



DAWN

EDITORIALS

June 2022

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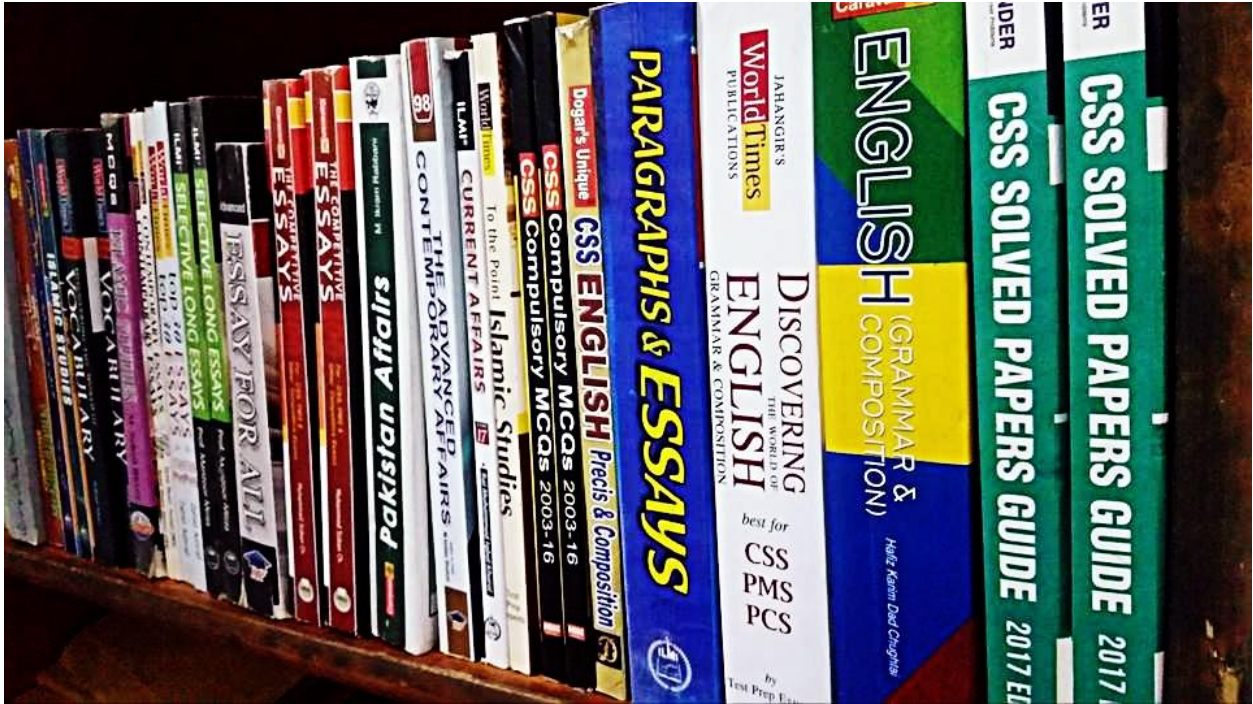
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Sour grapes

FORMER prime minister Imran Khan's abortive Azadi March has him blaming many things for his decision to abandon, at least temporarily, his rather boisterous quest to force the ouster of the incumbent government. It may just be sour grapes, but he has recently been telling us that he called off his intended siege of the capital for the sake of maintaining national cohesion and avoiding bloodshed. The truth is, the anticlimactic denouement of Mr Khan's agitation campaign against the 'imported government' seems to have put him out of his depth as far as rationalising it to his supporters is concerned. He seems to be at pains to justify his abrupt change of heart, giving reasons that simply do not seem to gel with his 'normal' approach to politics. Is the ousted prime minister masking his hand, or has he been humbled enough to finally accept that a more measured approach to politics can still help attain objectives? His future strategy remains shrouded in mystery. He has confined himself, along with key PTI leaders, to Peshawar, but he cannot hope to mobilise the nation against the government (as he has threatened) if he remains holed up there. Is he waiting for something, or just avoiding the possibility of arrest?

It is clear the temptation to revert to his usual self is strong. Already, Mr Khan is speaking about being "better prepared" when (and if) he returns to the capital for the next iteration of Azadi March. What this better preparation will entail is unclear, but a suggestion from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister to march with his "own force" gives cause for concern. By his own admission, Mr Khan's supporters were carrying firearms during the protest in Islamabad and he had feared that they would exchange fire with law enforcers if he had not pulled back. It is good that he was candid about the situation, but Mr Khan surely realises that he cannot have expected anything different given that his own rhetoric had created so much animus between his supporters and the state. He himself had been referring to the marchers as his "attack force" and exhorting them to force their way through police ranks to get to Islamabad.

If he now believes protests should remain nonviolent and non-confrontational, it is Mr Khan's responsibility to strongly denounce and discourage the carrying of firearms by his supporters, as well as clarify and walk back the KP CM's suggestion that in the event of a confrontation with the centre, the KP police force may be brought in. Every political party has a right to peaceful protest and lawful

assembly but the exercise of this right should not be allowed to turn into a civil war-like situation. Mr Khan can expect no sympathy from the law or the people till he eschews violent confrontation with the state.

Published in Dawn, June 1st, 2022

New governor

THE appointment of Balighur Rehman as new Punjab governor after weeks of political wrangling between the president and prime minister might have paved the way for the provincial cabinet's formation, but the troubles of Chief Minister Hamza Shehbaz are far from over. Certainly, the development has left the PTI and PML-Q leadership with fewer options to recapture power in the country's most populous province, yet the alliance still has tricks up its sleeve to create problems for Hamza even if it can't knock him out completely. The immediate challenge facing the new set-up pertains to the passage of the next provincial budget this month. Although the ruling coalition claims to be still commanding a majority among the existing members of the assembly despite the disqualification of 25 PTI MPAs who had voted for Hamza, it will likely struggle to muster a simple majority for the passage of the money bill, and the failure to do so will automatically trigger its fall. The apex court's verdict that the votes of lawmakers defying their party's instructions or abstaining from voting either in the election of the prime minister and chief minister or on a money bill cannot be counted means the coalition can no longer depend on new, potential PTI-PML-Q defectors for the approval of the budget.

That is not all. The coalition parties are also far short of the magic number of 186 in the house to vote out Speaker Chaudhry Parvez Elahi, who is the other contender for the throne in Punjab. As long as he is there, he will continue to create difficulties for the PML-N in governing the province effectively. If he is to be removed from office, the coalition must win in the July 18 by-elections most of the 20 seats which fell vacant in the wake of the PTI defectors' disqualification. More importantly, the fate of the present set-up largely hinges on the outcome of the petitions filed by the opposition against Hamza's election and his subsequent oath as chief minister administered by the National Assembly Speaker under a court order. In short, the PML-N and its allies need to cross many hurdles before they can effectively govern the province that has been at the centre of an intense

political drama for the last several weeks. At the same time, the PTI and PML-Q must deal with many 'ifs' before they can hope to regain power in Punjab.

Published in Dawn, June 1st, 2022

A ghastly crime

A file photo of the Lahore Railway Station being almost deserted as the Karachi-bound Khyber Mail waits for clearance to continue its journey. — M Arif / White Star/File

ANOTHER horrific incident of sexual violence has come to light, underscoring how a cavalier approach to security arrangements can embolden criminally inclined men to indulge their worst instincts.

A few days ago, an unfortunate young woman was reportedly subjected to gang rape while travelling from Multan to Karachi by the Bahauddin Zakriya Express. As per the FIR, the three perpetrators are employees of the private firm to which Pakistan Railways had outsourced the train's commercial operations.

Speaking to this paper, an official of the PR police said none of their personnel were deployed on the train because the contract under which it was being operated stipulated that security arrangements were the responsibility of the private contractor. The woman's medical examination, according to the doctor concerned, has confirmed that she was indeed gang raped.

The question is not, why was the victim travelling alone? Instead, what must be asked is this: why was proper security not provided on board that could have prevented this terrible crime? The private firm has a duty of care towards those using the service it operates; and PR should have ensured that the company was abiding by the terms of the contract.

Such incidents have serious consequences. Aside from the long-term trauma that the victim in this case is likely to suffer, women in general are left — once again — feeling ever more insecure in the public space; the message to them is that without the 'protection' of a man, they are easy prey.

In the notorious Motorway gang rape of 2020 where a woman was assaulted in front of her minor children on the outskirts of Lahore, there was a public outcry

against the city police chief for suggesting that the victim bore some responsibility for her ordeal because she was out late at night.

As in that case, the suspects must be proceeded against swiftly and punished. And all public transport must have proper security arrangements on board; women's safety is the barometer of a nation's values.

Published in Dawn, June 1st, 2022

Ready for elections?

IT appears from recent developments that the system is ready for a general election, even if a timeline for the polls remains moot. The situation has significantly changed from just weeks ago when several legal and technical challenges had clouded the prospects of elections being held anytime soon.

When the PTI government had unconstitutionally dissolved the National Assembly and called an early election, an official of the Election Commission of Pakistan had told this paper that the ECP was in no position to conduct elections within the constitutionally mandated three months due to legal and procedural issues. The official had estimated at the time that it would take at least six months for the ECP to be ready.

Fresh delimitation of constituencies; procurement of election material; arrangement for ballot papers; appointment and training of polling staff; repeal of laws pertaining to the use of electronic voting machines and overseas Pakistanis' voting rights; as well as the appointment of members for Punjab and KP to the ECP had been identified as the key hurdles before elections could be held.

It is interesting to note that most of these hurdles will be eliminated in the near future.

A bill amending the law pertaining to EVMs and overseas Pakistanis' voting rights awaits final presidential assent. Even if President Arif Alvi refuses to sign it — which he most likely will for political reasons — a joint session of parliament can still be called to enact it as law.

The president has, meanwhile, assented to the appointment of the Punjab and KP members of the ECP.

Similarly, the chief election commissioner just yesterday announced that the ECP is “always ready for elections”, following a report nearly two weeks ago that the delimitation of National Assembly and provincial assembly constituencies, based on the 2017 census results, would be complete by mid-August. Electoral rolls are also being revised, and a summary outlining expenditures for the next election has been presented in the National Assembly.

It will be interesting to see how the political parties react. Key government allies like the JUI-F and the PPP had previously said that amendments to the Elections Act and NAB laws were their only condition for calling an election. PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari had recently told PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif that as soon as the reforms were complete, the country can go to the polls.

The PTI, which has been unnaturally sedate since its Azadi March was prematurely called off, has the option to challenge and stall the government; but doing so could jeopardise its chances of finding support from other parties for early polls. Meanwhile, the government continues to insist it is here to stay and steer the ship out of a stormy political and economic environment.

Does the system know something we do not?

Published in Dawn, June 2nd, 2022

Increasing food prices

THE low-middle-income families, who usually purchase their groceries from government-run utility stores to save money, must be in a state of shock as subsidised ghee and cooking oil prices have been spiked by Rs208 a kilo and Rs213 a litre to an all-time high of Rs555 and Rs605 — even above market rates. That this exorbitant increase is approved by a government which claims to have come to power to repair the broken economy and shield the people from hyperinflation, is disappointing. This decision more or less cancels the positive impact of the relief package given by the government to vulnerable groups to mitigate the pain of the increase in fuel prices that was recently announced. The new CPI inflation numbers, a measure of what the people pay for the goods and services they consume or use, show that the pace of escalation in headline prices during May was the fastest in the last 28 months. The index has surged by 13.76pc year-over-year due to a big jump of 17.3pc in food and 31.8pc in transport prices. The 11-month average inflation is computed to be 11.29pc, up from 8.83pc for the corresponding period last year. The problem is that CPI numbers cannot even remotely capture the pain people deal with each day when they purchase groceries, buy petrol, and pay their electricity, health and other bills.

There is no denying that the government needs to fix the budget and put its fiscal house in order for long-term, sustainable growth. The increase in fuel and power prices, frozen by the PTI government for political mileage, is a prerequisite for

fiscal stabilisation to improve inflation expectations and contain risks to external stability. Nonetheless, it must not overlook the impact that double-digit inflation has had on the vulnerable and fixed income segments of the population in the last three years as it makes fiscal adjustments — now or in the next budget. While it is crucial to boost fuel and electricity prices that will produce higher food and transport inflation and directly hit the low- and middle-income populace, the authorities must also cut their wasteful and non-essential expenditure to create space for helping the inflation-stricken segments. This will also require transferring some of the pain of the upcoming fiscal adjustme

ts to the rich. Ordinary Pakistanis have paid heavily for the indiscretions of the country's elite; it is now time for the latter to shoulder the burden.

Russian oil

AS high global oil prices hit all sectors of the economy, and with more petroleum price shocks in the pipeline, the search for cheaper oil should be a national priority, along with exploring other, more affordable energy options. One option that was floated by the former PTI government was of buying discounted Russian crude. However, as Finance Minister Miftah Ismail told CNN on Tuesday, Russia had not replied to the previous administration's communication regarding the purchase of discounted crude. Moreover, Mr Ismail pointed out the fact that sanctions stand in the way of buying Russian oil, while Pakistan also lacks roubles to buy the crude, which is one of Moscow's demands. Therefore, the finance minister told the American broadcaster that "it's very difficult for me to imagine buying Russian oil".

However, considering Pakistan's dire economic predicament, all avenues must be explored to ensure energy security. Where buying Russian oil at discounted rates is concerned, perhaps the new administration must again approach Moscow to confirm its interest in the sale, or otherwise. But even if there are positive signals from the Russians, the question of sanctions arises, as the West has practically cut off Moscow from the global financial system. There is also the question of compatibility of Russian crude with Pakistan's refining capabilities. Yet if Pakistan is serious, these obstacles can be overcome. For example, if India, a major American ally, can buy deeply discounted Russian crude with the US looking the other way, why should there be pressure on Pakistan not to

attempt a similar purchase? Elsewhere in the region cash-strapped Sri Lanka has also purchased Russian crude on credit. In fact, even the EU, which is a major backer of Ukraine in the conflict against Russia, has said oil imports from Moscow will be cut back “gradually”, while some EU members have been temporarily exempted from the ban. Therefore, if Russia is willing to sell and Pakistan is ready to diplomatically defend its purchase of oil, attempts should be made to explore this option.

Published in Dawn, June 2nd, 2022

Grandiose rhetoric

PTI Chairman Imran Khan speaks in an interview on Wednesday. — Amir Zia
Twitter

IMRAN KHAN appears to be a man without a plan, and a very angry one at that — even recklessly so, making increasingly apocalyptic statements as time goes on. The six-day ultimatum he gave the PML-N-led government to call early elections when bringing his Azadi March to a premature end has come and gone, but the announcement of the second long march he had threatened if his demand was not met is nowhere in sight.

Indeed, it seemed PTI was playing for time by filing a petition in the Supreme Court for protection from ‘state torture’, which however the court returned yesterday, deeming it had already decided the issue in an earlier, similar petition. The court has already indicated its intention to find out why the march participants reached D-Chowk in violation of its directives and has sought intelligence reports to this end.

But Mr Khan has also been granted transitory bail by the Peshawar High Court; that could, by preventing his arrest upon returning to Islamabad, expedite his next move. While the ousted premier’s approach to the judiciary has of late at least been somewhat circumspect, his appeals to the powers that be have become more provocative than ever.

It is fair to say that the establishment’s repeated involvement in political engineering is thoroughly exposed by now. No fig leaf, no niceties remain for plausible deniability. Indeed, so advantageous has this blurring of institutional

boundaries been for the PTI in recent years that after being ousted from the centre, the party has twisted 'neutrality' into a pejorative, where the very stance of being 'neutral' is posited as a dereliction of duty.

In a television interview on Wednesday, Mr Khan went a step further and painted a doomsday scenario in which Pakistan was on the brink of "self-destruction". If the establishment did not "take the right decisions", he said, the country would experience economic collapse and forced denuclearisation, and break up into three parts.

The former prime minister also conceded he did not have full power in running the country, indicating that the actual power centre lay elsewhere and "everyone knows where that is". He added: "A system only works when responsibility and authority are in one place." Indeed, long before he became prime minister, Mr Khan spoke earnestly about how governments that come to power riding the coat-tails of the establishment are deeply compromised and inherently weak.

He has now seen that play out up close and personal. However, amidst his grandiose rhetoric of good versus evil and his angst at being 'out of favour', does Mr Khan have the capacity to understand that playing his role in strengthening parliamentary democracy, instead of repeatedly looking towards unelected forces, is in the interest of the PTI? There is only one winner in the way politics is presently played in Pakistan — and it is not the civilian leadership.

Published in Dawn, June 3rd, 2022

Balochistan LG polls

THE preliminary, unofficial results of local government elections held in the majority of Balochistan's districts on Sunday have revealed some interesting political trends in Pakistan's geographically largest province. For one, independent candidates have snapped up the lion's share of seats, winning nearly 1,900 of the 4,456 constituencies. The political parties have come in quite far behind, with the JUI-F clinching the second highest (over 460 seats) as per the unofficial numbers available at the time of writing. Polling in Quetta and Lasbela will be held later. The elections were held in a largely peaceful atmosphere, though there were reports of sporadic violence, with at least one person believed to have been killed. Most of the violent incidents occurred

between supporters of rival candidates, though polling stations were targeted by suspected militants in a number of locations. As per the Balochistan chief secretary, the turnout was between 50pc and 60pc. This is an encouraging sign for the democratic process in Balochistan as figures from the 2018 general elections in the province show that turnout for both national and provincial assembly seats hovered around 45pc. Among the big winners was the Gwadar Ko Haq Do movement, which clinched the most seats in the coastal district. Late last year, the movement, led by Jamaat-i-Islami leader Hidayatur Rehman, held a nearly month-long protest in Gwadar demanding civic rights for the people of the coastal region.

