry out FSRU maintenance in May last year — the period it had intimated to the government in 2019 — because of Covid-19. Apparently, Engro will defer maintenance if the government shares the cost of delay. Or does it want to put pressure to secure third-party access for its terminal, which will help it expand its regasification capacity for sale of LNG to private buyers? The matter must be investigated since the maritime affairs ministry has accused Engro of violating the terms of agreement and jeopardising the country's energy security. It wants penalties to be imposed on Engro. If the company has breached its contract or failed to complete dry docking last year for its own reasons (like saving money on replacement vessel charges in winter), neither the government nor the consumers should be made to pay.

New Iranian president

SAYYID Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's new president, is taking over at a time of great geopolitical flux, while the Islamic Republic's economy is in dire straits mostly due to Western-led sanctions. Therefore, he will have to carefully steer Iran through the choppy waters of foreign policy, as well as work to revive the battered economy. Questions have been raised about the democratic process in Iran. However, it must be said that while clerical control over the selection of candidates filters out many hopefuls, Iran still has a more functional democracy compared to many of its neighbours, including Arab absolute monarchies and presidents-for-life. Turnout in the presidential elections was reportedly low and Mr Raisi, the country's former chief justice, cruised to an easy victory. Though Western media has used a number of adjectives to describe the new Iranian president, the fact is that he is a conservative with close links to the ruling

establishment, which means there will largely be a consonance of policy between the presidency and the supreme leader.

Mr Raisi's victory and the defeat of Iran's former central bank governor — who was seen as representing Hassan Rouhani's 'pragmatist' camp — in the presidential race signalled that the Iranian people were unhappy with the economic situation. A central plank of the Rouhani government was that the economy would surge as benefits of the 2015 nuclear deal started to materialise. Of course, this failed to happen when Donald Trump torpedoed the deal in 2018. Now, if the West wants to prevent Iran from further hardening its stance, it must ensure all parties implement the JCPOA and that Tehran starts to benefit economically from it. Mr Raisi has also said he is ready for peace with Saudi Arabia, which is welcome. Meanwhile, spoilers must be kept at bay. For example, the new Israeli prime minister recently used highly objectionable language, terming the Iranian government "mass murderers". Israel, which knows a thing or two about butchering civilians, should be the last to point fingers at others.

Electricity policy

THE Council of Common Interests has unanimously approved the National Electricity Policy 2021 that will focus on long-term reforms in the power sector for providing reliable, secure, environment-friendly and affordable electricity to consumers. The energy minister told a presser the other day that people would see the impact of the new policy (on the economy) in the next five to 10 years. Generally speaking, the formulation of a broad national electricity policy targeting development of indigenous fuels for generation is welcome and will save the nation a lot of hard-earned dollars, make electricity affordable to all types of domestic consumers and help to end the price volatility associated with fluctuation in the global energy markets. Further, the initiative will support the effort to move towards a competitive power market in the country and introduce transparency in the sector. Most importantly, the new document promises to focus on increasing transmission capacity as the system currently can transport 24,000 MW against a generation capacity of 35,000 MW. This is the area where the government needs to drastically boost investment since the dearth of it is one of the major reasons that surplus power remains unutilised in spite of growing demand.

Although the policy does state the intent of the authorities, it does not carry specific targets. For example, it is silent on privatisation of inefficient, loss-making distribution companies. Likewise, it does not clearly mention what local fuels will be preferred and how it plans to bring in modern technologies. Perhaps the national action plan that would be 'chalked out under the initiative' will clearly define the targets for renewable energy, long-term hydel schemes, development of local fuels, improvement in power distribution, etc that the government aims to achieve over the next 10 years. However, the biggest challenge for the government will be the implementation of the policy and alignment of its intent with the targets of the other entities such as NTDC, as well as the availability of finances to execute reforms in the power market.

PM on Afghanistan

THE prime minister has made a number of timely observations regarding the situation in Afghanistan in a recent op-ed published in the Washington Post. Needless to say, conditions in Pakistan's western neighbour are far from favourable where the intra-Afghan peace process is concerned, with the Taliban scoring military victories against government forces and negotiations not showing any progress.

Therefore, the points raised by Imran Khan in the write-up need to be pondered by all sides — specifically the Afghan government and the Taliban — if a fully fledged civil war is to be avoided once foreign troops complete their withdrawal by September.

Mr Khan has written that Pakistan opposes a military takeover by any group in Afghanistan, adding that if the Taliban try to fight their way to Kabul, it will lead to "endless bloodshed". He also observes that the Taliban must be included in any government "for it to succeed", and asks the Afghan government to "show more flexibility", though it must be said that the Taliban are the ones showing rigidity where carrying forward the peace talks is concerned. Mr Khan's refusal to host American bases in Pakistan also makes sense, as this country should not get caught up in another military adventure.

The prime minister has offered logical solutions to help end the Afghan quagmire. However, the key question is: are the players active in Afghanistan listening? Right now there are genuine fears that Afghanistan will collapse into endless

conflict if a sustainable peace plan does not materialise by the time the American exit is complete.

The situation very much mirrors the state of affairs in Afghanistan after the Soviets withdrew and the mujahideen and warlords grappled with each other for power as the country imploded. It was this power vacuum that led to the rise of the Afghan Taliban, as the hard-line militia eventually took Kabul, only to be ousted by foreign forces in the aftermath of 9/11.

This bloody history does not need to repeat itself in Afghanistan, but for this all factions, especially the Taliban and the Afghan government, will have to make compromises and learn to tolerate each other. While the Afghan administration is not keen on the idea of a transitional government, this may be one of the ways to salvage the peace process.

Also, Afghan security forces need to do more to protect their soil and people. For example, when the Taliban recently captured a key border town on the Tajik frontier, Afghan forces quickly fled. The point is that the Afghans cannot rely on outsiders for their security permanently. The Afghan government needs to show that it is capable of administering and defending the country, while the Taliban must also realise that any attempt to seize power on the battlefield will result in prolonging the cycle of violence, as forces opposed to the militia will try and dislodge them.

Third-party interest

WHAT should be done when third-party interest has been created where construction has been done illegally? It is an important question involving people's lives, that can be upended when the courts take notice of building violations and order demolition of the unlawful structures. It is a sad fact brought home time and again of late, especially in Karachi, where buildings stand on thousands of what are meant to be amenity plots, and alongside nullahs and river embankments. Last week, the Supreme Court came down hard on local authorities for allowing encroachments of various kinds. The three-judge bench reminded them that the court had several times decreed that 36,000 plots across the city be cleared of encroachments. It also ordered the demolition of a 15-storey high-rise known as Nasla Tower, a portion of which has, it said, been illegally constructed on land meant for a service road.

The apex court ordered the property builders to refund the buyers of the residential and commercial units within three months. However, it is not merely a question of refunds, the process to disburse which may well not be completed within the time stipulated, and also involve considerable effort on the part of the buyers. The demolition will leave scores of people deprived of their homes overnight for no fault of theirs. What once appeared to be well-laid plans for a secure future will be in tatters. Notwithstanding the principle of caveat emptor or 'buyer beware', regular citizens can scarcely be expected to know whether a particular project in which they are investing their hard-earned savings is illegal. What makes the situation much more precarious from the buyer's point of view is that the regulatory authorities supposed to be looking out for the public are themselves complicit in the many scams playing out on Karachi's precious real estate. How else did the owners of residential and commercial units being demolished for having been built alongside the city's Gujjar nullah obtain leases and utility connections? Given the lack of scruples, the chances of substandard construction in such get-rich-quick schemes also increase manifold. But it will take more than fines or reimbursements to discourage avaricious builders and their accomplices in officialdom. The individuals involved must be punished to the fullest extent of the law, so that real deterrence is created. Meanwhile, an autonomous body should be set up to present practical solutions for affected citizens in such unfortunate situations.

Famine threat

IT is indeed shameful that in 2021 there should be tens of millions of people in the world facing starvation due to man-made crises. According to a recent report by the UN's World Food Programme, 41m people in 43 countries are "on the very edge of famine". Two years ago, this number was 27m; the latest figure shows a huge jump. Ethiopia, Madagascar, South Sudan and Yemen are the worst affected while Somalia, Nigeria and Burkina Faso are also areas of concern according to the UN agency. The primary factors contributing to famine-like conditions are conflict, climate change and economic instability. Prices of staple foods remain high, preventing the most vulnerable from buying food. But what is most disturbing is the situation states are facing due to conflict. For example, Yemen — where a Saudi-led and Western-supported coalition has been trying to oust the Iran-backed Houthi militia from power — has been described by the UN as the world's biggest humanitarian catastrophe. Ethiopia, which also faced a

famine in the 1980s, is currently in the midst of a civil war as the central government confronts the Tigray region.

To stave off the threat of famine confronting millions of people, more efforts need to be made to end the aforementioned conflicts. Moreover, for those who may deny the effects of climate change, these startling figures should serve as a wake-up call as environmental crises are having a direct impact on global food security. It is also a fact that we live in a highly unequal world; while rich states manage to largely insulate themselves from global shocks, a vast number of people — particularly in the Global South — barely have enough to eat. In this regard, those in the international community with deep pockets have a moral duty to support those facing starvation. If rich states can spend billions of dollars on deadly hi-tech weaponry and vanity projects, and launch disastrous wars, they can certainly spare funds to help feed humanity's most vulnerable.

Lahore blast

THE car bomb that killed three people in Lahore's Johar Town on Wednesday is a grim reminder that the threat of terror attacks is ever present and that improved vigilance is critical. Though police high-ups did not expressly name Jamaatud Dawa chief Hafiz Saeed in their statements, they said the explosion occurred near the house of a 'high-value target'. Nearly 15kg of explosive material was said to have been used. The fact that the device was installed inside a parked car in the middle of a busy area suggests that the person or group behind the blast had done a considerable amount of homework before carrying out the nefarious plan.

The authorities may also link the timing of the attack and its proximity to Hafiz Saeed's house to the fact that the FATF plenary meetings are underway. The name of the JuD chief, who is currently incarcerated in Kot Lakhpat jail, has once again come up in the media as Pakistan awaits the FATF's decision regarding its removal from the grey list. It is also important to note that thus far no one has claimed responsibility for this attack — which would be unusual had the perpetrators been a religious militant or ethnonationalist group.