The results thus far reflect the fact that the people of Balochistan have put their faith in independent candidates to get their local issues resolved, rather than give the mandate to traditional political parties or nationalists. Apparently, the movement in Gwadar — which forced the powers that be to take notice of local demands — has influenced their choices at the ballot box. It is also true that the establishment's meddling in politics has left the people disillusioned with political parties and their ability to solve Balochistan's problems. Yet the respectable turnout is a healthy sign both for democracy as well as stability in Balochistan, offering a democratic path to change in the beleaguered province. Hopefully, Balochistan's voters will also fully participate in the next general elections. Regardless of whether the voting is at the local, provincial or national level, Balochistan's elected representatives must deliver the goods to the people, while the establishment should give them the space to run the province in a democratic fashion. Otherwise, Balochistan's sense of deprivation and disillusionment will only increase.

Published in Dawn, June 3rd, 2022

Rescue service

WHILE the launch of the Rescue 1122 by the Sindh government is a welcome step, one can justifiably ask what took the authorities so long to introduce a comprehensive emergency service in the province, especially in a city like Karachi where the population is estimated at 20m. A few years ago, the provincial government had entered into a partnership with a private ambulance provider in Karachi. However, hit by funding problems, that endeavour didn't go

as planned, and citizens still continued to rely mostly on the large and sprawling ambulance networks of Edhi and Chhipa that had partially filled the gap left behind by the dearth of emergency health services. Thankfully now, with a fleet of 50 modern ambulances and 180 more to come, it should become easier for citizens to seek help in times of need. According to the Sindh chief minister, the Rescue 1122 service will provide “a complete package of rescue, relief and rehabilitation” and it will be extended to all parts of the province. The ambulances will have trained paramedics and the service, to be overseen digitally from a command and control centre, will also be connected with fire brigades and trauma centres across the province.

However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The Sindh government’s record in the health sector is a shoddy one, and one may well ask whether it is committed to the challenge of providing a steady flow of funds and the expert training required to maintain the quality of service and the upkeep of the costly facilities being developed for Rescue 1122. One hopes that the government has a plan to ensure equitable and accessible services to the common man and that its latest endeavour is more than just a vote-seeking initiative. Moreover, the rescue services must go hand in hand with a larger effort to address the defects of the faulty healthcare sector in Karachi, as well as the rest of the province.

Published in Dawn, June 3rd, 2022

Moody’s downgrade

THE bills have come due for the PTI’s ill-conceived fuel and electricity subsidies and the PML-N’s waffling response to an imminent balance-of-payments crisis.

Within a week, the new government has unloaded a cumulative 40pc hike in fuel prices as well as a 47pc increase in the per unit tariff for electricity. Inflation, already high, will soar as the economy adjusts to the new reality.

Meanwhile, the inordinate delay in the announcement of these price adjustments and the resultant delay in securing an IMF loan has cost Pakistan in the form of a diminished outlook rating.

Moody’s Investor Services, whose risk assessments are closely watched by lenders and influence the interest they charge, has downgraded Pakistan’s

outlook to ‘negative’ from an earlier ‘stable’ rating citing the country’s “heightened external vulnerability”, “uncertainty around ... ability to secure additional external financing” and “weak institutions and governance strength”.

Both the past and the present government are to blame for this mess.

First, the PTI, for the disastrous policy of subsidising electricity and fuel not just for the poor, but also the rich. It ended up incentivising the consumption of an imported commodity that the country simply could not afford.

Then, the PML-N, which, despite knowing that the subsidies needed to be withdrawn immediately, fought within itself for weeks as ‘senior’ leaders refused to let the government take what proved to be an inevitable decision. The party’s unpreparedness to deal with economic realities rattled capital markets and ultimately resulted in Pakistan’s failure to secure an agreement with the IMF in the recently concluded round of talks in Doha.

Editorial: Cold feet

Throughout this period, the country’s political climate has remained on a boil, with one party willing to go to any lengths to force an early election, and one party (the government) fumbling spectacularly in dealing even-handedly with either the political or the economic challenges it faces. No wonder Moody’s does not see much hope given the existing state of affairs.

The rating agency is reasonable in expecting that the government cannot deliver stability in its short tenure. The latter faces significant challenges in keeping its rainbow coalition of allies intact as the threat of public agitation, led by a resurgent PTI buoyed by widespread anger over inflation, always lurks around the corner.

Editorial: Meeting IMF demands

Since the government has chosen to complete its tenure, however, it is now its responsibility to respond to these challenges in a manner that at least does not worsen Pakistan’s international credit ratings any further if it cannot improve them.

A lot hinges on maintaining social and political stability and securing a lifeline from the IMF, without which many avenues for external financing will remain closed. Failure to clinch an agreement this month can spell further disaster for the economy, the blame for which will fall squarely on the government's shoulders.

Published in Dawn, June 4th, 2022

Water shortages

THIS summer has unpredictably turned out to be the driest in most parts of the country in many decades. No wonder Pakistan is faced with an unprecedented water shortage of around 50pc, the highest ever since 1991 when the provinces agreed to share the water available in the Indus river system under the Water Apportionment Accord. A dry spell resulting in approximately 26pc deficit in snowfall during the winter months as well as negligible rainfall in the last several months saw the current Kharif season begin with at least 40pc water shortage against an annual average deficit of 14pc for the last three decades. That the snow is not melting at a comparable pace in spite of the early onset of summer has drastically increased shortages in the system and drained the two largest reservoirs — Tarbela and Mangla. This should not come as a surprise to anyone. The hot and dry weather has already shrivelled the wheat output, and is likely to adversely affect cotton and rice production in Punjab and Sindh. It has also revived old tensions between the two provinces, with Sindh complaining it has suffered 14pc higher shortages than Punjab and demanding additional supplies for its growers.

Pakistan's looming water crisis has been in the making for many years and is of increasing concern. Many international research studies have predicted that Pakistan might run dry by 2025 as water scarcity is rising to alarming levels. A new White House report, US Action Plan on Global Water Security, forecasts that Pakistan will be among the world's most water-stressed countries, along with other regional states, by 2040. Yet the authorities in Islamabad have shown criminal negligence towards the approaching crisis that can quickly morph into a broader food, economic and national security issue if corrective measures are not implemented. The first step towards ensuring water security for posterity has to be a meticulous and thorough review of the 1991 accord to incorporate into it

water conservation, governance, storage and usage strategies. The complexity and scale of the looming water crisis call for a response that is based on actual availability of the resource and not on hypothetical data. The ruling coalition government, with its member political parties representing the will of different provinces and regions, has an excellent opportunity to achieve a fresh consensus on how to deal with the crisis threatening food and economic security, and inter-provincial harmony.

Published in Dawn, June 4th, 2022

Palestine killings

THE murder of four Palestinian civilians in the occupied territories by Israeli forces over a period of two days shows that whether it is wartime or a period of uneasy peace, Arab lives come cheap. Among the victims was Odeh Mohammad, a 17-year-old boy shot by Israeli forces on Thursday as he played with friends in his West Bank village near the odious 'separation wall'. Tel Aviv was initially silent about the murder but later alleged that the boy was hurling Molotov cocktails at Israeli soldiers. Among the three other victims was Ghufuran Warasneh, a Palestinian woman shot by Israelis outside a refugee camp. The Israelis claimed she was rushing towards them "with a knife" though witnesses have challenged this claim. Clearly Tel Aviv's military machine feels no compunction about resorting to lethal force at the slightest pretext, even if it involves killing children in the name of 'self-defence'. According to one figure, at least 65 Palestinians have been murdered by Israel this year, including 16 teenagers. Moreover, Israeli forces on Wednesday demolished the home of a suspected Palestinian shooter near Jenin and arrested his father, reflecting the colonial practice of collective punishment.

In Israel, it is apparent that fundamental rights and due process do not exist for Palestinians. Arabs can be killed, injured or indefinitely detained simply on the suspicion of participating in militancy. None of Israel's gushing supporters in the West are ready to ask why Tel Aviv chooses to extrajudicially murder Palestinians it suspects of resorting to militancy. Perhaps this is because Palestinians have been dehumanised for most Israelis. In the recent so-called Jerusalem Day event — which marks the occupation and annexation of the holy city — Israelis, including many children and teenagers, were gleefully chanting

'death to Arabs'. If this is what is inculcated from childhood, perhaps it is no surprise that Palestinians are mercilessly butchered by Israeli forces. Moreover, few in the international community, including Israel's newfound Muslim friends, have the courage to call out Tel Aviv for these crimes.

Published in Dawn, June 4th, 2022

Saving Earth

FIFTY years ago today, countries worried by the pressing environmental concerns faced by a planet they shared, came together at Stockholm to recognise that "the protection and improvement of the human environment is a major issue which affects the well-being of peoples and economic development throughout the world". They realised that there was "only one earth", a campaign slogan being raised today on World Environment Day. It is a slogan that is profound — and a stark warning to humankind to scale down activities that are destroying wildlife, flora and fauna, ecosystems, and indeed, human habitat itself. The world is fast approaching a point of no return, where a permanent 1.5°C rise in global temperatures looks imminent. Earth's delicate and complex web of interdependence between and among species, including humans, has been ravaged in the name of 'progress'. Human activity is affecting three-quarters of the total ice-free land, and two-thirds of the oceans. Unfortunately, the growing demand for resources has outpaced nature's capacity to replenish and renew. In the last three years alone, the global material footprint has increased by as much as 113pc, as per the International Resource Panel, an offshoot of the United Nations Environment Programme.

For developing nations like Pakistan, planetary climatic changes have acted as threat multipliers, leading to disease outbreaks, food insecurity, water shortage, poverty, and other violations of human rights, posing dire security and existential risks to the country. This is because, despite being blessed with a diverse topography and unique ecosystems, Pakistan's ability to cope with climatic changes and climate-related disasters is abysmal. Its contribution to carbon pollution is negligible when compared to the big emitters. However, it is among the top 10 countries to have suffered most on account of climate change, made worse by an ever-expanding population. Despite the last government's promise to shift away from coal, the country remains dependent on fossil fuels, its

agricultural and water management practices are antiquated and carbon-intensive, while deforestation continues to make way for brick-and-mortar structures and effluents and plastic choke our waterways.

The government's inability to counter the hazards of a changing climate is also on account of a lack of resources required to mitigate its effects and set the country on a more sustainable path. Climate financing is certainly a need for developing countries, as emphasised by the federal climate minister, Sherry Rehman, at the Stockholm+50 meeting recently. It is unfortunate that countries most responsible for global warming and plundering natural resources have not yet mobilised the promised \$100bn to aid environmental recovery in developing countries. But, irrespective of when the funding materialises, it is imperative that Pakistan develop a long-term climate adaptation framework that permeates every level of financial and social development. Climate change is the biggest threat to national security and, as young environmental activist Greta Thunberg said in 2019, the 'house' is indeed 'on fire'.

Published in Dawn, June 5th, 2022

Karachi fire

AN entirely avoidable disaster has ended up displacing dozens of families, killing a young student and consuming considerable resources of the Karachi fire department.

From initial reports, the owners of a superstore chain had hoarded an estimated four to 10 tonnes of cooking oil in the basement of a residential building located near Karachi's Jail Chowrangi. The store owners were hoping to make a significant profit from their stock, as they expected oil to soon run short in the market.

Due to reasons that have yet to be ascertained, a fire broke out in or near the storage area last Wednesday, killing one and injuring three. For more than 50 hours, dozens of fire brigades and scores of firefighters struggled to put out the blaze, which reportedly kept reigniting due to the large quantity of cooking oil present.

Nearly 800,000 gallons of water were consumed in combating the blaze. The building has since been declared 'dangerous' as a result of the damage to its structure, rendering hundreds of its residents homeless.

Neglect of fire, general safety and construction regulations has become an all too common feature of most residential and commercial projects in the city in recent years. The authorities who are tasked with keeping a check on dangerous practices continue to look the other way as long as there is an 'incentive' to do so, and ordinary citizens are inevitably paying the price.

An investigation team needs to determine why a superstore was allowed to turn a residential building's basement, meant to be used as a parking space, into a warehouse for flammable goods, as well as who allowed it to do so. Criminal proceedings should be initiated against all those responsible to send a strong warning to all businesses and builders operating in the city that they should put public safety before personal profits. The government would also do well to ensure that any loss suffered by families and individuals affected by this store's reckless disregard for public safety is fully compensated.

Published in Dawn, June 5th, 2022

Excellent cricket

ON the back of a disastrous World Cup campaign, the Twenty20 and One-Day International series wins against Sri Lanka for the Pakistan women's team are not only morale-boosting but inspiring as well. Pakistan had lost six of their seven matches at this year's ODI World Cup and a strong response was needed against the Sri Lankans, even if their opponents had failed to reach the World Cup. It was an emphatic one. A clean sweep of the three-game T20 series last week was followed by victory in the ODI series, featuring the same number of matches, by a game to spare. Good results always help and in this case, with the ODIs being part of the ICC Women's Championship which is part of the 2025 World Cup qualifying cycle, these are crucial to Pakistan's ambitions of qualifying directly for the tournament. Even more so, they might help in securing the future of the women's team. A number of schoolgirls were in attendance at the Southend Club in Karachi to watch the team in action and saw sterling performances from youngsters Tuba Hassan and Ayesha Amin, taking Pakistan to victory in the opening two T20s. Leg-spinner Tuba showed her effervescence

with the ball in the first game, picking up four wickets, while batter Ayesha guided Pakistan home in the following match. It was opening batter Sidra Ameen who was instrumental in Pakistan sealing the ODI series triumph, hitting a sparkling century in the second match. Others chipped in too, including skipper Bismah Maroof, spinner Ghulam Fatima and all-rounder Fatima Sana.

With the PCB eager to increase the country's talent pool by holding countrywide trials, strong performances will attract more women to the game. A number of girls in attendance at the matches spoke about their desire to represent the national team in the future. It's now a question of harnessing that interest. A larger talent pool is also crucial to PCB's plans of holding a women's edition of the Pakistan Super League. That will hopefully take women's cricket in the country to the next level, providing the platform for the emergence of a new generation of stars. The PCB should, however, ensure that the women players get a bigger stage to showcase their talents. And instead of the obscure Southend Club, the National Stadium should be the venue to stage women's internationals. That's a move that will ensure that women cricketers get the same spotlight as their male counterparts.

Published in Dawn, June 5th, 2022

No more perks

Preferential treatment to certain members of society was always morally and legally wrong. —File photo

FOR too long has the power elite of this poor country shamelessly plundered state resources for its own benefit, fattening itself on undue favours and the perks of office. It is time for a reckoning. The tinderbox of public discontent demands nothing less.

The government must impose highly visible, across-the-board austerity measures on the ruling elite immediately. No half-measures will suffice. The people are staring into the abyss of financial ruin, reeling from an unprecedented cumulative hike of 40pc in petrol prices within a week, a 47pc increase in the per unit electricity tariff and now a 45pc rise in the gas tariff. A spiral of backbreaking inflation, recorded at its highest in 64 weeks, according to the latest figures, has already begun and will push millions more households below the poverty line.

So far only the Sindh and KP governments have been responsive to the public mood, slashing the fuel quota enjoyed by cabinet members, legislators and government officials by 40pc and 35pc respectively. Even this, however, does not go far enough. There is no justification for any fuel allowance in these financially straitened times for government officials, not when the people they are supposed to serve are suffering so.

On Friday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif called on the privileged classes to make sacrifices and adopt simplicity, saying this was necessary in these challenging times. It would be extremely foolish to expect that appeals to the conscience of a historically indifferent class will have any impact. There must be tangible actions to demonstrate that the ruling elite is prepared to share the burden of belt-tightening with the common man. At this critical juncture, it makes both economic as well as political sense to dismantle, as far as possible, the trappings of the prevailing VIP culture that is flaunted every day in the face of 'ordinary citizens'.

One sees it in the needlessly ostentatious security escorts for some individuals, the contingents of hangers-on accompanying members of the ruling elite for umrah at state expense, the foreign junkets of government officials with their family members going along for the ride, and so on. Whatever their differences, the ruling elite is almost always in harmony where it comes to enhancing perks and privileges, including overly generous health and travel facilities, for themselves and their families. In a country where millions struggle without adequate access to basic amenities, such disparity in lifestyles is no less than obscene. A course correction is long overdue.

Preferential treatment to certain members of society was always morally and legally wrong. To continue on such a path now would be economically unfeasible and tantamount to political suicide. Public resentment against the privileged class already runs so deep that unless conspicuous measures are taken to address this inequity, the anger could spill over into civil unrest. Optics matter.

Published in Dawn, June 6th, 2022

Transport blues

AS fuel prices go through the roof — with more shocks likely — the state needs to seriously revamp the public transport infrastructure, particularly in Pakistan's expanding cities. Filling up the fuel tank to get to work or study is now putting a serious strain on people's budgets, while app-based private bus services that offered a decent alternative are packing up, adding to commuters' woes. The latest player to leave the market is Swvl, which announced recently that it was "pausing" its services in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad and Faisalabad, attributing the move to the "global economic downturn". Airlift, another app-based bus service, wrapped up its transport operation during the pandemic and shifted to delivering groceries. For commuters in Pakistan's metros, these are unfortunate developments as particularly in Karachi, public transport is in poor shape, and these private players offered a comparatively cost-effective and reliable commuting option. The fact is that while Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar and Multan have received functional metro bus services, Karachi lags far behind. However, both the federal and Sindh governments have seemingly awoken from their long slumber and have vowed to bring 'hundreds' of public buses to the metropolis' roads. These efforts need to be expedited to provide the public safe, affordable and comfortable commuting options.

While public transport has for decades been a neglected area throughout urban Pakistan, perhaps because the ruling elite have no need for it, high petroleum prices require the state to focus on this sector without delay. The projects in Lahore, Islamabad and other cities need to be expanded. For example, while the Islamabad metro bus links the city to Rawalpindi, more services are needed connecting the capital's sectors. Karachi is another story altogether. Though the launch of the Green Line earlier this year was hailed as a step in the right direction, the other BRTS lines also need to be speeded up. Moreover, the Sindh government needs to fast-track its Peoples Bus Service scheme on all routes. Also, the KCR, which remains a pipe dream, must eventually see the light of day as it will be very difficult to solve Karachi's public transport dilemma without an efficient urban rail system. The state must encourage private start-ups to keep their vehicles on the roads, as Pakistan's transport problems can only be solved through public-private partnerships. More ridership on public transport will mean

less consumption of fuel by private vehicles, and result in some savings for the hard-pressed commuter.