Given the ever-present threat, it is indeed welcome that the National Intelligence Coordination Committee has finally been made operational. This week, incidentally on the same day as the Lahore attack — which could perhaps have

been prevented had there been better intelligence — the long-awaited spy agency liaison body became functional. A functional NICC has been a long time coming, as the Abbottabad Commission investigating the US raid to capture Osama bin Laden had in 2011 pointed to the lack of a platform for the integration of both civil and military intelligence. The fact that such a body did not exist or was not working prior to this week points to gaps in the intelligence-sharing mechanism. The supra-intelligence committee gives a major role to the ISI in leading coordination efforts to combat terrorism. Given the underwhelming performance of Nacta, which has been reduced to a post office disseminating information from the interior ministry to the various CTD departments, expectations from the NICC are high. Its role in efficiently sharing intelligence is crucial, as the lack of such a practice leads to compromised security. While inter-agency rivalries exist in many countries, when it comes to effective internal and external counterterrorism, collaboration is key.

It is important that those involved in heinous crimes and terrorism be brought to justice. But it is also essential that unauthorised actions such as enforced disappearances or extrajudicial killings are not justified in this collaboration. In this regard, there is a need for an oversight committee of parliament to evaluate the NICC's performance and ensure it remains within the confines of constitutional provisions in the execution of its responsibilities.

Balochistan politics

BALUCHISTAN is the bellwether of Pakistan's power politics. Political instability that brews in that province is usually not confined there for long but spills over into the rest of the country as the first sign of an approaching national crisis. So it is not surprising that some developments in Balochistan's politics that may appear insignificant at the time can often turn out to be the first indication of possible changes in the overall political landscape. How the PPP was forced to suspend its provincial government and declare governor's rule in the province in 2013 or how the PML-N led coalition was voted out of power weeks before the Senate polls in 2018 are just two examples of the way in which political dynamics in Balochistan can affect national politics.

The decision of Yar Mohammad Rind, PTI provincial chief and education minister, to resign from the Balochistan cabinet, citing differences with Chief

Minister Jam Kamal Khan Alyani, may not appear significant at the moment. His resignation — the second after the local bodies minister quit the cabinet a little over a month back — is, at best, a sign of an individual's dissatisfaction with the Jam of Lasbela for interfering in his ministry or for not sharing development funds with him. Viewed through the lens of recent events outside the provincial assembly on the day of the Balochistan budget, when opposition lawmakers and their supporters clashed with the police to obstruct the session, the current situation may be a forerunner of unsavoury occurrences. Are these ministerial resignations and the opposition's violent protests a few isolated happenings or a harbinger of potential change in the provincial set-up, with implications for Mr Alyani's coalition partners outside Balochistan? Time will tell. But local conflicts involving Baloch chieftains and politicians remain submerged in provincial and national politics until the powers that be start to use those disputes to reset political alignments to suit their own agenda. That said, it needs to be emphasised that perpetual political uncertainty in a province battered by long years of insurgency, militant violence and underinvestment is damaging its development landscape and increasing anguish and despair among the people, the vast majority of whom are forced to live in abject poverty without access to proper food, clean water and other services. What they need at the moment is a caring government that does not spend money to win the elections, but to pull them out of their misery.

Drug abuse

WITH over 7m drug users in the country and given the inefficiency of the law-enforcement authorities towards the smuggling of narcotics, it is clear that much needs to be done to curb the trafficking of contraband substances. Though the smuggling of heroin dates back to the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s and the resultant influx of refugees into this country, at present around 40pc of Afghanistan's illicit heroin and opium trade is reportedly routed through Pakistan. Today as the world observes the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, we must reflect on the situation inside the country. This year's theme is 'Share facts on drugs, save lives'. A glance at figures and information shared by law enforcers reveals that though the use of illicit substances is very common across the country by people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, it is KP and Sindh that have a larger number of drug users — 11pc (of the

population) and 6.5pc respectively, as compared to Balochistan and Punjab with 5.01pc and 4.8pc.

Meanwhile, a drastic increase in the consumption of synthetic narcotics, especially crystal meth or ice, has also been reported. Initially, the use of crystal meth was mostly restricted to urban youth, but now its consumption is more widespread. Though law enforcers try and target routes used by the traffickers, the shortage of manpower, resources and funds renders their efforts largely ineffective. They are often reports of law enforcers seizing drug shipments and arresting dealers, but it is unclear how many of the latter have been prosecuted. The process of doing so must be streamlined in the narcotics courts. In Sindh, there are two special courts for the control of narcotic substances; however, they are severely overburdened with 9,000 cases pending. KP, the most affected province has yet to establish a special court. A holistic strategy is required and coordinated efforts by the government, law enforcement, rights activists and the media needed to curb the menace of drug use in the country.

Modi's Kashmir moot

NEARLY two years after he scrapped the special constitutional status of held Kashmir and effectively locked down the disputed region, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called a 'surprise' meeting of Kashmiri leaders — mostly loyalists — at his New Delhi residence on Thursday. In attendance were some former chief ministers of the occupied region, including Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti, who were both held in detention after the events of August 2019.

Though it is not exactly clear what prompted India to call this meeting, it would not be wrong to say that the moot, weak on substance as it was, was a signal from the Indian leadership that the hard-line approach to resolving the Kashmir issue, specifically by illegally absorbing the region within India, has failed. Such outreach to held Kashmir's political class should have been conducted much earlier, while not inviting leaders of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference was ill-advised, as the Hurriyat is one of the major stakeholders in Kashmir.

The signals from the meeting seem to be mixed. While Mr Modi has indicated he is ready to listen to pro-India parties in Kashmir, he has given no timeframe for the restoration of the region's autonomous status. Ms Mufti had raised the issue

of the restoration of Article 370 in the moot, though Mr Modi said a return to full 'statehood' would come "at the right time".

As Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi told a press conference in Islamabad on Friday: "This is very vague. What is an opportune time?"

The fact is that India's illegal move to annex Kashmir has not only been denounced by the majority of those seeking freedom in the region, but even some of New Delhi's most staunch loyalists, who were present at the conclave, have rejected this arbitrary decision. Therefore, if the Indian leadership is serious about restoring normalcy in Kashmir, it must set specific goals instead of giving the region's people lollipops.

If India seeks a genuine way forward, it should set a timeline for a return to autonomous rule in Kashmir. Furthermore, New Delhi must engage with Pakistan as well as the Hurriyat leadership, as the Kashmir issue cannot be resolved without the involvement of all stakeholders. If Mr Modi and company think cosmetic measures and false promises will pacify the Kashmiris, they are mistaken.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has also said that Pakistan is ready for talks with India should the latter provide a roadmap for restoration of Kashmir's special status. Therefore, India must take solid steps to not only address Kashmiris' concerns, but also to push the peace process with Pakistan forward. Moreover, India needs to halt its efforts to change Kashmir's demographics by settling outsiders in the region. India must show that it respects the wishes of the people of Kashmir, or else such meetings will be little more than a political pantomime.

Travel restrictions

CANADA'S decision to allow PIA flights to Toronto is a welcome step, given the steady fall in confirmed Covid-19 cases in Pakistan over recent weeks. On June 24, around 1,052 people tested positive after 45,924 tests were conducted, indicating a national positivity ratio of 2pc. This is a significant improvement from April, when the positivity ratio in some cities was a staggering 40pc and thousands were admitted to critical care units in hospitals across the country. If Pakistan continues to maintain the trend of decreasing Covid-19 infections, countries such as the United Kingdom and the UAE must consider easing travel

restrictions for travellers from Pakistan. Both countries have a significantly large Pakistani workforce and diaspora, so the travel curbs are posing serious difficulties for both migrant labour and families. It appears these countries have clubbed India and Pakistan in one category when it comes to Covid-19 evaluations. This defies logic, because cases in India are far higher than in Pakistan, and the spread of the Delta variant which originated in India is a serious factor. The UK astonishingly put Pakistan on its red list weeks before India — a decision which British MPs challenged as biased and unscientific. In fact, the UK was criticised for delaying putting India on the red list, as it meant that the Delta variant was allowed to spread in the UK when travellers from India arrived. The Delta variant is now the dominant variant in the UK, and is a major reason why the UK has delayed lifting the lockdown restrictions.

Countries must acknowledge the falling number of reported cases in Pakistan, and let in at least those travellers who have had two doses of WHO-approved vaccines. The Pakistan government must realise how critical a mass vaccination programme is to international travel. Conditions for travel may move beyond negative Covid-19 tests before flights, and become dependent on proof of vaccination. Our government must ensure both vaccine awareness and access, so Pakistani travellers don't face difficulties as a result of perpetually being on travel red lists. Increased testing is also a key factor in demonstrating to other countries the reality of the spread of Covid-19 cases in Pakistan — an element of the Covid-19 response that has been terribly lacking in Pakistan. For a country of 200m people, Pakistan's testing has been abysmally low even during the peak of Covid-19. The government must address these shortcomings so that Pakistan can make a compelling case for its citizens to travel.

Landmines in ex-Fata

FOR decades, landmines have been used as a potent weapon by many armies and militias, governments and rebels. It is a sinister weapon, indiscriminate in its lethality, designed to kill and maim people, and destroy livelihoods by rendering land uncultivable. Though Afghanistan, Cambodia and Angola are the three most heavily mined countries in the world, landmines laid in areas near the Pak-Afghan border since the Soviet-Afghan war began in 1979 still continue to cause horrific injuries and take lives. Youngsters are particularly susceptible to often fatal injuries since mine detonators can resemble shiny objects which children

mistake for toys. It is against this backdrop that a group of lawyers recently moved the Peshawar High Court to take note of frequent landmine explosions in the merged tribal districts, mainly South Waziristan, demanding the government announce compensation for the victims and steps to demine the area.

The petitioners claim that around 800 people have died in South Waziristan on account of 178 mine explosions during the past couple of years. The incidents have also left 250 individuals paralysed and 77 visually impaired. At least 4,000 cattle heads have been killed in the explosions. According to the petitioners, three landmine blasts have occurred in the area since May 28, 2021, alone, taking the lives of 15 children and three security personnel. Alarm was also raised by Unicef earlier this month, with its representative in Pakistan issuing a statement stressing the need for clearing the minefields and raising awareness about the issue. The concern is very valid. According to a report by the International Committee of the Red Cross, landmines in a number of conflict zones all over the world have collectively caused around 2,000 deaths every month for the past 50 years. Once laid, they remain in place for decades, forgotten until triggered by unsuspecting civilians. The ICRC report estimates that the cumulative deaths and injuries inflicted by landmines globally are greater than those caused by nuclear and chemical weapons combined. Though the situation in Pakistan is relatively better than some of the most heavily mined countries, the frequent reports of landmine blasts in areas close to the Pak-Afghan border demand urgent attention. It is unfortunate that we are one of only 33 countries that have not ratified the Ottawa Convention that prohibits stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel landmines. The authorities should take immediate steps for the demining of the areas concerned.

Grey list concerns

THE FATF decision to keep Pakistan on its so-called grey list in spite of this country's substantial progress on the original action plan has disappointed many. Yet others see it as an opportunity to intensify implementation to prove to the international community that Pakistan is a responsible state and willing to do what is expected of it to make the world a safer place. This is in line with Islamabad's stated position on terrorism financing and money laundering, as well as the efforts of the PTI government to check corruption and the illegal flow of money from and into the country.

After all, the primary beneficiary of the exercise to stop money laundering and combat terrorism financing would be the national economy and the Pakistani people. The actions implemented so far to meet the 27-point FATF action plan have already resulted in remittances bonanza for the economy, providing more room to grow it.

Indeed, the FATF is used by global powers as a political tool to put pressure on countries like Pakistan. There are examples where the global watchdog delisted other jurisdictions under its enhanced monitoring even though they had done far less than Islamabad to tighten their controls over flows of illicit money. Thus, the feeling that India is misusing the FATF platform against Pakistan, as voiced by the foreign minister, is not entirely misplaced. Also, there are many who are calling for the FATF to first take action against the European countries believed to be major hubs of illicit money before forcing Pakistan to meet its standards. These are legitimate concerns and Pakistan should ask for the fair application of the AML/CFT regime everywhere.

On the other hand, the FATF has consistently been emphasising the complete execution of its action plan for Pakistan to get off the list. Yet some of us have failed to properly read the message of the watchdog after its review meetings, hoping that we still have enough geopolitical weight to get off the list, without having to fully comply with the FATF's demands. This time, however, the FATF president has said clearly that the country will remain on the list as long as it does not address the single remaining action (related to the investigation and prosecution of senior leaders and commanders of UN-designated terror groups) as well as the items on a parallel action plan handed out by the watchdog's regional partner, the Asia Pacific Group, in 2019.

Pakistan is also required to ensure that its law-enforcement agencies cooperate internationally to trace, freeze and confiscate the assets of the designated individuals and entities. More political will is needed to fully comply with the two action plans as the lack of it is imposing heavy costs on the country. The government must swing into action to fulfil the remaining conditions in order to avoid the serious consequences of delay and inaction.

A successful PSL

A COVID-disrupted Pakistan Super League season came to a fitting climax on Thursday night in Abu Dhabi with Multan Sultans, who looked down and out halfway through the tournament, clinching their maiden title. This year's edition seemed all but over in March when Covid-19 cases in the tournament's bio-secure bubble in Karachi saw the tournament postponed with 14 of 34 matches played. However, with so much at stake — the PSL being the Pakistan Cricket Board's flagship event — the season had to be completed. After a mad scramble to find a window in a packed calendar, the PCB finally found some space in June with the rest of the tournament being shifted to the UAE after the NCOC didn't give clearance to resume it in Pakistan. That brought logistical concerns and further uncertainty with players, broadcast crew and officials flying in from almost every part of the world and needing to quarantine. But once the tournament resumed, there was no looking back. Multan certainly didn't, in a remarkable turnaround. Having won just one match in five in Karachi, they won four out of five in Abu Dhabi to finish second in the league stage before advancing to the final where they brushed aside Peshawar Zalmi.

After the Karachi fiasco, where there were multiple reports of breaches in the bio-secure bubble, the PCB needs to be lauded for ensuring there were no such mishaps in Abu Dhabi. Having been in the shadow of the Indian Premier League for years, this year's PSL is giving its much wealthier counterpart a blueprint on how to conclude a virus-hit season successfully. The only downside to playing in Abu Dhabi was that the PSL games were played in empty stadiums. But bringing in crowds wouldn't have been possible even if the PSL had resumed in Pakistan. However, as the vaccination drive picks up, there is hope that fans will be able to see their stars in action when the next edition of the country's biggest cricket tournament comes along.

Expected Covid surge

TOP health and Covid-19 response officials in the country are already starting to talk about the possibility of the fourth wave. Though new confirmed cases and the national positivity ratio are low as compared with last month, the high transmissibility of the Delta variant, poor SOP enforcement and limited vaccine

coverage make Pakistan ripe for yet another peak. Two weeks ago, Sindh Health Minister Azra Pechuho said the situation could get critical if vaccine uptake is not ramped up. This week, NCOC chair Asad Umar urged members of the public to follow SOPs and get vaccinated, as the fourth wave is expected to begin in July. These admissions by senior officials are worrying, and are a reminder that though cases are comparatively low now, they will certainly climb if SOP enforcement and vaccine coverage remain poor. Complacency once again appears to have set in across the country when it comes to something as simple as mask wearing and social distancing. The government must go beyond appeals to follow SOPs and demonstrate the best precautionary practices for citizens to follow.

As far as the vaccine programme goes, a new finding by a Chinese disease control researcher has revealed that while they do offer some protection, two Chinese Covid-19 vaccines are less effective against the Delta variant compared with other strains. Though the specific vaccines have not been named in the study, this revelation is enough to serve as a warning for vaccinated citizens in Pakistan who think they are somehow immune to the coronavirus. The government must communicate that there is no vaccine that gives 100pc protection from Covid-19. It must also consider placing orders for booster Covid-19 jabs for those who have been administered two doses of the Chinese vaccines being administered here as concerns over efficacy grow. It is important that the government communicates clearly with the public about the threat of the Delta variant and the need for vigilance. Implementation of science-led strategies now will prevent Pakistan from becoming a cautionary coronavirus tale in the future.