Published in Dawn, June 6th, 2022

Screening civil servants

THE government has attracted significant flak for ‘officially’ empowering the ISI, the country’s premier spy agency, to ‘vet and screen’ civil servants before their induction, appointment, posting and promotion. The rationale behind the move is to give legal cover to a practice that was already ‘in place’, but had never been formalised. The change made by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to civil bureaucracy rules, by notifying the spy agency as the Special Vetting Agency, will also give ‘legal effect’ to reports issued by the ISI for use in court as valid documents, although there are some who dispute this explanation. Needless to say, most civil servants are disappointed by this decision. Apparently, this job of vetting aspiring and in-service bureaucrats is beyond the mandate of the spy agency. Moreover, it is not clear under what law the ISI can screen the civil bureaucracy. There are also concerns as to how an intelligence agency operating outside civilian oversight can be tasked with scrutinising civil government officials in matters pertaining to their appointments and promotion, unless they are suspected of being involved in anti-state activities. Such actions enhance the role of a military-controlled agency and give it leverage over civil servants.

The prime minister’s decision has been met with criticism, with the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan saying that the “role of the military in civilian affairs needs to recede if Pakistan is to move forward as a democracy”. Certainly, there is no disagreement on the screening of public office holders per se; their performance is crucial to ensuring that state and government systems run smoothly in the country. Background checks, especially of those whose credentials may be in doubt, are helpful in removing any concerns regarding their personal integrity. However, this is a job that is best left to the civilian intel agencies. The ISI’s job is to safeguard Pakistan from the designs of its enemies, and its focus should not be diverted to issues which can be managed by others.

Published in Dawn, June 6th, 2022

Toxic narrative

FOR long, the Sangh Parivar in India has used Pakistan as a punching bag, while also lambasting Muslim emperors and sultans that ruled the subcontinent centuries ago. But when officials linked to India's Hindu nationalist ruling party publicly started attacking Islam's sacred figures, a red line was crossed.

The vile comments directed at the Holy Prophet (PBUH) coming from two BJP spokespersons were no mere slip of the tongue. They were the result of decades of anti-Muslim poison spewed by the hard right in India; now the anti-Islam discourse has been mainstreamed, with people in power feeling free to attack the revered figures of other religions to please their rabid vote bank.

The reaction from many Muslim states has been swift against the outrage. Kuwait, Qatar and Iran summoned Indian diplomats to register their protest, while Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have also issued stern denunciations against the provocative statements.

For its part, the BJP has expelled one character in this sordid saga, while suspending the other. It has also issued a lukewarm clarification stating that it "is strongly against any ideology which insults or demeans any sect or religion". If this were so, hard-core Muslim-baiters and demagogues, such as the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and the Indian home minister, would not be key cogs in the ruling apparatus.

The prime minister of India himself has a dark communal history, as the ghosts of Gujarat will testify. Moreover, the reaction to the comments has been disingenuous on part of the Indian state. While responses to the controversy by Indian missions in Kuwait and Qatar were conciliatory, distancing themselves from the "offensive tweet", the Indian external affairs ministry's reactions to the OIC generally and Pakistan's concerns over the matter were combative and thoroughly undiplomatic.

Perhaps the feeling in New Delhi is that the billions of dollars worth of trade and remittances from the Gulf states cannot be lost over the controversy. Already there are campaigns underway in the Gulf calling for boycotts of Indian goods.

All religious minorities in India, including Christians and Dalits, have been feeling the heat as Hindu extremism has gained strength. But Muslims have been on the receiving end of the most hateful campaigns, with their loyalty to the state questioned, their cultural and religious practices restricted, and now their sacred figures attacked.

With the latest provocation, the Sangh Parivar is playing with fire. Already there has been violence in some areas, and unless efforts are made to rein in the hate-mongers, especially those who enjoy political and official patronage, the situation can deteriorate very quickly.

The international community, especially the Muslim world, needs to continue to call out India for its anti-Muslim and anti-Islam provocations. Perhaps sensitive to censure by foreign states, and fearful of damage to economic ties, New Delhi may change its attitude and seriously address these reprehensible incidents.

Published in Dawn, June 7th, 2022

Electoral roll controversy

THE Election Commission of Pakistan finds itself in the middle of another needless controversy. The commission recently started displaying updated electoral rolls for public review and, as is quite normal, there were some anomalies in them. Among those who were affected, some took to social media to claim that their polling stations had been moved to new locations; in some cases, quite far away from their current place of residence. Given the highly charged political environment and the PTI's repeated claims that the ECP is biased against it, these reports were viewed by some as an attempt at 'pre-poll rigging'. The controversy grew to a point where the ECP was forced to issue a public statement saying there was "no truth" to such reports and that those who were facing inconvenience should immediately reach out to the commission with their complaints.

While technology and social media have helped the citizenry grow increasingly better informed of the electoral process, they have also brought with them their own set of problems. In particular, the rapid spreading of misinformation on otherwise mundane issues has emerged as a key challenge. It appears in this case that controversy arose because the ECP decided that for all voters whose

addresses, registered with the ECP for voting purposes, were other than the ones mentioned on their CNIC, their permanent address according to the CNIC would be used. The ECP says this decision had been taken in 2017 and voters were told to get their addresses updated by January 2018. They still have till June 19 to do so. However, the commission, instead of responding to the controversy by simply explaining where the confusion was arising, only made matters worse by issuing a blanket denial that it had made changes to voter registration data. Given the current climate, the ECP cannot afford to lose public trust. Clearly, there is a need for the ECP to be more transparent in its dealings with the public. It also needs to bring its practices in line with modern times. In this regard, it can benefit from close coordination with Nadra, which maintains detailed databases on citizens. It is quite unhelpful to ask affected voters to visit ECP offices in person in case they want their registration data corrected when this can easily be done online or through a phone call from a number registered against the voter's CNIC.

Published in Dawn, June 7th, 2022

Shadow economy

THERE'S no right way of accurately measuring the undocumented part of an economy. Hence, the size of Pakistan's shadow economy is estimated to be in the range of 30pc to 50pc of the nation's total reported GDP by various studies using different methodologies. That is massive by any yardstick. The shadow or informal economy refers to economic activities taking place outside the tax and regulatory system, and may or may not have any backward or forward linkages with the organised sectors. Every country is grappling with the issue of parallel economy; Pakistan is not alone in this. The problem for Pakistan is that the size of the unreported economy has grown so big that it is now bearing down on formal sectors, penalising taxpayers, undermining tax collection, intensifying market distortions and creating an uneven field for organised businesses. The existence of unregulated economic activities across almost every segment of business underlines poor governance and law enforcement, weak tax administration, corruption, and the lack of political will to take action against participants of the shadow economy.

The size of the unregulated economy isn't the only problem Pakistan must deal with. The state's tolerance of the black economy means that smuggled and counterfeit products are now snatching a bigger market share from the organised sector, besides fostering further growth in illicit trade at the expense of consumers and industry. This is in addition to the government forfeiting large revenues through uncollected taxes that could have been used to build economic and social infrastructure to boost productivity, generate employment opportunities and create surplus for exports. It is, indeed, hard to document every unregulated sector. Nor is this required. Many informal micro and small businesses linked to organised sectors will always exist and continue to indirectly contribute to economic growth; therefore, they need not be regulated vigorously. It is the unchecked smuggling and illicit trade in counterfeit products that the authorities need to curb without further delay to protect the organised industry and consumers.

Published in Dawn, June 7th, 2022

Energy crisis

The current energy crisis was a long time in the making. — Reuters/File

OUR political class's strategic failures have once again brought us back to the days of relentless 'load-shedding'. Yet, instead of making a sombre assessment of the failed policies that have brought back these days of misery, our politicians are obfuscating the facts by pointing fingers at each other.

The truth is, the current energy crisis was a long time in the making. It could have been better prepared for had policymakers made smarter decisions over the past decade. The country needed to have been put on track for greater self-sufficiency through increased use of indigenous and renewable resources, but instead, bad planning paved the path to disaster.

In its previous tenure, the PML-N had attempted to overcome the power shortages and plan for the future by inviting foreign investors and lenders to help establish a series of power projects which would offer them guaranteed returns. These plants are run mostly on imported fuel. The policy not only drastically increased Pakistan's risk exposure to global supply shocks and adverse movements in international markets, it also created considerable surplus power

generation capacity which had to be paid for in dollars even if it was never utilised.

Subsequently, the PTI government's strategy to devalue the dollar to contain the current account deficit had the side effect of triggering a surge in electricity generation costs, which increased as the dollar rose sharply against the rupee. Distribution companies also played a role in exacerbating problems by failing to contain line losses and improve recoveries during either government's tenure. Both governments also paid short shrift to renewable sources of energy like wind and solar, which Pakistan has ample potential to tap.

As fuel prices rose and the dollar strengthened over the past few months, electricity generation rapidly became more unaffordable. To top it off, stuck payments for power generation companies and shortages of fuel due to the PTI government's failure to arrange sufficient stocks in time worsened the bad situation, leaving the entire system unable to meet increased summertime demand.

There is, unfortunately, no short-term solution to the crisis the people currently face. The incumbent government is cash-strapped and in no position to magically cure the power sector's many structural issues. It is attempting to curtail demand with the restoration of a five-day workweek, but more will need to be done.

The Covid-19 pandemic offered many lessons in work-from-home and hybrid arrangements, which can be reintroduced if residential areas can be guaranteed uninterrupted electricity. Another option would be to negotiate with traders to restrict commercial activities to daylight hours, which can help considerably in saving electricity.

For the long term, the political class urgently needs to work towards a multiparty consensus on the country's long-term energy goals. It is clear no single party can provide the solution to the chronic problems that plague Pakistan's energy sector.

Published in Dawn, June 8th, 2022

Unacceptable language

IT beggars belief that lawmakers would throw around statements that make them appear indistinguishable from the violent extremists who for years have caused rivers of blood to flow in the country. In a widely shared video on social media on Monday, PTI MNA Attaullah Niazi made a shocking and explicit threat. “If a single hair on Imran Khan’s head is harmed, those running the country be warned. Neither you nor your children will remain. I will be the first to carry out a suicide attack on you,” he said. Mr Attaullah is no shrinking violet when it comes to extreme reactions. He is one of two PTI legislators booked over the storming of Sindh House in Islamabad a few weeks before the vote of no-confidence against Mr Khan. But his threat of suicide bombing — which he retracted yesterday with a flimsy ‘clarification’ — is beyond the pale, even in a climate where political discourse has plumbed new depths of uncivility. His words cannot be dismissed as the utterings of an intemperate individual or an expression of intense devotion to his party. Appropriating the language of terrorists is never acceptable; in fact, it is against the law. Suicide attacks have had very real, devastating consequences for tens of thousands of people in Pakistan, including the trauma of suffering life-changing injuries and/or the loss of loved ones in such incidents. Bandyng around threats of similar violence trivialises their experience.

Regrettably, Mr Attaullah is not the first legislator to use such rhetoric. Former federal minister Shehryar Afridi declared at a public gathering in March that were suicide not forbidden in Islam, he would have tied explosives to his body and targeted the “hypocrites” in parliament, referring to those with whom the then opposition was working to oust Mr Khan as premier. Around the same time, then aviation minister Ghulam Sarwar also expressed the desire to carry out a suicide bombing and wipe out the opposition. Curiously, those who have made these execrable statements all belong to the PTI. Is that a coincidence or is it the natural outcome of a party culture that encourages maximalist language and whose leader has demonstrated a perplexingly kid-glove approach towards militants, even urging the government some years ago to allow the TTP to open an office in Pakistan? There must be some red lines where rhetoric is concerned. Threats to commit violence, regardless of ‘provocation’, is a glaringly obvious one.

Published in Dawn, June 8th, 2022

Livestock precautions

WITH around a month left before Eidul Azha, livestock markets have begun to spring up offering sacrificial animals for sale. However, this year the authorities need to be extra vigilant about ensuring that no animals infected with lumpy skin disease make their way to the markets. As reported in this paper on Tuesday, a number of infected cows apparently made it to one of Karachi's livestock markets, though the spokesman for the facility claims the entire consignment, including the sick animals, was returned. However, there are disturbing reports that officials are allowing in livestock without a proper veterinary examination at a number of checkpoints in Karachi. One trader talking to Dawn claimed that the checkpoints have been set up just to mint money and that no vets were present at the spots. Moreover, both provincial authorities and KMC officials are shifting blame where checking of animals is concerned.

While it is true that the vector-borne LSD is not transferred to humans through the consumption of milk and meat of infected animals, the authorities must still ensure that only healthy livestock is brought to cattle markets. Earlier this year, there was a major outbreak of the disease in Sindh, resulting in the public reducing consumption of beef and milk. However, the Sindh authorities claim over 2m cows have been vaccinated against the ailment. Yet with Eidul Azha approaching, hundreds of thousands of cattle heads, goats, sheep and camels are brought to markets countrywide, and it must be ensured that these markets do not become incubators for the disease. During the earlier outbreak in Sindh, as per one figure around 36,000 cattle had been infected with LSD, while a few hundred died, and farmers who were eking out a living through a few cattle heads were hard hit when their animals fell sick. Therefore, for the health of the public as well as animals, all provincial livestock departments need to ensure that sick animals are not brought to markets.

Published in Dawn, June 8th, 2022

Charter of the economy

WITH the economy in turmoil and no easy fixes on hand, it would be ideal if lawmakers from across the political divide were to pledge to work together to improve it. Given the reality, however, the prime minister's desire for a 'charter of the economy' is likely to remain a pipe dream.

One wishes that 75 years of independence would have yielded us an agreement that the economic future of more than 200m souls cannot be left to the vagaries of Pakistan's power politics. Unfortunately, Pakistan's democracy appears to have much farther to go before it reaches that point of maturity.

For Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's wish for a 'charter of the economy' to become reality, it is also necessary that he first acknowledge his own party's role in precipitating public distrust in economic decision-making at the government level.

Before the PML-N and its allied parties pushed the PTI out of power, Mr Sharif had noisily challenged every decision the PTI government took to increase fuel and electricity prices, claiming the citizenry would be delivered from the clutches of painful inflation if only Imran Khan were to be removed. By now appealing for a 'charter of the economy', Mr Sharif seems to have acknowledged that he may have been in over his head.

On a related note, Mr Sharif also needs to come to terms with the fact that the PTI is likely to remain a major political force for the foreseeable future. Any charter of the economy is unlikely to hold till the party is accommodated.

At the same time, it also cannot be ignored that Mr Khan's stubborn and unyielding approach to politics is likely to be the biggest obstacle to a breakthrough even if the PTI were to be formally invited to sit with the other parties to solve the economic conundrum. Three years of his party's struggles to get a grip on the economy ought to have taught him better. Mr Khan would do well to remember how citizens would routinely dig up old clips and tweets to disparage his government, even when the decisions it was taking may have been the right ones.

Given Pakistan's electoral history, aspiring prime ministers must at some point accept that their party's economic plans are likely to be cut short before its mandated five years are up. While the transiency of power may be acceptable as a feature of Pakistani democracy, the economy need not be subject to it.

There first needs to be an agreement that cynical politicking over the economy should not be a means to gain public support, as it makes future decision-making all the more difficult. Before parties arrive at that understanding, however, it

seems more reasonable to expect the sun to rise from the west than to see them actually working together for the greater good.

Published in Dawn, June 9th, 2022

By election test

EVEN though the appointment of a new governor in Punjab has somewhat reduced political uncertainty in the country's most populous province, the fledgling government of Chief Minister Hamza Shehbaz has several more bridges to cross before it can expect to complete the remaining term of the provincial assembly. The immediate challenge facing it pertains to the passage of next year's budget as it remains unclear whether it still enjoys a simple majority among the existing 346 assembly members following the disqualification of 25 PTI MPAs, including five elected on reserved seats, who had voted for the incumbent in the chief minister's election. Besides, the government is faced with multiple cases in the courts filed by the PTI-PML-Q combine, challenging the legitimacy of the chief minister's election. Nonetheless, the upcoming by-elections on 20 provincial assembly seats, which fell vacant after the disqualification of the PTI defectors, scheduled to be held around five weeks from now, may prove to be the biggest headache for the ruling coalition, and the continuation of the Hamza Shehbaz set-up in the province. The PML-N and its allies must win most of these seats — if not all — to ensure a simple majority of 186 members in a full House, and keep their hold on the province.

This is the first time in the parliamentary history of Punjab that by-elections are simultaneously being held in such a large number of provincial constituencies. That the PML-N is reported to have hammered out its differences with its ally, the PPP, and formulated a joint strategy to contest against the PTI-PML-Q alliance after a meeting between Asif Zardari and Hamza Shehbaz on Tuesday doesn't necessarily mean that its electoral troubles are over. The PML-N is facing prospects of rebellion from within the party in some constituencies where it plans to field PTI defectors on its tickets. Needless to say, local political formations play a critical role on polling day in Punjab. If the PML-N reneges on its commitment to the defectors, the integrity of its leadership will be badly hurt. Then, some defectors want to contest independently, although with the PML-N backing them.

This means they won't be bound to toe the party line if returned to the assembly. How successfully the PML-N negotiates the upcoming electoral challenges has implications for not only the future of the Hamza Shehbaz set-up, but also for the party's chances in the next elections.

Published in Dawn, June 9th, 2022

Brutish behaviour

IT has unfortunately become the norm in Pakistan for many members of the legal community to display uncouth behaviour that stands in stark contrast with the lofty ideals of their profession. The latest incident involving high-handedness of lawyers occurred in Karachi, where legal proceedings were paralysed for nearly a week at the City Courts after a dispute emerged between the black coats and a district and sessions judge. The dispute revolved around the arrest of a court watchman, who the lawyers alleged was involved in 'criminal activities'. However, the judge got the watchman released, telling the Sindh High Court chief justice that the lawyers in question had tried to encroach upon a piece of land, and the watchman was simply doing his job by stopping them. As a result of the dispute, litigants had to suffer for almost a week, as cases were not heard due to the lawyers' strike. The lawyers only relented and returned to work when the judge was transferred.

There have been several such incidents nationally in which the legal community has flexed its muscles, much to the detriment of the public and the rule of law. One of the most shameful episodes occurred in 2019, when lawyers attacked Lahore's Punjab Institute of Cardiology following a dispute with doctors. A number of patients died on account of the ensuing chaos. Moreover, there have been numerous incidents where lawyers have locked judges in their chambers after not getting their way. Such brutish behaviour needs to end. The fact that those who are supposedly most well-versed in the law choose to trample on it is a glaring contradiction. What is more, when lawyers resort to frequent and lengthy strikes, it puts additional strain on our creaking legal system. For example, there are nearly 70,000 cases pending trial in Karachi's district courts. When legal proceedings are disturbed, the backlog only grows. The leading lights of the legal profession, therefore, need to do more to rein in their unruly colleagues, and teach them how to respect the law.

Published in Dawn, June 9th, 2022

Pakistan Economic Survey

The PML-N-led coalition government launched the Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-2023 on Thursday. —PID

A FIRST reading of the Pakistan Economic Survey 2021-22 reveals just how deep the impact has been on the country's economy of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Without it, the conversation around Pakistan's challenges in the next fiscal year would decidedly have been very different.

The survey report, which documents the state of the economy up till roughly the same point as when the PTI government was pushed out, shows that the economy had continued on its path to a robust recovery from the days of the Covid-19 pandemic.

GDP growth actually exceeded the PTI government's set target of 4.8 per cent by registering at 5.97pc, helped by low interest rates and an expansive fiscal policy, growth in manufacturing and improved production of crops (apart from wheat). However, as the incumbent finance minister put it, this growth was 'unsustainable' as it had worsened the underlying imbalances in the economy by considerably heating it up.

Before the Ukraine crisis overshadowed everything, the government had started to feel the impact of inflation triggered by excess demand. Its decision to subsidise petrol and electricity and remove the petroleum levy and sales tax on POL products, "posed significant risks to fiscal sustainability in an already constrained fiscal environment". Savings and investment also remained low, while economic conditions were unable to attract either domestic or foreign direct investment in the economy.

It is commendable that the report, released under the PML-N, maintains objectivity and apports praise where it is due. This is quite positive, because if there is ever to be a 'charter of economy', it will have to start with rival parties at

least acknowledging each other's efforts and achievements instead of trying to constantly undermine each other.

The survey's findings make it clear that it will not be in any party's control to set a firm direction for the economy for at least the next year. The document notes that the "surge in commodity prices and the increase in global interest rates will further reduce fiscal space, especially for oil and food-importing economies," of which Pakistan is one.

The explosive expansion in the country's trade deficit and its subsequent impact on the current account has already wreaked much havoc. Considering that Pakistan will have to import considerable quantities of expensive wheat as well this year due to a smaller crop, risk exposure to global markets will remain elevated. Inflation fuelled by higher prices of electricity and gas and global supply-side shocks in fuel and commodity prices will pummel the economy for months.

As the document notes, domestic instability is only exacerbating the crisis. If they cannot work together, political parties must at least exercise some restraint and allow for a needed economic correction to proceed unhindered. The times ahead are tough, and parties must show a greater sense of responsibility than is currently on display.

Published in Dawn, June 10th, 2022

Repressive law

A PARTICULARLY problematic clause in an overall controversial piece of legislation is to undergo further scrutiny, this time in the Supreme Court. Admitting a petition by singer Meesha Shafi, a two-judge bench on Wednesday stayed criminal proceedings against her in a defamation suit under Section 20 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, and signalled its intention to determine the constitutionality of what is colloquially known as Peca's 'criminal defamation' section. It is the latest development in Ms Shafi's high-profile sexual harassment case against another well-known singer, Ali Zafar. As Justice Qazi Faez Isa pointed out during the hearing this week, there are two contradictory rulings by the Islamabad and Lahore high courts on Section 20. On March 9, the Lahore High Court had held that the legislation was not ultra vires of Article 19 of the

Constitution that protects freedom of speech and expression. The Islamabad High Court, however, on April 8 struck down the part of Section 20 that pertains to damage to reputation as being unconstitutional. That, and the court's simultaneous scrapping of the execrable Peca amendment ordinance which had vastly enhanced the scope and punishment for criminal defamation and made it cognisable and non-bailable was a significant victory for right to freedom of speech advocates.

Certainly, as the Supreme Court has noted, clarity is needed on the issue. What is crystal clear however, is that having criminal defamation on the statute books relegates us to a shrinking pool of countries with notoriously repressive regimes. At least two dozen journalists in Pakistan had been charged under Section 20 by the end of last year, and the inevitable chilling effect on dissenting voices is undoubtedly the objective that the PML-N government, and other state institutions, had in mind when Peca was enacted in 2016. Moreover, in Pakistan, the clause has been repeatedly used to silence women complaining of sexual harassment, and thereby has victimised them further. What makes it all the more ironic is that Section 20 was brought in on the pretext that it would protect women who were slandered online. Instead, it has become an instrument of repression, serving as an extension of the patriarchal attitude that cannot brook women articulating their experiences of abuse and violence instead of bearing their mistreatment in silence. A modern, forward-thinking state must remove defamation from the ambit of criminal law, and instead strengthen the civil law dealing with it.

Published in Dawn, June 10th, 2022

Iran-IAEA spat

IN the latest sign that all is not well where efforts to revive the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 are concerned, Tehran has disconnected a number of monitoring cameras placed by the International Atomic Energy Agency at its nuclear sites. The move has come in the aftermath of a resolution presented by the UK, France, Germany and the US — four of the six members of the P5+1 — to the IAEA alleging that Iran was “escalating” its nuclear programme. Moreover, in a report issued last month the IAEA also questioned traces of uranium at a number of Iranian sites. Iran, on the other hand, has criticised the moves as

“political”, while officials say 80pc of monitoring cameras are still active. These tense exchanges illustrate the fact that the window to revive the deal is fast closing, and with the gulf of mistrust between both sides still pretty wide, saving the JCPOA will be a long shot.

However, the outlook for the region — and the world — in case the JCPOA collapses permanently is grim. With the failure of international diplomacy in the shape of the Ukraine war, we have already witnessed the painful geo-economic effects across the globe, particularly in the energy and commodities sectors. Should tension between Iran and the West rise to greater levels, this would result in even higher energy prices, and a dangerous new conflict breaking out in a sensitive region. Already Israel has been spearheading a covert campaign to assassinate key Iranian officials, while it has reportedly staged hundreds of attacks on Tehran’s assets in Syria. To prevent this cold war turning hot, reviving the nuclear deal — along with restraining Israel — can be a key confidence-building measure. Therefore, both the Western bloc as well as Iran need to show some flexibility and come to a middle point where the deal is concerned. Time is of the essence and further confrontational rhetoric must be eschewed in favour of a more accommodative posture by both sides.

Published in Dawn, June 10th, 2022

Budget 2022-23

THE annual budget presentation has traditionally been heavy on granular details of the government’s spending plans for the coming fiscal year. It helps the common citizen get a rough idea of what is in it for them.

This year, however, Finance Minister Miftah Ismail went with a speech that was heavy on rhetoric but lacking in substance. Was it to avoid the negative optics of having to formally announce that he plans to reinstate both the petroleum levy and the Gas Infrastructure Development Cess, which will result in another hit to citizens in the form of a third hike in fuel and gas prices?

Mr Ismail may have stayed mum, but citizens can expect more pain from their gas, electricity and fuel bills starting next month.

The budget document, on the other hand, reads as if the government simply ticked off items from a checklist handed to it by the IMF.

Analysis: Appeasing IMF while preserving political capital

Having removed the major chunk of PTI's fuel subsidy over two instalments ahead of the budget, all that had been left was the reimposition of the sales tax and petroleum levy, on which the government has obliged. Likewise, the Fund had demanded tight control over the primary balance, and the government has dutifully budgeted for a surplus. An attempt has also been made to better tax the real estate market, which had long been in the cross hairs for being a safe haven for grey money and tax evasion.

Given that the government seems to have more or less acceded to all of the IMF's major demands, it is hoped that the lending agency will now be more forthcoming about the release of the much-needed funds.

However, it is worth asking the government if this budget was designed solely to secure an IMF loan because it otherwise seems to be lacking in intent.

There is nothing in it that suggests that the government is serious about fixing the structural imbalances inherent in the economy — the same imbalances that the finance minister had been complaining loudly about just a day earlier when he was unveiling the Pakistan Economic Survey.

It has budgeted for inflation to clock in at 11pc for the year, which seems highly unrealistic given the massive increases in fuel prices it has just unloaded, which have yet to be fully absorbed. Likewise, the budgeted growth figure seems unrealistic given that economic activity is going to slow considerably as the economy cools down. Little thought also seems to have been given to how the uncertainty roiling global commodity markets may impact the average citizen. If oil prices rise any further, the impact will snowball massively when combined with the reimposed sales tax and petroleum levy. Will the public be able to bear such an increase?

The finance minister should really have been more forthcoming about the government's plans.

Published in Dawn, June 11th, 2022

Forest fire SOPs

THERE appears to be no respite from the forest fires that keep erupting in whatever relatively dense forests remain in the country. These forest fires have been aggravated by the prevailing heatwave, underscoring the deadly impact of climate change and the need for Pakistan to address and adapt to new realities if it wants to prevent loss of life and resources. The recent blazes in Besham and Chakesar tehsils in Shangla district have reportedly been controlled, albeit after claiming at least three lives, taking the total death toll from forest fires in KP to nine. The past few weeks have witnessed dozens of small to medium blazes in Swat, Haripur, Khanpur, Lower Dir, Mohmand, Shangla, Mansehra, D.I. Khan, Murree, Islamabad and Rawalpindi districts. The most damaging was the raging inferno that destroyed a large portion of the centuries-old chilghoza forests and olive trees in the Koh-i-Sulaiman range straddling the KP-Balochistan border. The fire also claimed lives in the Sherani district of Balochistan.

In this context, the announcement earlier this week by the climate change ministry to establish SOPs to control forest fires and suggest ways to prevent them is a welcome one. Reportedly, under the new guidelines, the provincial departments concerned had been put on alert in 'high-risk zones'. The SOPs suggest attributing 'disaster' status to forest fires to get an immediate response from national and provincial disaster management bodies. Moreover, it has also been suggested that the relevant authorities establish watch towers, create fire ditches and set up localised control rooms across all forest zones. The SOPs encourage the involvement of local communities in preventing fires and in rescue efforts, besides alerting nearby schools and mosques to share relevant announcements or aid the firefighting and rescue efforts. Though the remit of the climate change ministry is restricted to areas under federal control, it hopes to play a larger role in coordinating "climate-related actions" through its Climate Change Task Force. The authorities should also make an effort to spread awareness among the local public so that volunteers do not resort to using tree branches to put out large blazes, which are as dangerous as some other conventional practices that have accidentally sparked fires in places. It would be good if the relevant authorities translate the SOPs into local languages and disseminate them among the public so that they too may use the recommended means to save themselves and their properties from damage.

Published in Dawn, June 11th, 2022

K-IV progress

AFTER several delays and unfulfilled promises, the K-IV water project — designed to deliver an extra 260 million gallons of water per day to Karachi in phase-1 — has finally gotten off the ground. Formally launched in 2011, and on the drawing board for many years before that, Wapda on Thursday awarded contracts for the first phase of the scheme, which will hopefully be completed by October next year. The K-IV project in particular, and infrastructure schemes for Karachi in general, have long been neglected by the federal and provincial governments. In the meantime, residents of the metropolis have struggled to find water to drink, bathe with and use for household chores. According to estimates, the city needs around 1,100MGD; it receives around half of that volume as the rest is pilfered, or lost in transmission. And while the rich can afford tankers, it is the poor living in urban slums who have to suffer the most, spending a high percentage of their meagre incomes buying water. In this context, progress on the K-IV scheme should ease the water woes of the metropolis somewhat.

While multibillion-rupee projects such as K-IV are of course needed to upgrade Karachi's decrepit water system, more needs to be done by the authorities to prevent theft, and encourage water conservation. It is hardly a secret that while law-abiding citizens who pay their bills are deprived of water from the mains, the 'tanker mafia' has ample access to the precious resource. Of course, such criminal elements that steal water cannot function without help from those within state departments. Therefore, the government needs to crack down on all those who steal water and sell it for unholy profits, as well as those who aid and abet them. Moreover, water scarcity is a nationwide concern, and there are valid questions about where the extra water for Karachi will come from. The state, then, must encourage conservation of water and penalise those who waste it, while also replacing the leaky infrastructure that adds to the losses.

Published in Dawn, June 11th, 2022

After the budget

the inflationary budget for FY23 focuses on two things: a) fiscal consolidation to save the economy, and b) protection of underprivileged and vulnerable populations against the adverse impacts of the austerity policies being executed for reviving the IMF funding programme.

Speaking at the post-budget news conference yesterday, he recounted the measures proposed in the budget for stabilising the economy and shielding poor to middle-income segments from the consistently rising inflation caused by surging fuel prices.

Indeed, the budget is a mix of austerity but inflationary measures necessary to meet IMF conditions for the restoration of its suspended funding to support the country's deteriorating balance-of-payments position, and tax relief and goodies for almost everyone — students, civil servants, filmmakers, farmers, industry, etc. It also attempts to raise tax revenues, mostly through directly taxing affluent persons and landholdings of the rich.

In reconciling IMF-mandated policies with populist measures, the government has, however, set some difficult macro targets for itself. For example, the budget plans to grow the economy by 5pc and hold down annual average headline inflation to 11.5pc. How? Independent estimates project the growth rate to fall to 3pc to 4pc from this year's nearly 6pc and inflation to shoot up to 20pc from 11.7pc on the back of projected reduction in energy subsidies and tax recoveries. Likewise, its revenue collection and expenditure plan aiming to produce a primary balance surplus of 0.2pc of GDP from the present deficit of 0.7pc also appears unrealistic.

Mr Ismail's reluctance to address questions regarding the surprising exclusion of expected IMF flows in budget estimates strengthens the impression that the global lender must have its reservations over the projected macro numbers in the budget. Even if that is not the case, the failure to collect the projected revenues in the first few months for one reason or another may land Pakistan in trouble with the Fund once again, with the lender demanding more fiscal measures mid-year, or earlier, to cover the shortfall.

The possibility of this appears high given that the budget assumes that international oil and commodity prices will drop in the coming months and the political challenge thrown by Imran Khan's PTI to the ruling coalition will fizzle out soon. What if the opposition is able to bring the inflation-stricken people on to the

roads or the global commodity super cycle does not relent? In either case, chances of a review of the budget cannot be ruled out in the next three to six months. There's no doubt that it is a tough job for a government facing the prospect of default on its debt payments unless it arranges foreign flows soon — much before the next elections in 2023. But the rulers will have only themselves to blame if they set impractical goals that they are unable to deliver on.

Published in Dawn, June 12th, 2022

Cricket power show

THE first win was nerve-jangling, the second emphatic. For 14 years, Multan had missed out on international cricket but when it finally returned this week, the Pakistan team made sure it didn't disappoint the crowds that had braved the heat to watch their stars in action. Babar Azam's men wrapped up a second straight One-Day International series triumph with a game to spare against the West Indies. The opening game was a thriller with Khushdil Shah's power-hitting efforts taking Pakistan to a five-wicket victory in the final over. Mohammad Nawaz, who hit the winning six in the first ODI, was the star of the show in the second game as he weaved a web of spin over the West Indies to wrap up a 120-run victory. It would be unfair to discount the contributions of batting mainstay Babar and opener Imam-ul-Haq. The captain became the first batter to make centuries in three successive ODIs twice, with his ton in the first match. Babar missed out on becoming only the second batter to make four centuries on the trot by 23 runs in the second. Imam made half-centuries in both matches. The victories are also crucial as the series offers points in the ICC's ODI Super League, a qualification cycle for next year's World Cup.

Although the series only came to Multan after being postponed in Karachi and shifted from Rawalpindi, fans rejoiced in the city's first international match since Pakistan played Bangladesh in 2008. Since the resumption of international cricket in the country, the city of saints became the fourth staging venue after Lahore, Karachi and Rawalpindi. It was played at a time of year when Multan sees stifling temperatures. It wasn't ideal but ice vests and water breaks helped. The PCB should work on reviving other venues which have staged international matches previously. Not only would that burnish Pakistan's credentials as an

international cricket host, it would also allow the national team to make that much-needed connection with cricket fans across the country.

Published in Dawn, June 12th, 2022

Afghan visa policy

PAKISTAN has been a destination of ‘choice’ for millions of Afghans fleeing their strife-torn homeland for the past four decades and counting — in fact, in many cases, this is the only country they can escape to safely. While the initial exodus was sparked by the Soviet invasion, this trend has continued with the Taliban takeover of Kabul last year, creating fresh challenges for this country. Along with fears of Taliban reprisals — especially for those Afghans that worked for the former government, or aided US forces and their foreign allies — Afghanistan’s dire economic situation is also fuelling a refugee crisis, as people look for safer, more economically sound countries to settle in. However, Pakistan, facing an economic crisis of its own, is not in a position to host a large number of refugees and asylum seekers. As per the latest UN figures 1.3m Afghans are residing in this country, while over 300,000 have fled their native land for Pakistan since the fall of Kabul. There have been protests by Afghan nationals in Islamabad calling for their speedy resettlement in developed states. In this regard, the government’s decision to introduce a new visa policy should address most of the issues regarding the smooth settlement of Afghans in third countries.

According to details of the new policy reported in this paper, a transit visa of 30 days would be issued to Afghans within 24 hours in order to smoothen the process of onward travel and settlement in third countries. While this is a welcome move, the visa duration could be extended from 30 days to six months in order to allow time for the processing of paperwork. The fact is that this is literally a matter of life and death for many Afghans. Along with those associated with the former government, journalists, artists and civil society activists have also fled Afghanistan, fearing the wrath of the Taliban. Therefore, if Western states are willing to take in these asylum seekers, Pakistan should help facilitate the process as much as possible. This country, as mentioned above, has played

a major part in hosting Afghan refugees for decades. Now, when socioeconomic factors make it difficult to provide long-term shelter to vulnerable Afghans, Pakistan and the developed states must work together to ensure that those fleeing Taliban persecution have safe havens to go to, and bureaucratic hurdles standing in the way of their resettlement are minimised.