Misunderstanding Afghanistan

THE recent meeting of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and senior politician Abdullah Abdullah with Joe Biden in the White House, as well as the US secretary of state questioning whether the Afghan Taliban are serious about the peace process, indicates that hectic efforts are afoot to chalk out a game plan for the post-US withdrawal scenario in Afghanistan.

The message from President Biden was clear: the “Afghans are going to have to decide their future”. However, the Americans have failed to understand

Afghanistan, and their policies towards the country have not achieved positive results. Unsettling as it may be, it appears that the countdown to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul has begun, and the Americans have yet to come to grips with the fact that after decades of involvement in Afghanistan, costing thousands of lives and billions of dollars, their strategy has failed.

The sad fact is that over the past few decades, there has never been a negotiated transfer of power in Afghanistan. In 1973, the king, Zahir Shah, was overthrown by his relative Daud Khan and from then onwards, power has been taken by parties that have seized Kabul by force. So while the Taliban should respond to peace overtures, expecting them to break with this 'tradition' is unrealistic. The Americans should see this, considering their lengthy involvement in Afghanistan, but that doesn't seem to be the case. In fact, US blunders in Afghanistan go back to the Soviet invasion, when, fired up by Cold War rhetoric, Washington opposed the communist government in Kabul by playing the religion card and creating the 'mujahideen'.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were willing partners in this project. Unfortunately, it was out of this milieu that Osama bin Laden emerged and the philosophy of transnational 'jihad' took a more solid form. The world is now paying the price for these experiments. After the Soviet withdrawal and in the midst of mujahideen infighting the Americans lost interest. And when the Taliban took power amidst this chaos, the US and other Western powers made the mistake of not recognising them, forcing them to turn to the likes of Bin Laden for funds. Things have come full circle, with the Taliban once more poised to take Kabul, despite the Mr Ghani's claims that his forces have made "significant progress".

Unless by way of a miracle all Afghan stakeholders agree to a peaceful transfer of power, the US, Pakistan and other regional states must prepare themselves for another Taliban government in Afghanistan. The international community should be willing to engage with them, provided they are given assurances that fundamental rights will be respected and extremist groups will not be given refuge. Without such pledges, a new security nightmare will await Pakistan and the rest of the world.

Will IMF be flexible?

THERE are signs of the IMF moving away from Pakistan as the PTI government ditches contractionary fiscal policy to fuel growth ahead of the 2023 elections. The Fund has already pushed the sixth review of its \$6bn facility to September when it will likely be clubbed together with the next one. Obviously, the delay in the review emphasises the lender's reservations regarding Islamabad's expansionary fiscal plan for the next year. Yet a potential break-up between the two is still some distance away. The finance minister is interpreting the deferment of the review as a sign of the Fund's willingness to support the new growth policies and be flexible in its demands. Nonetheless, an IMF spokesman recently said that the Fund was holding "open, constructive discussions" with Pakistan before going on to state that further discussions were needed on the country's fiscal spending plans, structural reforms — particularly in the energy and tax sectors — and social spending envisaged in the reforms programme. "...[W]e remain fully engaged with the Pakistani authorities, aiming to resume these discussions in the period ahead." His statement shows that the cracks continue to persist over Islamabad's decision to change course midway, with the lender underscoring the importance of accelerating the "implementation of policies and reforms needed to address ... long-standing challenges facing the economy".

Whether or not the two sides can bridge their differences, Pakistan would want to buy some more time without leaving the programme. The government has already ruled out the option of exiting the programme since it may send a wrong signal to other multilateral lenders and global financial markets from where it plans to raise billions of dollars in new debt to boost its forex reserves and meet its financing requirements of \$25bn during the next fiscal year. The finance minister is confident that he can convince the Fund that the programme's objectives will be achieved without raising individual income tax or increasing electricity rates. Apparently, the IMF is prepared to wait for a few months to see the results of the new pro-growth fiscal policies listed in the budget. If the government succeeds in boosting tax revenues, enhancing social spending and reducing the power sector debt, the IMF may show some flexibility. But what if the plan does not deliver? Will the lender of last resort be prepared to give Pakistan more leeway and dollars? Much depends on the regional geopolitical situation after the US pulls out from war-ravaged Afghanistan.

Saudi women activists

THE release of two Saudi women activists from confinement recently has once again raised questions about the pace and genuineness of reforms in the kingdom, particularly when it comes to human rights, and specifically women's rights. Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sadah had been in captivity since 2018, after the Saudi state had launched a crackdown on activists. Another prominent rights activist, Loujain al-Hathloul, was released earlier this year after she was handed an over five-year sentence on charges of 'terrorism'. However, Ms Hathloul is not allowed to leave Saudi Arabia. It is unclear what has prompted the release of the women activists. One possibility is that American 'nudging' may be behind the move. A US official was in Riyadh recently and met the head of the Saudi Human Rights Commission. According to a US government Twitter account "steps forward in women's and labour rights in Saudi Arabia" were discussed. The Biden administration professes to put human rights at the top of its foreign policy agenda whereas, of course, the Trump administration had no such compulsions. Therefore the Americans may well have had conversations behind the scenes with the Saudis urging them to spruce up their image where human rights are concerned.