Published in Dawn, June 12th, 2022

Wages of hate

THE controversy sparked by the vile, hurtful comments made about the Holy Prophet (PBUH) by a BJP leader refuses to die down, with the Indian state cracking down on protesters with immense brutality.

Two protesters died when police opened fire on unarmed demonstrators in the eastern city of Ranchi on Friday, as protests against the sacrilegious remarks, and the BJP government's insensitive handling of the matter, have spread to many parts of India. As per media reports, hundreds of protesters have been rounded up by police while disturbing videos have emerged of law enforcers torturing demonstrators in custody.

Rallies against the offensive remarks have been held in various Muslim countries, including Pakistan, but the response of the Indian state towards its own Muslim citizens exercising their fundamental right to protest has been marked by ruthlessness. One particularly shocking episode occurred in Allahabad, where police detained the mother, sister and father of student activist Afreen Fatima and surrounded her house to force her to surrender.

Instead of soothing the anger of its Muslim citizens and trying to heal the wounds of division, the Indian state has unleashed the brute force of the law to beat them into submission. Suffice to say, the BJP is heading into very dangerous territory with this ham-fisted approach.

While under Narendra Modi's rule India's Muslims have been systematically marginalised through discriminatory laws, the targeting of Islam's most sacred symbols by a member of the ruling party has crossed a red line.

In this regard Foreign Minister Bilawal-Bhutto Zardari has rightly asked the UN not to remain silent on the sensitive issue, while the Foreign Office has also slammed the “indiscriminate and widespread” use of brute force against protesters. The Muslim world in particular needs to speak with one voice, especially the energy-rich Middle Eastern states that India is worried about alienating. Through the OIC a strong message must be sent stating that Islamic sacred symbols must be respected, and that vicious treatment of Indian Muslims will not be tolerated. Moreover, India’s Western friends must also tell the ‘world’s largest democracy’ that it cannot deal with its Muslim citizens in such a violent manner.

The sad fact is that the monster of Hindutva has been eating away at the innards of Indian secularism for decades. India’s hard right has never accepted its Muslim citizens, viewing them as eternal ‘outsiders’, spiritual heirs of foreign invaders polluting the ‘pure’ character of the Hindu rashtra.

However, while the Sangh Parivar’s criticism of Muslim emperors and warriors of old was tolerated, the targeting of Islam’s sacred figures by spokespersons of the ruling party just to please its rabid vote bank was a step too far. The Indian state needs to take immediate steps to end the crackdown on Muslims, and rein in the hateful forces trying their best to ignite the fires of communalism.

Published in Dawn, June 13th, 2022

Right to know

IT is encouraging to note that the PPP is now pushing for greater engagement of public representatives in ongoing negotiations with the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan. Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari recently tweeted that he will be reaching out to allied parties currently in the coalition government to form a consensus on the way forward and that his party believes all decisions on talks with the TTP to thrash out a peace deal should be taken in parliament. The people of Pakistan deserve at least that. The Pakistani state and both the incumbent and recently ousted governments have been incredibly opaque on the matter thus far. Despite months of talks, we still know only the broad contours of the discussions taking place. There is a concern in some quarters that negotiators may be making too many concessions to the TTP, for too little in

return. Pakistan has reportedly already released many captive foot soldiers and a few high-ranking militants to keep the talks going, even though the UN Security Council has warned that the prospects for actual peace being attained are very weak. There is also a lack of clarity on how far the negotiators will accede to the TTP's reported demands for unchallenged autonomy and a parallel legal system in north-western parts of Pakistan's sovereign territory.

For the Pakistani people to not have been made a party to these talks is a grave injustice. The TTP's fight was never directed solely against the government or security forces, that they may now decide the matter amongst themselves. The people of Pakistan paid in life, limb and livelihood for the nearly two-decade war against these rogue outfits and their twisted ideologies. At the very least, they deserve an explanation for why the need for a peace deal is being felt now, what good it will accomplish and how the TTP will be made to make amends for the many grievous injuries and injustices it caused our people. For this reason, a parliamentary debate is important. Retired Gen Raheel Sharif's appointment to head a Saudi-led counterterrorism coalition in 2017 had been a similarly sensitive and contentious issue, but discussion on the matter in parliament had at least given public representatives a chance to have their say on the matter. This is a far more serious matter, and the country will be well-served if there is an honest public debate to chart a path forward.

Published in Dawn, June 13th, 2022

Refusing post-mortems

WHEN a suspicious death occurs, acceding to the wishes of grieving family members in disallowing the post-mortem of their loves one may appear humane but it does not serve the ends of justice. After well-known televangelist Aamir Liaquat died on Thursday, his family refused to allow an autopsy. Police officials, to their credit, did not acquiesce, and instead, went to the court in an effort to take custody of the body which had been kept in the mortuary. However, the judicial magistrate ordered that the mortal remains be handed over to the family and Aamir Liaquat was buried on Friday, with no one the wiser as to why the 50-year-old who apparently had no serious health problems had breathed his last.

There have been many instances when the legal requirement for autopsies is treated as a matter of choice for the family of the deceased. Under Section 174 of the CrPc, when “there is any doubt regarding the cause of death,” as well as in certain other circumstances, the police officer “shall” send the body for a post-mortem. However, the relevant courts can and do, allow families of the dead to refuse the procedure. Meanwhile, police officials and its forensics team on the day of the televangelist’s death had reportedly collected evidence from his residence, but in the absence of an autopsy, it may not be enough to arrive at a conclusive cause of death. The rumours, one may be sure, will continue to proliferate. Treating post-mortems as a matter of choice rather than a mandatory requirement can also benefit the accused in cases of confirmed foul play. The body of the deceased can be a valuable repository of evidence that can hold up in court. The killers of Maulana Samiul Haq have never been found; the JUI-S leader’s family refused an autopsy citing religious reasons. The most high-profile case of this kind was of course that of Benazir Bhutto, whose murder in 2007 remains a subject of speculation to this day.

Published in Dawn, June 13th, 2022

Budget blame

THE bickering started before the weekend was out. While economists, analysts and experts were poring over the budget documents to make sense of the implications of the government’s proposals for the common citizen, our politicians seemed to have spent more time sharpening their tongues.

Not unexpectedly, the PTI and PML-N began sparring over the budget soon after its unveiling, and their attacks against each other will likely set the tone for the coming weeks, raising political tensions and adding to domestic instability.

Consider a recent debate on who took on more debt during their time in power. Responding to criticism over the size of Pakistan’s public debt, former finance minister Shaukat Tarin on Saturday asserted that it grew by ‘only’ 76pc during the PTI’s tenure, not the 80pc as claimed by the new government. This prompted scorn from the PML-N, with the information minister responding with the misleading claim that the PTI had ‘confessed’ to taking on 76pc as much debt as all other rulers of the country put together.

This, in turn, invited another riposte, this time from former information minister Fawad Chaudhry, who claimed that most of the debt taken on was only to retire old loans taken by past governments. In the back and forth, both parties pushed their own line on the matter, which seemed quite at odds with economic realities past and present.

Neither was willing to acknowledge that the other faced situations of considerable adversity — one, the Covid-19 pandemic and the other, the Russia-Ukraine conflict — and had to make difficult decisions to adapt. And neither party was forthcoming about any ideas they may have about how bad decisions may be salvaged.

There is a view that crises offer opportunities for large-scale changes in society. However, the intellectual dishonesty apparent in the allegations and counter-allegations traded in the aftermath of the budget presentation is a blunt reminder that we perhaps should not be expecting much to change.

There is arguably much left to be desired in the budget, drawn up as it was under certain conditions set by the IMF, and in the midst of an economic storm that would give any political party sleepless nights. However hard it tries to appease everyone, it leaves a lot of serious questions unanswered. Even the finance minister, when cross-questioned over the weekend by journalists regarding some glaring discrepancies in his fiscal plans, did not seem too sure that the budget would stay as it is in the coming weeks or months.

This situation is far from ideal, as it indicates that the government's plans are not firm. Now is no time to be uncertain; yet, instead of holding serious discussions on how to make the best of the economic situation, our politicians are playing the blame game instead.

Published in Dawn, June 14th, 2022

Taiwan tensions

A TENSE exchange of rhetoric between the Chinese defence minister and the US defence secretary over Taiwan at a recent security conference in Singapore reveals that the self-ruled island that Beijing claims as its inalienable part may become a major source of conflict unless rational minds prevail. Referring to

military flights, the senior US official told the gathering that China's activities near Taiwan were "provocative and destabilising". Meanwhile, his Chinese counterpart remarked that the People's Republic would not "hesitate to start a war" if Taiwan declared independence, while adding later that it would be a "fight to the very end". It would be easy to brush aside the remarks of both gentlemen as emotional observations, but as the ongoing Ukraine war has taught us, verbal jousting in the international arena can very much lead to real confrontations on the battlefield. China has been particularly piqued after US President Joe Biden last month told a questioner in Japan that his country would aid Taiwan militarily in case of offensive Chinese action. Though White House spin doctors later stressed the fact that America's policy of "strategic ambiguity" over Taiwan remained, further damage to the already fragile Sino-American relationship had been done.

The fact is that the vast majority of the international community maintains official relations with Beijing and not Taiwan, while tinkering with the 'One China' policy would be inadvisable. Perhaps the best solution to the Beijing-Taipei imbroglio would be the 'One country, two systems' approach China has applied with varying degrees of success in Hong Kong and Macau. However, this is a matter for China and Taiwan to work out between themselves, and foreign states would be best advised to stay away from this delicate matter. Yet if push does come to shove over the Taiwan issue — with the US considering China its number one strategic competitor, and the latter country willing to use force to prevent Taiwanese independence — the world will again be called to take sides, just as in the case of the Ukraine conflict. This will be a considerable foreign policy challenge for Pakistan. This country maintains deep political, economic and strategic relations with China, and while relations with the US have been chequered, they cannot be termed adversarial, and it will not be in Pakistan's interest to have strained ties with Washington. Ultimately, it is hoped diplomacy prevents a Sino-American flare-up over Taiwan, yet the world must prepare for a bumpy ride if things get ugly.

Published in Dawn, June 14th, 2022

Children in chains

IT is deeply unfortunate that the state continues to not just ignore but further jeopardise the future of its youth, and by extension its own, through its persistent apathy towards children. Its inaction is particularly to be condemned in the matter of children employed in hazardous occupations — including those made to serve as bonded labour. According to a survey conducted by the Hari Welfare Association, out of the 1.7m people engaged in bonded labour in Sindh, nearly 700,000 are children, mostly in the farm sector. The figure may appear shocking — and, indeed, it would be considered so by any civilised nation. As per some estimates, Pakistan has the third-highest number of bonded labourers globally after Mauritania and Haiti. However, in the context of child labour in the country, perhaps this reprehensible fact is not very surprising. Bonded labour is a deep-rooted practice in feudalism, and one that the state does not care to counter. In fact, child labour is deeply entrenched in practically all occupations. Often it is invisible — for instance, around 12m children work as domestic labour across the country, be it in the house of a government official, a businessman or a salaried person. Many have been maltreated by their employers, sometimes to the point of death, but unless civil society raises its voice, the cases usually go unreported.

The sight of children working on the streets, in restaurants and in auto repair shops, in the fisheries, etc, is more evident, especially in cities like Karachi. This is so despite the fact that there are laws to curb this despicable practice. As poverty in the country grows, it is likely that more families will send their children to work instead of school — where their numbers are already abysmal. Unfortunately, Pakistan's children have never been on the priority list of governments; there may be laws and constitutional pledges regarding their welfare, but it is unlikely that the authorities will ever see children as the future of the country.

Published in Dawn, June 14th, 2022

Punjab chaos

FOR over two and half months, the ongoing free-for-all in Punjab between the PML-N ruling coalition and the PTI-PML-Q alliance has been causing one constitutional crisis after another. But the way Punjab Assembly Speaker Chaudhry Parvez Elahi has used his office to stall the presentation of the provincial budget for the next fiscal year takes the cake.

The move has further diminished signs of an early resolution of the crisis in Pakistan's most populous province. It shows that the PTI-PML-Q opposition is ready to go to all lengths to bring down the present set-up and recapture power in Punjab to force early elections, no matter what the cost to the economy or people.

It is possible that the political crisis might worsen in the days ahead, unless the PML-N and its coalition partners manage to muster a simple majority of 186 members in the House in next month's by-elections on 20 provincial seats in order to remove Mr Elahi from office.

The current crisis in Punjab has its roots in the successful ouster of Imran Khan as prime minister through a no-confidence vote in April, in spite of every stratagem employed by the then government to avert a defeat. The removal of the PTI government at the centre was followed by the election of Hamza Shehbaz as Punjab chief minister but only after much chaos, legal battles and violence in the provincial assembly triggered by PTI and PML-Q lawmakers, apparently on the directions of the speaker, who himself was a candidate for the top job.

The election didn't end the political turmoil in the province as the previous PTI governor refused to administer the oath to Hamza Shehbaz, saying that the election was invalid. Even after the National Assembly speaker swore in the Sharif scion after two weeks, he was unable to constitute his cabinet until the president, after weeks of dilly-dallying, allowed the appointment of a new governor on the PM's advice.

Needless to say, the entire provincial administration remained paralysed for nearly two months, delaying important decisions.

As if that were not enough, once again the opposition alliance is leading the province to chaos by stalling the presentation of the budget.

That the speaker put off the budget on Monday and did not start the proceedings the next day despite the government's commitment to withdraw cases registered against PTI and PML-Q workers and parliamentarians over the recent long march and violence in the assembly on April 16 is an indication of possibly mala fide intentions. The opposition's controversial demand that the province's IGP and chief secretary apologise (for carrying out their duties on the orders of the

high court, in fact) before the speaker allows the government to present its budget is untenable and will only demoralise the bureaucracy. The opposition needs to realise that such unconstitutional actions will return to haunt them.

Published in Dawn, June 15th, 2022

Reset in ties

THE posting of a new American ambassador in Islamabad after a gap of nearly four years presents a fresh opportunity for the resetting of Pakistan-US ties after a period of considerable turbulence. Bilateral relations throughout the former PTI government's tenure were colder than usual, while Imran Khan's claims that his administration was ousted by a US-backed 'conspiracy' — later clarified by the National Security Committee — marked a nadir in ties. However, as Ambassador David Blome told this paper, Washington wants to move on and "keep engaging across all levels of Pakistani society". Of course, resetting ties will not be easy, but as long as there is an intention on both sides to improve relations in a spirit of mutual respect, progress can be made.

There were already signs that Washington wanted to improve ties with Islamabad after the departure of the PTI government. In this regard, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in New York last month was seen as a major ice-breaker. Moving forward, relations need to be mutually beneficial, and not merely transactional as has been the case over the last several decades. For example, while Mr Blome told this paper that the US seeks a "sustained" partnership with Pakistan on "counterterrorism"; this should not translate to simply using Pakistan as an over-the-horizon staging post to manage Afghanistan. It is in Pakistan's own interest to fight terrorism and ensure Afghanistan does not become a base for global militancy, but the Pakistan-US relationship needs to be developed along deeper lines. Ideally, ties should prioritise economic, trade, development and people-to-people linkages. Moreover, the world is once more becoming a very polarised place, and developing states like Pakistan are again being asked if they are 'with us or against us'. Simply put, Pakistan cannot afford to take part in bloc politics, and should pursue a progressive foreign policy of neutrality and friendship with all like-minded states. The Pakistan-US relationship must indeed be rebuilt and deep linkages can be forged in multiple sectors. But the US should not expect

Pakistan to follow its orders where maintaining or breaking relations with America's foes — China, Iran, Russia etc — are concerned. There is much potential in bilateral ties between Islamabad and Washington, as long as Pakistan's sovereignty is respected, and this country does not receive dictation about who it can and cannot befriend in the international arena.

Published in Dawn, June 15th, 2022

Journalist's disappearance

THAT journalist Nafees Naeem's abduction was a brief one does not dilute the gravity of the crime committed against him. The senior assignment editor of Aaj TV channel was reportedly picked up on Monday afternoon near his Karachi residence by men in plainclothes travelling in a Vigo, a pattern repeated in so many cases of enforced disappearance that it has become a trope. Mr Naeem thankfully returned home safely in the early hours of Tuesday. Relief at this denouement should be accompanied by anger that he and his family had to suffer the ordeal at all and that journalists have once again been conveyed a sinister warning about how easily their fundamental rights can be violated — presumably if they do not 'toe the line'.

When it took up the reins of power, the PML-N-led coalition announced it was shutting down any nascent attempts made by the ousted PTI government to establish a single media regulatory body under a draconian law. Imran Khan's government was perhaps the most hostile to press freedom of all civilian set-ups in the country's history: journalists were harassed, physically attacked and disappeared, while several lost their jobs because pressure was applied on the media houses that employed them to cut them loose. Even when video evidence was available aplenty, such as in the cases of Matiullah Jan and Asad Ali Toor in Islamabad, no action was taken to even identify the perpetrators, let alone prosecute them. The findings in the Freedom Network's latest annual report indicate that the state and its functionaries rank as the "biggest threat actor" targeting media in Pakistan. Another significant finding by the independent media and civil liberties watchdog is that the nation's capital is "the riskiest and most dangerous place to practise journalism". The coalition government must ensure that journalists can do their work not having to look over their shoulder constantly. There is also the media protection law, ironically brought in by the PTI

dispensation. Mr Naeem's abduction presents an ideal opportunity to start implementing it.

Published in Dawn, June 15th, 2022

Storm incoming

THE shockwaves of a monetary policy decision taken yesterday halfway around the world will soon rumble through our economy. In its Wednesday announcement, the US Federal Reserve — the US equivalent of our State Bank — hiked its policy rate by a whopping 75 basis points in an attempt to cool down inflation, which exceeded expectations in the month of May to rise to the highest level in more than 40 years, according to official data shared last Friday.

US stocks have already fallen sharply this year and are now officially in a bear market, while the dollar is on track to touch its highest in the 21st century. Wall Street is now warning that the US economy may be entering a recessionary period as soon as August. The fortunes of the US economy have a significant bearing on the rise and fall of almost all other economies of the world due to the interconnectedness of global trade and financial systems.

Pakistan, with its heavy dependence on foreign capital flows and trade, stands particularly exposed. The fallout of the Fed's decision will be wide on Pakistan's economy. Stocks are likely to take an immediate battering, while the rupee-dollar exchange rate will inevitably slip further. The deterioration of the exchange rate will, in turn, make imports — including fuel and palm oil — even more expensive than they already are.

Higher US interest rates will also hurt foreign portfolio investments in Pakistan, as individuals and corporations will be looking to take advantage of low-risk returns. Similarly, as an economic slowdown — or recession — takes hold, demand for major exports like textiles, leather and sports goods is likely to fall. As the US is Pakistan's biggest trading partner, the impact will be particularly severe on the local economy.

Making export goods will also get more expensive as fuel and electricity costs rise. Remittances are also likely to fall as Pakistanis living overseas are forced to adjust their spending in response to prevailing economic conditions. On the

upside, demand for oil — the main driver of economic activity — and other commodities is likely to gradually contract, resulting in a drawdown in prices.

All of these and many more concerns should be weighing heavy on the minds of the country's economic planners as they head into the new fiscal year. The question that needs to be asked, again, is this: will the budget drawn up by the incumbent government be sufficient for the massive challenges looming ahead? The government's revenue projections depend heavily on customs duties and taxes that rise and fall with economic activity — will it be able to balance the books as these revenue sources dry up? There should be no pretence about where we stand as we head straight into the vortex of a major global storm. The country now needs firm hands at the wheel.

Published in Dawn, June 16th, 2022

KP and Sindh budgets

BOTH Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have announced fiscally expansionary budgets for 2022-23 that allocate massive development funds, continue tax concessions for different sectors given during the pandemic, boost their expenditure on health, education and other public services, allow pay and pension hikes for civil servants, and create thousands of new jobs in the public sector. With the country entering an election year, the provinces were expected to propose such populist initiatives even if they ran counter to the austere fiscal policies being targeted by the federal government to meet the IMF's demands for the revival of its suspended bailout package. With the IMF already unhappy with tax and other relief measures given in the new federal budget, it can't be expected to react kindly to the overgenerous provincial spending targets. The populist streaks of the two budgets notwithstanding, what sets KP apart from Sindh is its focus on governance, public financial management, the health sector and green energy reforms. For instance, the PTI government has become the first province in the country to introduce a 'contributory pension scheme' to check the growing burden of pension payments on its budget, which has already jumped to 14.7pc from less than 1pc in 2004. Given the long-term challenge of militancy it faces, the province has performed much better in the last few years than other units in reforming the management of its finances. It has also improved its public service delivery despite resource constraints.

A look at the two budgets proposed by diametrically different parties, the PPP and PTI, shows that the authors of the documents have made unrealistic estimates of their revenues and expenditures at a time when economic growth is projected to slow down to 3pc to 3.5pc. For example, the Murad Ali Shah government in Sindh is targeting an over 29pc increase in provincial tax revenues to Rs347bn. This is despite the fact that it will bring in around Rs267.9bn or 12pc less provincial taxes against the target of Rs304.9bn for the current fiscal at a time when the economy is anticipated to expand at a much faster pace of 6pc. It's the same case with tax and other income projections in KP. That raises the question: will the two provinces be able to deliver on the promises made in their election budgets? It would have been much better if they had planned their expenditure on the basis of realistic revenue estimates rather than exaggerating them for political mileage.

Published in Dawn, June 16th, 2022

Exotic birds

JOINT action by the Sindh Wildlife Department and Rangers on Sunday that caught a consignment of at least 26 exotic birds near Karachi appears in sync with the government's new policy shift to ban the export of local species of birds and the import of exotic mammals. The birds, which included the Alexandrine parakeet whose population in Pakistan has declined due to widespread hunting, illegal trade and rapid deforestation, were reportedly being transferred from Bahawalpur to Karachi for sale. According to the officials, the birds appeared to have been caught in the wild.

In recent years, the disturbing trend of keeping wild and exotic animals in private zoos and at homes in cages has become quite popular, especially in bigger cities such as Lahore and Karachi. The traders or breeders of such animals can earn millions of rupees from a single purchase. However, as animal rights activists rightly say, keeping these creatures in captivity for personal entertainment is an inhumane and archaic custom that needs to be abolished. The Islamabad High Court also made this point in its July 2020 order in the well-known case of Kaavan, the ailing elephant at the city zoo. The decision by the federal climate change ministry to ban the import of exotic mammals is thus a step in the right direction. Moreover, the ministry reportedly will also not issue any more NOCs to

private owners or for public zoos. The measure could lead to a gradual phasing out of public zoos in the country where deaths of captive animals are a frequent occurrence due to the abhorrent conditions in which they are kept. Taking animals out of their natural habitat and confining them to cages or private residences is against their natural rights as it affects their feeding and mating patterns and exposes them to intentional or unintentional abuse at the hands of their owners. The authorities should ensure strict implementation of the ban while also working to spread awareness about animal rights among the public.

Published in Dawn, June 16th, 2022

Fuel price woes

Citizens who have visited the fuel pump after the government's third late-night surprise must have left with a deep sense of unease thinking about what the days ahead will bring. The large hole just fuel itself is burning in our household budgets is expected to grow as the next fiscal year starts on July 1, when the government's budgetary proposal to stack the petroleum levy and sales tax on top of the per-litre cost of petrol and diesel takes effect. It will be followed by a likely increase in the costs of nearly all other expenses due to higher production and transportation costs.

It is, unfortunately, quite a glum scenario, and one that seems quite unavoidable given global market conditions and the state of our country's finances.

Unless the government can find new streams of revenue to create fiscal space for subsidies, the public will bear the brunt of the inflation.

Citizens can cut some costs immediately on their end by curtailing travel for necessary tasks only, carpooling where possible and using smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles instead of 'gas guzzlers' if the choice is available. At home, lifestyle changes like the conservation of electricity and cutting back on consumption of non-essential, imported goods can help reduce monthly expenses.

Employers must consider work-from-home arrangements where possible to help employees save on commuting costs.

This should also be a strong wake-up call for policymakers, who need to devise more well-thought-out strategies to enable the citizenry to switch to cheaper sources of fuel and electricity. Promotion of technologies to harness solar power is acquiring greater and greater importance as people struggle with the soaring costs of electricity.

The government has cut sales tax on panels in a bid to encourage adoption of solar power, but more should be done. Likewise, there needs to be a greater effort to push the automobile industry to produce vehicles that prioritise fuel efficiency.

Ownership of electric vehicles should be incentivised to encourage people to make the switch to greener vehicles that cost far less to run than those that run on petroleum products. There should be incentives for Pakistani engineers and entrepreneurs who wish to set up ventures that can help indigenise both renewable energy technologies and electric vehicle manufacturing. It is better for our future to make solar panels and electric cars than tanks, bombs and bullets.

Finally, both the government and the PTI would do well to read the room. Pointing fingers will only worsen domestic instability and will not give the public any relief from economic misery. A joint effort is needed to bring the nation together for this latest challenge. With unity of purpose and national will, there is no crisis that cannot be weathered. Pakistan is resilient. This, too, shall pass.

Published in Dawn, June 17th, 2022

FM's Iran visit

THOUGH there is great potential in the Pakistan-Iran relationship, geopolitical complications, particularly since the events of 1979, have prevented ties from maturing to a higher level. However, if there is sustained commitment from both sides to improve relations, the present positive rhetoric can be translated into more robust political and economic ties. Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, during his recent two-day trip to Iran, renewed Pakistan's commitment to improving ties with Tehran, as he met his counterpart as well as the Iranian

president. As Mr Bhutto-Zardari told the media, building “close relations” with Iran was a “high priority” for the prime minister as well as himself. Discussions in Tehran revolved around trade, investment, facilitating pilgrims as well as cultural and educational exchanges. Barter trade, border markets and import of electricity from Iran were specifically discussed.

But before ties can move beyond pleasantries, the irritants standing in the way of improved relations need to be frankly discussed and resolved at the diplomatic level. Iran’s closeness to India, and Pakistan’s warm relations with Saudi Arabia, are obstacles that prevent further cementing of bilateral ties. Still, these impediments can be overcome, as long as both sides commit to the principle that they will not let good relations with each other’s perceived foes stand in the way of better bilateral ties. Moreover, non-state actors active in both countries often stage cross-border attacks, particularly in far-flung areas. There must be a commitment, therefore, not to allow each country’s soil to be used against the other, while greater collaboration between both nations’ security agencies can minimise the damage militants can do to ties. And in these times of spiralling energy prices, Pakistan should make all-out efforts to purchase Iranian oil and gas at competitive rates. While Iran has completed its side of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, Pakistan has yet to complete work on its end. The foreign minister mentioned the project during his Iran visit. Of course, the major stumbling block in importing Iranian oil and gas is US sanctions. That is one of the major reasons work on the pipeline remains stalled. However, Pakistan needs to secure waivers from the US, just as Washington has not stopped India from importing Russian oil despite sanctions. If the sanctions can be overcome, Pakistan can also ramp up exports to Iran, particularly of rice and agricultural products. Improved trade — and mutual trust — can be the keys to better bilateral ties.

Published in Dawn, June 17th, 2022

Punjab budget, finally

PUNJAB is where the battle for power will be fought between the PML-N-led ruling coalition and the opposition PTI, not only in the next elections, but also during the crucial by-polls on 20 provincial seats, which will be held on July 17. With the future of the fledgling Hamza Shehbaz set-up in Punjab and the timing of the next general elections heavily dependent on who — the coalition or PTI —

secures a simple majority of 186 members in the provincial assembly after the by-polls, it was but natural for the ruling alliance to woo voters by proposing a massive development stimulus of Rs685bn, and setting aside Rs392bn for subsidies and relief to poor to middle-class households in its Rs3.22tr budget. That Speaker Parvez Elahi used his office to block the presentation of the budget in the House for two days, and that the government then took away his powers to call or prorogue the session and gave them to the law and parliamentary affairs department, shows how low the two adversaries are willing to stoop in their scramble for power.

Meanwhile, the budget documents show that the new government of Chief Minister Hamza Shehbaz has based its expenditure and revenue estimates for the next year on certain assumptions: the economy will grow by 5pc, the FBR will collect the targeted tax revenue of Rs7tr and inflation will remain at 11.5pc. If things move according to the script written by the federal government, Punjab shouldn't find it hard to pull off its large tax and non-tax revenue targets of Rs2.52tr, including federal transfers of Rs2.02tr, and finance its huge development programme and the massively increased current expenditure of 1.71tr. But the constrained fiscal environment, external sector vulnerabilities and elevated global oil and food prices mean that these macro targets will be missed by a long margin, forcing Punjab and other provinces to drastically revise down their exaggerated preliminary revenue and spending estimates. That review will not come without significant political costs for the PML-N in its stronghold of Punjab.

Published in Dawn, June 17th, 2022

Some good news

THAT Pakistan has finally got the assurance of an on-site visit from the FATF to verify the “implementation and sustainability of the country’s money-laundering and counterterrorism financing measures” before it is formally removed from the task force’s increased monitoring (grey) list, is the best outcome we could have hoped for from the current review.

It means that Pakistan should be removed from the grey list in October once the on-site inspection is conducted.

In its recent Berlin plenary, the global money-laundering and terrorist-financing watchdog has made its initial determination that Pakistan has substantially completed two action plans, complying with all 34 items, noting that this showed that the “necessary political commitment remains in place to sustain implementation and improvement in the future”.

According to the watchdog: “Pakistan demonstrated that terror-financing investigations and prosecutions target senior leaders and commanders of UN-designated terrorist groups and that there is a positive upwards trend in the number of money-laundering investigations and prosecutions being pursued in Pakistan... .”

This assessment of Pakistan’s efforts to exit the grey list is primarily based on the extensive work done by the previous PTI government to simultaneously complete two challenging action plans given to it for compliance to avoid being blacklisted.

Yet it will be unfair to not give credit to the coalition government for using diplomatic channels to help the country exit the list. There are reports that China had recently been working quietly to help Islamabad on this front.

Many believe that the decision also indicates tacit US support. If true, it means that we are now closer to the restoration of the IMF bailout, even if not there yet. Once formally removed from the list, the country will see its credit rating improve, giving confidence to foreign investors.

That several actions implemented over the last four years wouldn’t have been possible without the military’s consent shows the army has remained supportive of the civilian efforts to exit the list.

Last but not the least, the conviction of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba chief Hafiz Saeed on terrorism-related charges must also have strengthened Pakistan’s case.

No matter how encouraging it is, Pakistan’s success in meeting FATF’s anti-money-laundering and antiterrorist-financing standards in an exceptionally short time frame, despite the efforts of certain foreign powers to get the country blacklisted, should not make the authorities complacent as had been the case previously.

We have been on the grey list thrice since 2008. Being downgraded to that list again would do irreparable damage to the economy and international trade. It is, therefore, hoped that the nation's civilian and military leadership will continue to show the highest level of political commitment to address the leftover deficiencies in the country's AML/CFT regime, and carry on the good work to update and strengthen the relevant laws, regulations and procedures in the months and years to come.

Published in Dawn, June 18th, 2022

NA-240 violence

THE ugly scenes witnessed in Karachi's NA-240 constituency during Thursday's by-poll are a reminder of the political violence that regularly rocked the metropolis in the not-too-distant past. Unfortunately, they may also be a harbinger of things to come unless the administration and political parties commit to ensuring a violence-free electoral exercise. At least one person was reported killed as supporters of various political parties — primarily MQM-P, PSP and TLP — clashed on polling day. One showdown in Landhi was particularly disturbing, as rival partymen traded heavy fire, terrorising citizens. The convoys of PSP leader Anis Kaimkhani and TLP supremo Saad Rizvi came under fire in separate incidents. Among the triggers of the violence were reports of mischief inside the polling stations, with footage emerging of an alleged MQM-P worker stealing election material. What is of major concern is that law enforcers, including police and Rangers, largely watched as spectators while political rivals used deadly force against each other.

As per the unofficial results, the MQM-P candidate seems to have captured the seat, though by a razor-thin majority, while the TLP candidate has come in a close second. Considering the allegations of rigging, and the close margin of victory, the calls for a recount are justified. Moreover, the fact that the TLP performed well at the ballot box indicates that the party once known for its violent shows of strength is becoming a significant player in electoral politics. In the last elections, the religiously motivated party returned candidates to the Sindh Assembly, and it may soon have lawmakers sitting in the National Assembly. However, significant questions remain unanswered — primarily, will the party shun its violent rhetoric of the past? The NA-240 episode should raise concerns

about the ECP's and the administration's ability to conduct polls peacefully. Considering the fact that 20 by-polls for Punjab Assembly seats vacated by de-seated lawmakers are due next month, is the state ready for this major electoral exercise? After all, the scenes witnessed in Punjab between the PML-N and PTI-PML-Q combine do not inspire confidence. In such circumstances, the administration, especially the ECP and law enforcers, and political parties have a major responsibility to guarantee peaceful polls. The ECP must ensure there is no room for electoral malpractices, while political parties need to clearly instruct their cadres to shun violence as it is the right of the voters to choose their elected representatives in an atmosphere free from violence and pressure.

Published in Dawn, June 18th, 2022

Lights out

THE Sindh government yesterday became the first provincial administration to enforce the early closure of markets in a bid to conserve electricity. According to a notification issued by the province's home secretary, all markets have been told to shut shop by 9pm. Likewise, eateries have been told to lock up by 11pm, while marriage halls have been told to conclude events before 10.30pm. Medical stores, pharmacies, hospitals, petrol pumps, CNG stations, bakeries and milk shops will remain exempt from the restriction, which will hold for a 30-day period. The strategy, first implemented as a precautionary measure to curb the spread of coronavirus when the pandemic was in full swing, will now be used to divert more electricity to household consumers, who have been suffering extended hours of loadshedding in oppressive heat and humidity. Other provinces are also deliberating similar moves and are expected to take their decisions on the matter soon.

It is a less-than-ideal solution to Pakistan's energy shortfall, but it will count. It is clear that the country urgently needs to rationalise energy consumption. The electricity generation shortfall needs to be managed by controlling demand so that more resources can be diverted for public needs. The move should not be resisted by traders just for the sake of it. The timings notified by the Sindh

government seem to be quite accommodative of their interests: the time set for closure is generally followed as a norm in most traditional markets of the city. There is no doubt that commercial activities will take a hit of some magnitude, but sacrifices need to be made in these trying times. Traders should also be asked why they open markets in the afternoon, as has become the norm, instead of earlier in the morning. It is a wasteful practice, and this culture needs to change permanently, regardless of whether there is a shortfall or not. The cavalier wastage of national resources does not behove the people of a country stumbling from one shortage to another.

Published in Dawn, June 18th, 2022

Uncertainty in Punjab

WHILE a healthy amount of rain in Lahore and other Punjab cities during the last couple of days broke the unprecedented heatwave that had been enveloping the province for the past several weeks, political temperatures keep surging. With the ongoing crisis showing no signs of abating, more legal and constitutional complications are emerging by the day as the fledgling Hamza Shehbaz government struggles to find its footing in uncertain conditions.

A report in this newspaper yesterday raised doubts over the legal status of the ordinance issued by the Punjab governor because it was promulgated when the provincial assembly was still in session. The ordinance took away the speaker's powers to call or prorogue a session, and placed the assembly under the law secretary. It was issued after Speaker Chaudhry Parvez Elahi, driven by political rivalry, stalled the presentation of next year's budget for two consecutive days, putting the government in a spot. If the opposition PTI and PML-Q challenge it in court — as they are planning to do — and if it is found to not have the law's backing, the ordinance's cancellation could invalidate all actions including the summoning of a new session by the law secretary and the budget's presentation and passage under it, creating yet another crisis. That the law secretary had started using his new powers as 'custodian of the House' even before the ordinance's promulgation was notified makes legal matters for the government

worse. Meanwhile, the PML-N-led ruling coalition and the PTI-PML-Q combine are conducting separate sessions, with little clarity as to which one is according to the law.