At one time Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was touted as a great reformer of the desert kingdom. Of course, the grisly murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the kingdom's Istanbul consulate — widely believed to have been ordered by Riyadh — tarnished this reputation considerably. While the prince has tried to modernise his kingdom by allowing women to drive, hosting concerts and wrestling matches, all of this will be meaningless unless there is genuine reform in the area of fundamental rights. Specifically, the right to question the government and basic freedoms for all, irrespective of sect, gender and tribe, should be guaranteed in the kingdom. This will prove that the reform drive is genuine. Saudi Arabia's attempts to project a modern image is fine but they must be accompanied by actual political freedoms.

Backlog in courts

THE wheels of justice turn slowly but they grind exceedingly fine, goes the proverbial expression. It is, however, the first part that best describes Pakistan's

judicial system, while we are far from achieving the second half of that reassuring dictum. Endless delays, umpteenth rounds of the courts, and mounting legal expenses — that is the experience of most litigants. Matters, it seems, are going to get worse before they get better. It emerged on Sunday that 51,387 cases are pending before the Supreme Court, as per its fortnightly report. Last year, in late May 2020, it was reported that 44,658 cases were pending before the apex court, which was then the highest ever pendency in its history. Overall, there are around 2,160,000 cases yet to be disposed of in Pakistan's judicial system.

There have been efforts now and then to clear the backlog, at least in the superior courts. Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry during his tenure as the country's top judge instituted double shifts for judges to hear cases. The last chief justice, Asif Saeed Khosa, focused on streamlining court procedures and setting up model courts in every district to expedite the hearing of criminal cases. Due to his efforts, the 25-year backlog of criminal appeals has almost been cleared. However, civil cases still drag on interminably, sometimes outlasting the lifetime of the litigants themselves and thereby causing terrible injustice. In May 2019, Pakistan's apex court for the first time began hearing cases through video link connectivity. This enabled lawyers to argue cases without being physically present in court; the fact their caseload often requires them to appear in different courts, sometimes in different cities, is one of the reasons that adjournments are sought so frequently. This innovative approach did not have time to become well established before Covid-19 spread across the world; at the moment, it is employed on a very limited scale at the level of the superior courts. The coronavirus pandemic thus played havoc with an already dysfunctional judicial system, with hearings suspended for weeks on end. In some ways, however, the judiciary itself bears some responsibility for the huge backlog, even before the contagion struck. Many senior lawyers point to the slew of public interest cases under Articles 184 (3) and 199 that grant the superior judiciary the power to enforce fundamental rights, as a significant factor in slowing down the wheels of justice.

That said, the situation in the lower courts, where most of the public has its first encounter with the judicial system, is far worse. Incompetent and/or overworked public prosecutors, individuals prepared to bear false witness for a price, shoddy police investigations, etc — the problems are many and serious. The provision of justice, or at least a measure of justice, is considered one of the hallmarks of a functioning state. By this standard, we have a long way to go.

Growing debt

PAKISTAN must borrow more and more every year to repay its outstanding external loans, finance its current account and build its forex reserves. In the process, it will accumulate more debt.

Sometimes the pace of debt accumulation may appear to be slowing — or reversing itself. In the quarter ending in March this year, for example, the country's total external debt and liabilities declined marginally to \$116.3bn from \$117.1bn at the end of December 2020.

Over the last 15 years or so, the country's external debt and liabilities have grown at a varying pace but no effort made during this period succeeded in containing the exponential increase in the burden. This is quite evident from the more than 150pc growth in foreign debt and liabilities to \$116.3bn from \$45.4bn at the end of FY2008. Therefore, the report that Pakistan purchased nearly 63pc more debt or \$12.13bn in the first 11 months of the outgoing fiscal year compared to \$7.4bn the government had borrowed during the same period last year does not come as a big surprise.

That the government has borrowed more aggressively from external sources during the outgoing year despite a record 29pc jump in remittances sent home by Pakistanis living abroad and a current account surplus underscores its anxiety over the rising short- to medium-term debt payments.

Islamabad's debt payment requirements are not surging because of its increasing foreign debt stock alone; the changing composition of external debt — the replacement of low-cost multilateral and bilateral borrowings with more expensive commercial purchases — is also increasing debt-servicing requirements. The spike in debt accumulation over time signifies the failure of successive governments to increase their tax revenue for financing their budgets and push exports to earn enough dollars to pay for the rising import bill, which has resulted in the emergence of large current account deficits year after year. Moreover, the extremely low flows of non-debt-creating, long-term FDI are also not helping. With little likelihood of any dramatic jump in tax revenues or exports in the next few years, the country's dependence on foreign loans will continue.

With bilateral dollars in short supply for various reasons and multilateral assistance on hold because of the differences with the IMF over the PTI government's spending plans for the next year, chances are Islamabad's dependence on costly commercial loans from international banks and markets will increase, escalating debt accumulation and servicing — at least in the short run.

Tourism potential

IT is a truth universally acknowledged that Pakistan's tourism industry is a potential shot in the arm for the country's deflated economy. On Monday, Prime Minister Imran Khan said as much to a gathering of Tiger Force volunteers in Naran. Surely, there is no dearth of breathtaking natural landscapes in the country, and few can compete with traditional Pakistani hospitality. Why then should international tourism be confined to a few areas in the country and Pakistan remain excluded from the list of nations that people want to visit at least once in their lifetime? As with other industries, tourism too cannot flourish without proper planning, investment, marketing and sound government policies. Despite the growth of the domestic tourism industry, many popular destinations lack modern amenities such as high-speed internet and cashless banking, at times even a proper Basic Health Unit. Moreover, the country remained in the grip of violent elements for a number of years. Large-scale military operations eliminated the militants but not before they had dealt a severe blow to the tourism infrastructure, leading potential travellers to perceive Pakistan as unsafe. In more recent times, a European ban on the national flag carrier over the dubious licences issue has also raised concerns.