That the opposition has made the country's political heartland, Punjab, the centre of its war with the ruling coalition, which came to power after ousting Imran Khan through a vote of no-confidence in April, is understandable. Political control of Pakistan's most populous province is crucial for both rivals for deciding the timing of the next general elections and winning them. No wonder the opposition is using every trick up its sleeve to frustrate the ruling coalition, pressuring it into making mistakes. The presentation of next year's budget was a major challenge for the Hamza Shehbaz government and the speaker used every ruse to prevent the finance minister to make his budget speech. The political fortunes of both sides in the province depend on the outcome of the July 17 by-elections on 20 provincial seats across the province as the results will determine which side holds a simple majority of 186 members in the full House. The opposition must win at least 15 seats to recapture power in the province from the PML-N and its partners. If it fails to muster the required numbers, it will likely keep looking for ways and means to create political instability and make it difficult for the coalition to focus on governing effectively.

Published in Dawn, June 19th, 2022

Minister's allegations

WHEN high-stakes political interests are involved, then a multimillion pound secret is unlikely to remain under wraps for long. So it has proved in the case of the £190m settlement that the UK-based National Crime Agency arrived at in December 2019 with property tycoon and owner of Bahria Town Ltd Malik Riaz, details of which were contained in a non-disclosure agreement (NDA).

At a presser on Tuesday, Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah spilled the beans on the NDA. Further, he accused former prime minister Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi of accepting Rs5bn and huge tracts of land from Bahria to "provide protection" to the real estate firm in the money laundering case.

As a result of efforts by Shahzad Akbar, the then PM's aide on accountability and allegedly tasked by Mr Khan to resolve the matter, the NDA that was arrived at in

the UK provided for the humongous amount to be adjusted against Mr Riaz's civil liability in Pakistan. (The latter refers to Bahria's offer of Rs460bn, accepted by the Supreme Court in March 2019, to settle the case pertaining to the firm's illegal acquisition of land in Karachi.)

According to the interior minister, a parallel agreement was also executed closer to home whereby land measuring 458 kanals with an official value of Rs530m was transferred to a trust owned by the ousted premier and his spouse. Another 240 kanals was, he said, transferred to Farah Shehzadi, reportedly a friend of Bushra Bibi. The federal cabinet has formed a sub-committee to investigate the matter and deal with it according to the law.

The allegations made in the press conference are extremely serious and must of course be probed. The saga of the NCA's settlement with Mr Riaz — specifically how the Pakistani state was seen to go out of its way to ensure a favourable outcome for the well-connected property tycoon — is a sordid one, even without taking the recent 'revelations' into account.

It is mind-boggling how even fundamental requirements of justice were flouted in the process of favouring an individual. Consider that the NDA, brokered by the state, allowed members of his family holding UK bank accounts that had been frozen for containing the suspected 'proceeds of crime', to pay the contents of those accounts "at [their] sole discretion" towards Bahria's existing civil debt. Can one even expect that beyond political vendetta against the ousted prime minister, the present government will seek to right this injustice?

Published in Dawn, June 19th, 2022

Demanding answers

THE authorities cannot continue with their ostrich-like behaviour with regard to enforced disappearances. The matter is too urgent and the violation of fundamental rights too grave for the government to be allowed to get away with its apparent lack of will to do anything to stop it from happening. On Friday, the Islamabad High Court admonished the federal government for not following through on its ruling of May 25 for the recovery of missing persons, and upped the ante by saying it could summon the country's chief executive to demand an explanation. The IHC had directed the PML-N-led government to serve notices

on retired Gen Pervez Musharraf and all successive chief executives for their “undeclared tacit approval of the policy regarding enforced disappearances”. It was incumbent on each of them, said the order, to rebut that view and explain why they should not be charged with high treason. Failing this, the previous and incumbent interior ministers were to appear before the bench, but the court’s ruling fell on deaf ears.

After former Supreme Court chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry several years ago, IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah is perhaps the first member of the bench to have so emphatically tried to get to the bottom of the issue of missing people. He has rightly declared that the buck stops with the government and that all state institutions — some of them repeatedly accused of perpetrating enforced disappearances — are subordinate to it as per the Constitution. The extent of the problem can be gauged from a report prepared by the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances and submitted to the IHC, according to which only one-third of 8,463 missing persons have returned home since March 2011 after their whereabouts were traced. The commission has done an abysmal job in holding to account anyone for their involvement in this reprehensible tactic, and it is worth asking why retired justice Javed Iqbal, who resigned under a cloud as DG NAB, is still heading such an important body.

Published in Dawn, June 19th, 2022

Foreign policy rethink

In order to resolve issues and other irritants with India, the option of engagement is better than sabre-rattling. —AFP/File

LOCATED as the country is in a tough neighbourhood, and confronting multiple external and internal crises, it is essential that Pakistan’s foreign policy is progressive and receptive to swiftly changing global realities, without compromising on principles. In this regard, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari’s comments made at a think tank in Islamabad recently about the need to engage with India, as well as addressing the country’s ‘isolation’ in the international arena, are food for thought.

Mr Bhutto-Zardari was of the view that disengagement with India had not worked in Pakistan’s favour, while calling for a focus on economic diplomacy and

engagement with this country's eastern neighbour. In particular, he said that disengagement — specifically after India unilaterally made changes to occupied Kashmir's special status in 2019 — had not helped the Kashmir cause, or addressed rising Islamophobia in India, while arguing that better ties could have aided Pakistan in tackling these key issues with that country.

Considering the sensitivity of the matter, the Foreign Office later said there had been no change in Pakistan's policy towards India, and that while this country desired constructive engagement, Delhi's "unabated hostility ... impeded the prospects of peace".

The matter of ties with India is indeed complicated. Pakistan's position on India-held Kashmir — as well as the condemnation of anti-Muslim violence under BJP rule and the recent vile remarks targeting the Holy Prophet (PBUH) — is a principled one. For there to be long-lasting peace in South Asia, the Kashmir issue needs to be resolved as per the wishes of the disputed region's people, while anti-Muslim violence and prejudice at the state level in India must end immediately.

Yet, in order to resolve these issues and other irritants, the option of engagement is better than sabre-rattling. That is why if either country offers dialogue, there should be a positive reception from the other, instead of an arrogant reaction. In the long term, engagement is the only way to achieve regional peace, with the alternative being perpetual confrontation.

Moving beyond the Pakistan-India relationship, this government — and all future dispensations — must adhere to a foreign policy that is flexible, yet does not compromise on national interests. Foreign policy should be above petty politics and party lines, putting Pakistan's interests foremost.

A focus on maintaining friendly relations with all neighbours, as well as trade and investment links with states further afield, will yield diplomatic dividends. Cementing relations with traditional allies such as China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, etc and improving ties with the US, EU, Iran, Russia and others is important.

Admittedly, crafting a foreign policy that maintains a balance between all these actors is a considerable task, as some of these states are in direct confrontation with each other. But for Pakistan, the most viable option is to stay away from bloc

politics, and maintain neutrality to ensure it does not get ensnared in other people's wars.

Published in Dawn, June 20th, 2022

Drought emergency

EVEN now, when crop yields have declined, cattle are dying, agricultural lands are parched and millions do not have enough water for their basic needs, there is little sign that the authorities are as alarmed as they should be over the current drought emergency. For a long time now, international bodies have been warning that water resources in Pakistan will dry up by 2025. That the country's per capita water availability has dropped from 5,060 cubic metres per annum in 1951 to a mere 908 cubic metres today, according to UNDP estimates, is a depressing measure of things to come. Despite the facts, warnings and signs, comprehensively tackling the water crisis issue does not appear to be on either the government's or any political party's agenda. Decades of short-sighted development and consumption practices have turned the rivers in the country into cesspools of toxic waste. Nearly 92pc of the Indus delta, once known for its immensely rich flora and fauna, has been destroyed while the river itself now resembles a nullah overflowing with plastic waste. Meanwhile, the Ravi is listed among the three most polluted rivers of the world, while freshwater lakes such as Manchhar and Keenjhar are also badly polluted and have contracted in size. All this is a searing indictment of the state's policies and its mismanagement of the country's water resources that are necessary to sustain life, business and growth.

Pakistan's failure on this front will ensure an even more catastrophic impact of climate change, to which the current drought in the country is intrinsically connected. The ongoing heatwave, which has severely aggravated the prevailing water shortage, illustrates this. Consider Federal Water Resources Minister Khursheed Shah's claims in the National Assembly on Friday that up to 6,000 cusecs of water "evaporated" while travelling a distance of 350km from Sukkur to Kotri barrages. Moreover, new research indicates that severe heatwaves, of the kind estimated to have taken about 90 lives in India and Pakistan this year, will now be the new normal as they are 30 times more likely to occur than before. Meanwhile, the dreaded rise of 2°C in global temperatures might translate into an

exponential increase of up to 20°C in South Asia. If this does not call for steps to stop our wasteful ways, revive dying water bodies while protecting and conserving the limited water resources we have on a war footing, then what will?

Published in Dawn, June 20th, 2022

On refugees

JUNE 20, marked as World Refugee Day, has rolled around once again while the world is wracked by social and economic upheaval. Conflict ravages Ukraine, while Afghanistan sinks ever deeper in the mire under a totalitarian regime bent on imposing its socially restrictive worldview. It is an unfortunate reality that the vast majority of refugees live in miserable conditions and are often treated as lesser humans by their host countries. The coming year is likely to bring increased hardship for them. With an economic downturn setting in, donor agencies are likely to be resource-stressed as they make arrangements to accommodate refugees in different regions of the world. Host countries will also feel the economic burden of catering to refugee populations while also taking care of their own. It is times like these that often provide a fatal spark to simmering xenophobia and racism, and world leaders must be increasingly vigilant about protecting refugees from more hurt and harm than they already face.

The Ukraine conflict must also not be allowed to distract the world's obligation to all the other refugee groups that need support. The world should not need to be reminded that 6.7m refugees from Syria, 5.7m from Palestine, 2.6m Afghans, 4m Venezuelans, 2.2m Sudanese and nearly 1.1m Rohingya refugees also need attention and financial help. There has been a tendency for world powers to dump the human cost of war on developing nations, which, though they are often struggling with their own issues, play host to more than 86pc of the refugees displaced prior to the Ukraine crisis. As the economic crisis intensifies, the powers that have actively engaged in conflict over the past decades should take greater responsibility for refugees. It is not fair or humane of them to be quite eager to supply bombs and bullets that keep wars going, but curse and complain when asked to clean up the social mess they create in the pursuit of their foreign policy games.

Published in Dawn, June 20th, 2022

IMF agreement

WITH differences between Pakistan and the IMF over the government's budget and macro targets for the next fiscal yet to be resolved, Washington is believed to have agreed to intervene at the behest of Islamabad to help it clinch a deal with the lender.

That Pakistan needs the IMF programme now to reverse the economic downturn in the country and stay solvent cannot be overemphasised. Pakistan requires \$37bn or more to finance its debt and other payments next year. As things stand, the inordinate delay in the finalisation of a new staff-level agreement with the IMF has already shut down global bond markets and other sources of funding — bilateral, multilateral and commercial — for Pakistan, while the latter's depleting foreign exchange stock is playing havoc with the exchange rate as the rupee dropped to 210 to a dollar on Monday.

Indeed, the US has influence over the IMF as its largest shareholder, and its support can come in handy for Pakistan. But, official confirmation is awaited although the finance minister sounded hopeful yesterday when he hinted at a deal being secured in a couple of days.

Moody's Investors Service has downgraded Pakistan's credit rating outlook to negative from stable. The only way out of the current economic crisis is through the IMF.

Islamabad not only wants the Fund to resume disbursements, but to also increase the package's size and duration.

There is no doubt the coalition government has made a few tough decisions — though with a lag of several weeks and after incurring significant losses — such as raising fuel and power prices, despite the PTI's street protests. Nevertheless, it has failed to convince the Fund on its next fiscal year's budget, mainly regarding its exaggerated revenues and understated expenditure estimates that make the achievement of the targeted primary surplus (or the savings from its revenues after meeting all its expenses excluding the interest payments for the year) of Rs152bn suspect.

If the government's finance team finds itself in a tight spot now or farther from an IMF deal on the sustainability of its budget, it has only itself to blame.

According to reports, the government must get its budget passed by parliament before or on June 28 to legally ensure its implementation from July 1 as required under the Constitution. This requires the government to reach a final agreement with the IMF at the earliest so that it can protect the agreed measures in its updated budget and show the expected financing from the IMF in the documents.

While the government needs to rethink its budget to show to the international creditors that it has what it takes to put its fiscal house in order, the IMF must also realise that the continuing delay in signing the deal isn't helping anyone. The more it gets delayed, the more unmanageable the economy will become.

Published in Dawn, June 21st, 2022

Rising hepatitis C cases

REPORTS that cases of hepatitis C are rising in several districts of Sindh are both alarming and further proof of lack of monitoring and regulation of the health sector on the part of the provincial government. In a recent survey conducted by the WHO and the Sindh health department across the province, cases of hepatitis C have risen from 5pc to 6.1pc, in contrast to hepatitis B infections which have registered a decrease. Almost 6,000 patients were screened for hepatitis B, C and HIV. At the moment, the provincial hepatitis programme caters to only 72,000 cases a year, when it needs to treat at least 200,000 annually.

Such a state of affairs paints a dismal picture of disease prevention and control. For a number of years, Pakistan has had the second-highest number of hepatitis C cases in the world. The national rate of hepatitis C prevalence hovers between 4pc and 8pc, with an estimated 150,000 new cases being reported every day. However, these figures are just the tip of the iceberg; as the survey suggests, the actual disease burden may be even higher than what the published numbers say. These alarming facts can largely be attributed to poor regulation of health

professionals and healthcare set-ups, since more than 70pc of infections are found in those who visit hospitals or local clinics for medical treatment. The use of contaminated medical equipment and syringes by unqualified medics or poorly trained hospital staff has remained a long-standing issue that the government has repeatedly failed to address. Meanwhile, the disease also spreads through the transfusion of contaminated blood and improperly sterilised dialysis machines. The reuse of razors at barbershops and sharing of needles, often by addicts, are also responsible. In many ways, the high prevalence of hepatitis C is a testament to the government's abject neglect of the health sector and continued laxity that has allowed unsafe medical practices by unqualified medics to flourish in the country. The authorities should immediately take steps to rectify the situation.

Published in Dawn, June 21st, 2022

Another long war

pOUR months into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there are no signs that this conflict will be resolved anytime soon. If anything, key voices in the West are warning their own people as well as the rest of the world to prepare for another long war. Among these is Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, who told a German paper that the conflict will likely “last for years” and that the cause must be supported regardless of high military costs or spiralling energy and food prices. Moreover, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who recently returned from Ukraine, wrote of the need to “steel ourselves for a long war”, while his army chief has reportedly highlighted the need to “deter Russian aggression with the threat of force”. Meanwhile, on the other side, the mood is equally combative. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told the BBC, there was no room for manoeuvre with the UK which, he said, wanted to bring Russia to its knees. “Go on, then, do it,” he cryptically remarked. The stage, therefore, is indeed set for another lengthy conflict. The Nato/Western combine appears to be gunning for Russia's total defeat, while Moscow also seems determined not to budge from its ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine.

While the people of Ukraine are obviously the biggest sufferers of this conflict, the rest of the world has also not been immune as high energy and food prices have rocked the global system, particularly developing states with fragile economies. Ideally, the West and Russia should drop their hard-line stances and negotiate an end to this war. However, as the statements from the primary protagonists quoted above indicate, this is a very slim possibility. The alternatives to peace are not very attractive. The longer this conflict grinds on, consumers across the world should continue to expect to pay high energy and grocery bills. For developing states, including Pakistan, this can have uncomfortable consequences. And should the conflict expand into a direct confrontation between the West and Russia, the ensuing price spiral may well deal a mortal blow to many a developing economy. Therefore, from the viewpoint of the Global South, the sooner this conflict is resolved peacefully, the better, while developing states also need to have alternative plans in place to ensure food and energy security. Previous 'long wars' — in Afghanistan, Iraq etc — have laid waste to these unfortunate nations. This one risks upending the global system.

Published in Dawn, June 21st, 2022

Right to fair trial

IT is scarcely an understatement to say that in Pakistan, the fundamental right to a fair trial, as provided for under Article 10A of the Constitution, is honoured more in the breach than the observance. On Monday, the Supreme Court rightly observed that the burden is on the bench to ascertain from the “facts and circumstances of the case ... whether this indispensable right was afforded or not”. The two-judge bench had taken up a civil appeal by an official in the Frontier Constabulary against the Federal Services Tribunal over the rejection of his plea in November 2018 on grounds of limitation without considering the merits of the case. The plea had been filed by the appellant after repeated and unsuccessful attempts to seek relief through departmental appeals over punitive action taken against him on allegations of misconduct without any show-cause notice or hearing. The apex court ruled that “no decision which is affecting the right of any person should be taken without providing an opportunity of being heard” and that “mere technicalities” should not stand in the way of providing justice.

The right to fair trial is also part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It reads: “Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.” Yet, on several occasions, the state has itself sacrificed this principle at the altar of expediency. One of the more recent and most consequential instances of this was parliament’s action of amending the Army Act and the Constitution to greenlight the setting up of military courts for prosecuting terrorists. That chapter, distinguished by an utter lack of transparency regarding the judicial process, including the denial of right of counsel of choice to the accused, fortunately came to a close in 2019. On an unofficial level, however, the state continues to violate Article 10A — not to mention multiple other human rights — in every instance of enforced disappearance that takes place.

At the same time, there still exists on the statute books legislation that is intrinsically at odds with the right to fair trial. For instance, the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, stipulates an unreasonably short time of seven days for the court to decide each case. Given that the law deals with the most heinous offences, the anti-terrorism courts, in an effort not to appear ‘soft’ on militancy, might possibly have condemned some innocent individuals to death because there was not sufficient time for the accused to mount a robust defence. On the other hand, the glacial speed of the ‘regular’ judicial process, resulting in a massive backlog of civil and criminal cases, also undercuts one of the fundamental prerequisites of fair trial — the right to be tried without undue delay.