Meanwhile, an unregulated hotel industry in many areas has harmed local ecosystems and marred the beauty of the land, perhaps the biggest example being that of Murree where haphazard development has ruined the hill station's natural landscape. The once pristine Lake Saiful Mulook, situated not far from where the prime minister addressed the Tiger Force squad, is now littered with trash thrown by visiting Pakistanis. The prime minister rightly pointed out the need for responsible tourism. But for this, the government would have to regulate both the construction of hotels and the inflow of tourists to popular destinations, in order to conserve the scenery and reduce the carbon footprint. The tourism

industry can thrive only in an atmosphere of security and convenience for travellers. This is missing at the moment.

Terrorism concerns

AS a negotiated settlement eludes Afghanistan, and the grim prospect of large-scale violence begins to haunt that country in the aftermath of the US withdrawal, neighbouring states, specifically Pakistan, have genuine security concerns. This is especially so if the government in Kabul — which at the best of times has maintained only tenuous control over the country — is unable to resist an Afghan Taliban onslaught on the capital. It is for this reason the country's security establishment will be briefing the nation's elected leadership during an in-camera session in parliament tomorrow.

Asked why the conclave was being convened, the prime minister's aide Babar Awan said that all parties' heads had discussed the Afghanistan situation in their speeches during the budget session and the lawmakers would be briefed on the security conditions prevailing across Pakistan's western border.

Editorial: The US, Pakistan and other regional states must prepare for another Taliban govt in Afghanistan

Pakistan has good reason to be concerned. After all, thousands of hardened anti-Pakistan terrorists are currently seeking refuge in Afghanistan, and if the situation in that country deteriorates, these inimical elements will have a freer hand to wreak havoc here. The Foreign Office pointed out on Monday that 5,000 terrorists belonging to the proscribed TTP have sanctuaries in Afghanistan, questioning a statement by Kabul that the TTP does not operate in that country. Moreover, the fact that hardened militants are hiding in Afghanistan has been confirmed by third parties, including the UN and US.

A UN monitoring body had earlier this year pointed out that the TTP and various allied groups were active in Afghanistan, while the Afghan Study Group for the US Congress had made similar observations. Amidst these groups is the 'Khorasan chapter' of the self-styled Islamic State, which has carried out a number of bloody attacks inside Afghanistan.

The fact that a cross-parliamentary body is being briefed by the intelligence agencies on possible threats emanating from Afghanistan is welcome. A thorough strategy is needed with all pillars of state on board to deal with the possible fallout of chaos in Afghanistan. This country has in the past paid a heavy price losing civilians as well as men in uniform to terrorist outfits operating from foreign locales. While the security situation has improved considerably domestically, the threat remains, as the blast in Lahore last week indicated. Once foreign forces leave Afghanistan, anti-Pakistan terrorist outfits may well have a greater opportunity to strike this country, therefore all state institutions must remain alert.

Of course, it is valid to ask why the world's leading military powers were unable to uproot militant groups active in Afghanistan despite spending two decades in that country ostensibly to fight terrorism. However, Pakistan must be ready to confront any refugee crisis, as well as militant activity, emerging out of the post-withdrawal situation in Afghanistan, and terrorist groups must be neutralised before they shed more innocent blood in this country.

Gas supply shortage

THE shutdown of a gas field in Sindh for annual maintenance and the unplanned dry-docking of Engro's RLNG terminal has forced the country's two gas utilities — SSGC and SNGPL — to cut fuel supplies to most industrial units, including cement factories and fertiliser plants, as well as to captive power plants and the CNG sector. The supplies have been discontinued in Sindh, Punjab and KP for one week to July 5. SSGC had already been rationing supplies to the transport sector and captive power plants for a few days to cover the shortfall arising from the previous shutdown of gas fields. Now it has extended the rationing period as the country's overall gas deficit expands with the RLNG terminal maintenance which has forced SNGPL to resort to gas curtailment in its jurisdiction. The system gas thus 'saved' is expected to be diverted to RLNG-based power generators for producing cheaper electricity and keep blackouts resulting from suspension in RLNG supplies to a minimum. The RLNG supplies are likely to be restored, albeit only partially, after the replacement of Engro's Floating Storage and Regasification Unit. Full restoration of supplies from the terminal are not likely before seven to 10 days.

The Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce & Industry has rightly argued that the gas shortages would impose huge costs on businesses, affecting production and exports, and common people will be forced to bear the higher generation cost in their monthly power bills. The FPCCI has also pointed out that the entire country is now in the grip of an energy emergency because of Engro's selection of peak summer for undergoing ship replacement for the terminal's dry-docking in order to cut down its own expenditure. The gas demand in the country is increasing and the fuel's domestic production contracting, creating supply gaps and shortages that have to be met through LNG imports. The current market share of LNG is around 25pc of the total gas sales. The imports are likely to increase substantially as the demand grows and domestic output drops further. We are already experiencing massive gas cuts in winters since we do not have enough terminal capacity to import more LNG to meet our needs. If the government has plans to get rid of these periodic gas shortages, it should realise that the country direly needs new private terminals for ending public-sector monopoly in the market and encouraging business-to-business deals, expansion in pipeline capacity and creation of storage.