Published in Dawn, June 22nd, 2022

Murdered workers

THE murder of two workers hailing from Sindh in Balochistan’s Hoshab area on Monday is the second incident this month in which labourers have been targeted in the province. The murdered men were working on a road project. Last week, three workers were killed in a labour camp in Harnai. In that attack, the assailants torched the labour camp after committing the crime. At the time of writing, no organisation had claimed responsibility for these attacks. Moreover, two policemen were also targeted in the Dera Allahyar area of the province on Sunday. This series of deadly attacks targeting ordinary workers trying to make a

living in the province, as well as law enforcers, indicates that the problem of militancy in Balochistan is far from resolved, as the state — both its civilian and military arms — has been unable to establish permanent peace in the troubled province. According to figures compiled by the Pak Institute of Peace Studies, at least 12 non-Baloch settlers and workers were killed in militant attacks in the province last year. While the killing of any non-combatant is indefensible, the murder of poor workers trying to provide for their families is particularly reprehensible.

When it comes to bringing peace to Balochistan, we seem to be moving in circles. The combination of military operations, offers of amnesty to militants and promises to improve the socioeconomic situation of the province's people has failed to bring lasting stability, perhaps because there is little visible change on the ground. For example, while incidents of violence continue, the ruling party in Balochistan is embroiled in palace intrigues — a disturbing reflection of the priorities of the rulers for whom the security and welfare of the population rank much lower than their bid for power. The fact is that in the troubled province, militant violence, poverty, lack of opportunity and the involvement of hostile actors are all interlinked. To establish lasting peace in Balochistan, a holistic strategy is needed, which moves beyond rhetoric. While those involved in the murders of civilians and security men must be brought to justice to deal a lethal blow to militancy, the people's genuine grievances have to be addressed. The Baloch should have the first right to the province's mineral riches, and gain from CPEC developments. If the state can show the people it cares for them and give them jobs, security, healthcare and education, the separatist narrative can be countered in a more effective manner.

Published in Dawn, June 22nd, 2022

Resurgent Covid-19

Children riding on a bike with their family wear facemasks as a preventive measure against the coronavirus in Karachi on October 29. — AFP/File

AS if the country's economic problems were not stressful enough, we now have to worry about resurgent Covid-19.

According to the National Command and Operation Centre, new cases have risen to the highest in 80 days, with Karachi and Hyderabad now reporting positivity rates of above 10pc — a level which, in the past, would have prompted lockdown measures. A significant portion of the population had previously received Covid vaccination and subsequent booster shots, but it appears that the efficacy of immunisation has waned over time.

Citizens have also grown complacent as the national attention has been diverted to pressing economic and political crises. New strains of the coronavirus have since emerged globally, which are now spreading thanks to relaxations on both domestic and international air travel.

With school summer vacations now underway and more people travelling to visit family or for vacation purposes, the risk of a resurgence in Covid cases has considerably heightened. Compounding challenges is the summer wedding season, which will soon be in full swing. It will bring with it large public gatherings in indoor, air-conditioned spaces — a sure recipe for any ceremony to turn into a so-called super-spreader event.

The government has little time to waste: it should immediately launch a public awareness and education drive to urge people to once again adopt preventive measures like the wearing of masks, periodic washing of hands, and avoidance of public gatherings in restricted spaces wherever possible.

There also needs to be a renewed push to encourage people — especially those citizens most at risk, or those around them — to receive booster shots. The government needs to be helpful in this regard: it needs to provide information regarding eligibility as well as availability of vaccines so that it is easy for citizens to find vaccination centres themselves. Much of the populace seems to have tuned out the danger posed by Covid after the last wave subsided. The state needs to take immediate action to reverse that.

Published in Dawn, June 22nd, 2022

Funding expectations

THOUGH still one step short of a staff-level agreement, the deal reached between the government and the IMF, after weeks of painful negotiations, has

brought the country closer to the revival of the stalled \$6bn Fund programme and, with it, financing from other multilateral and bilateral lenders to fund projected payments of up to \$40bn in the next fiscal. It should also settle the wave of uncertainty that has taken over the economy and investors due to the delay in coming to an agreement.

There have been conditions, of course: the government has consented to impose additional taxes of Rs436bn, gradually implement a petroleum levy of up to Rs50 a litre, besides rolling back some fiscally irresponsible measures proposed in the original budget 2022-23.

The changes in the proposed budget to be passed by parliament will help the government target the primary budget surplus of Rs152bn and overall fiscal deficit of 4.9pc of GDP. That makes the FBR's job a little more challenging, with its enhanced tax collection target of Rs7.4tr requiring a growth of 24pc. Any shortfall would force the government to cut down on its essential expenditure to stay the course.

On its part, the IMF has stepped back from its demand to impose a petroleum levy of Rs30 a litre in one go and has foregone 10.7pc sales tax on petrol and diesel.

Once the 'prior actions' are executed through changes in the proposed budget, and monetary targets finalised with the State Bank, the staff-level agreement will be approved by the IMF and the nearly \$1bn stuck-up tranche released.

Pakistani authorities hope the Fund will increase the size of the bailout package to \$8bn and extend its duration to June 2023.

The government's claim that a large part of additional tax revenues will be achieved by taxing affluent individuals and firms earning Rs150m and above a year, and that the tax cuts on annual income below Rs1.2m will not be withdrawn is debatable.

There is no way the inflation-stricken low- to middle-income households, already crushed by massive fuel price increases and bracing themselves for an enormous surge in power and gas rates from next month, will escape the impact of additional taxation.

Thus, it is imperative that even when the agreement with the IMF is finalised, the authorities here must make deep structural changes for long-term sustainable growth to protect the people from repeated economic busts and future global shocks — and chart an effective long-term economic plan so that they do not have to turn to the lender again and again.

For now, IMF funding, along with that expected from other lenders, should help improve macroeconomic stability and boost investor confidence in Pakistan's ability to execute reforms. The next few months will show how serious the government is about executing reforms and putting in place measures to strengthen the country's debt management outlook.

Published in Dawn, June 23rd, 2022

Budget debate

WITH the economy teetering on the precipice of a major crisis, one would have expected that public representatives in parliament would be deeply invested in debating the federal budget for fiscal 2023 before it is put to the vote. Instead, both the government and the opposition have only managed to make themselves look even more dysfunctional, while the ironing out of the budget — traditionally parliament's job — seems to have been left to negotiations happening behind closed doors with the IMF. Since Finance Minister Miftah Ismail's budget speech on June 10, the general debate on budgetary proposals has been marked by absenteeism and hollow speeches. In the National Assembly, the first session saw the government-friendly leader of the opposition deliver inane remarks to a nearly empty House. There was only one other speaker that day. The next day, only four lawmakers participated. In both sessions, the treasury benches were almost empty — a stark reminder of the mockery the democratic process has been turned into in the absence of a genuine opposition. The same sorry state of affairs was seen in both Houses in subsequent sessions, so much so that even lawmakers from government-allied PPP protested the government's complete lack of interest.

In whatever discussion that did take place on the budget, the focus of most speeches was on bashing former prime minister Imran Khan and the PTI government. The rambling, unintelligent 'explanations' for the causes behind the

present crisis show that many lawmakers still have not grasped the root causes of Pakistan's economic ills. We can, therefore, expect them to repeat their past mistakes in the future as well. On top of that, the indecent unwillingness of anyone — government, ally or opposition — to take responsibility for the economy's structural issues, the main reason why we are repeatedly in crisis, is quite galling. Finally, it must be asked why, instead of making their own recommendations for the budget through the debate, our parliamentarians left final adjustments entirely to the finance ministry and the IMF? After years of complaining loudly about IMF 'influence' on government policies, one would have expected them to take more ownership of the process. It is, after all, a key responsibility of parliament to review budgetary proposals as well as scrutinise government spending in the outgoing year. Having ceded this space, they cannot now complain when the revenue measures agreed to with the IMF cause pain in the future.

Published in Dawn, June 23rd, 2022

Afghanistan quake

FOR the hapless people of Afghanistan, the list of miseries just doesn't seem to end. The latest catastrophe to hit the country has been the 6.1 magnitude earthquake that struck early on Wednesday morning. The worst hit has been the eastern province of Paktika, which borders Pakistan. The devastation is believed to be considerable. At the time of writing, the list of fatalities was at least 1,000, with several hundred injured. Unfortunately, the casualty numbers are bound to rise as more information comes in from remote, mountainous villages. Shocks were felt as far away as India. In Pakistan, the tremors were felt in many parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as well as Islamabad, while the KP Disaster Management Authority said a man was killed in Lakki Marwat in a roof collapse incident linked to the quake.

The immediate priority for Afghanistan's neighbours as well as the international community should be to provide medical help to those who critically need it. Over four decades of war have resulted in little by way of a proper emergency management system in Afghanistan, while the present cash-strapped Taliban rulers are also not equipped to respond to a disaster of such magnitude. Speedy international efforts are therefore required to help ferry the injured in remote

locations to hospitals where they can be provided emergency care as the Taliban have appealed to aid agencies to participate in the relief effort. Moreover, food, shelter and medicine need to be provided to survivors of the disaster. In particular, those states that have spent trillions of dollars on waging war in Afghanistan must now spend liberally to provide succour to the suffering Afghans in their time of need. And considering the frequency of earthquakes in Afghanistan and the high human toll they take — over 7,000 people have been killed in quakes over the last 10 years, as per the UN — international experts should come forward to help put in place mitigation measures that can save lives when disaster strikes.

Published in Dawn, June 23rd, 2022

Parliament's imprimatur

IT may be a given that the country's security establishment would take the lead in talks with the banned TTP, but it was important that this hugely consequential issue be part of a more inclusive process. And that is the direction in which matters at last seem to be moving.

On Wednesday, the military top brass in a briefing to the political leadership held out the assurance that no extra-constitutional concessions would be given to the militants and any deal arrived at would be subject to parliamentary approval.

The meeting, the first of its kind since the coalition government came to power, was arranged after the PPP protested that the civilian leadership was being sidelined in the ongoing negotiations. It goes to show that it is worth demanding a seat at the table, instead of being resigned to irrelevance.

The implications of 'mainstreaming' militants are far-reaching and must be discussed threadbare by the people's representatives, for they would be in the hot seat if things do not go as planned. The imprimatur of parliament is essential.

In the interest of inclusivity, the coalition should have also invited the PTI leadership. At the very least, the presence of KP Chief Minister Mahmood Khan should have been sought at the briefing.

One of the TTP's demands is a rollback of Fata's merger with KP, but they have been told there can be no reversal of the move that was effected through a constitutional amendment. Their other demands, indicated the military officials at Wednesday's meeting, are under consideration.

As matters stand, an indefinite ceasefire between the government and the TTP was announced last month with negotiations set to continue, and an in-camera parliament session is to be convened to bring lawmakers into the loop. But there is a long way to go before any resolution can be arrived at.

A number of thorny issues need to be ironed out, not the least of which is how the militants are to be 'mainstreamed'. It would certainly rankle the public if top commanders whose hands are stained with the blood of innocent Pakistanis are given amnesty.

Of course, it is debatable whether any deal is even possible. Peace agreements with militants in the past have invariably failed; in fact, these violent actors have used the time to regroup and come back stronger than ever. Moreover, the TTP comprises several outfits with varying degrees of heft within the combine as well as different levels of commitment to militancy. Some are war-weary, while others, like the Jamaatul Ahrar, are driving a hard bargain. It would be exceedingly difficult to bring them all on the same page.

That said, if an agreement is arrived at, it must be one the public perceives as doing some justice to their years of suffering. And its details must not be kept from them.

Published in Dawn, June 24th, 2022

Monsoon preparedness

THE deaths of four people, among them three children, and the usual post-rain chaos in Karachi on Wednesday, yet again highlight how little prepared Pakistani cities are for what is expected to be a stormy monsoon. Before Karachi, a similar story of loss of life and property, prolonged loadshedding, inundated roads and suspension of services unfolded in KP, Balochistan and Punjab. Since last week, above-average pre-monsoon rains have caused flooding in large swathes of Balochistan, resulting in the loss of at least five lives in Sibi district and

considerable damage to the road network elsewhere. Meanwhile, heavy rains triggered landslides at several locations on a major road between Gilgit and Skardu over the weekend, while a glacial lake outburst flood in upper Chitral damaged a power station. People in many cities have had to brave prolonged power outages, traffic bottlenecks and wade through flooded roads to reach their destinations.

But this is perhaps a mere harbinger of the greater danger and damage expected during the upcoming monsoons. The federal climate change ministry issued a warning on Tuesday saying that Pakistan was set to receive “above average” rainfall that posed a “clear threat” of flooding in large parts of the country, especially bigger cities such as Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Islamabad and Multan. In fact, citing some forecasts, climate change officials also said that torrential rains could cause widespread destruction and displacement similar to the levels witnessed in 2010 when raging floods in the country affected one-fifth of the land and around 20m people. The NDMA issued an alert a few days ago, warning of floods and landslides in the upper parts of the country on account of the expected rain spell. Pakistan has just been in the throes of a killer heatwave that broke all previous records, drying up riverbeds, destroying crops and killing cattle. And now, the rain forecasts make it seem that the country is headed towards another climate catastrophe in the shape of floods. There is no denying that such extreme weather events are a manifestation of climate change, but this truth does not absolve the authorities of their responsibility to help the population deal with what has become the new normal. The government should take steps on a war footing to not just avert disaster but also prepare the ground for future adaptation measures if it hopes to cope with the impact of global warming.

Published in Dawn, June 24th, 2022

Balochistan budget

A BUDGET is all about the political choices a government makes. The eight-month-old Mir Abdul Quddus Bizenjo government in Balochistan has made its choice, which is to reward lawmakers from the ruling BAP and the opposition benches who helped him take the throne in the province. It has done so at the cost of the fiscal discipline badly needed to manage the finances of the impoverished province in a prudent manner. The Rs612.7bn provincial budget for

2022-23 is based on exaggerated revenue receipts and leaves a massive hole of at least Rs72.8bn in financing for its Rs191.5bn development programme. This gap in resources available for development will increase if the provincial government fails to realise the estimated cash — and fully — from all the resources indicated in the budget plan, especially the amount of Rs55bn shown against gas fields' 'lease extension bonus'. The budget for the present year had also indicated this amount under the same head but did not receive a single rupee. Clearly, the government will have to drastically slash its funding for development schemes to be undertaken or completed in the coming fiscal. That the province had to cut its original development plan from Rs172.5bn to Rs91.8bn in the current financial year due to resource constraints hasn't taught the new government much.

Finance Minister Abdul Rehman Khetran has described the budget as 'people-friendly' as it increases allocations for development. One is at a loss to understand how a budget that will leave hundreds of incomplete schemes in its trail, due to shortage of money, can be people-friendly or pro-poor. That the lawmakers were wrangling over development funds on a day when the rains killed several people in parts of the province, swept away roads, and damaged bridges and other infrastructure shows how successive provincial governments have miserably failed the people of Balochistan. With most of the population living in extreme poverty due to few employment opportunities and climatic effects on agriculture, the people deserve a caring government that can put their needs before its own political interests.

Published in Dawn, June 24th, 2022

Taxing corporates

IT is good optics, and the new tax measures imposed on the incomes of corporates and rich individuals will bring some consolation to the common man. In fact, the PML-N-led government has no choice but to drastically raise its tax income to finance its expenditure in the next financial year and to secure the revival of the suspended IMF funding if it is to avert a default on its foreign payments.

Will super tax help Pakistan's economy?.

But just how effective will Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's decision to increase taxes on the incomes of the already heavily taxed corporate sector be? And where does it stand in the overall picture of revenue generation?

The decision, announced yesterday, conveniently spares the PML-N's core constituency — the traders — and stops far short of netting other untaxed or undertaxed segments of the economy, such as agriculture. Likewise, it also frees the PML-N and its coalition partners from the need to slash the wasteful expenditure on SOEs that have been haemorrhaging taxpayers' money for years now. The disinvestment or closures of some loss-making public-sector entities actually might have saved more cash than the imposition of a one-time super tax on the FY22 profits of the documented sectors.

The new tax measures indicate that large companies in 13 specified sectors — covering banks, sugar, cement, LNG terminals, textiles, airlines, automobiles, steel, beverages, oil and gas, fertilisers, chemicals and tobacco — showing annual profits of above Rs300m during the outgoing fiscal, will be subject to an additional 10pc tax, and firms from other sectors to 4pc, over and above their regular corporate rates of 29pc (35pc for banks).

This will be in addition to the 1pc to 4pc poverty alleviation fund being levied on them and on high-net-worth individuals having a yearly income of above Rs150m.

No wonder, the stock market was rattled and plummeted by 4.8pc in the morning session before recovering somewhat in the afternoon.

It may not be possible for the government to broaden the tax net overnight, but it is disturbing to see it shy away from making a move in that direction. The implementation of a negligible fixed tax on retailers' incomes or 'rentals' from real estate holdings of the rich aren't enough.

The new measures will not produce much inflation even if some of the 'affected' sectors try to pass on the impact to consumers. Nor will it impact the pace of economic growth. However, it will significantly squeeze the profits of companies coming under the super tax and many of them are likely to hold their future investment plans and discourage documentation.

The steps taken by the government are reflective of the extremely sorry state of our economic affairs. We have reached a point where nobody is ready to trust us or hold our hand in difficult times. Short-term measures may help us avert immediate risks. But long-term survival will entail taking politically tough policy decisions.

Published in Dawn, June 25th, 2022

Poll security

AS local government elections in Sindh as well as a raft of by-polls for the national and provincial assemblies draw near, questions have been raised about election security. These concerns have been amplified after deadly violence was witnessed during last week's by-election in Karachi's NA-240 constituency, as well as an extremely polarised political atmosphere in Punjab. The first phase of Sindh's LG elections is scheduled for Sunday, with the second round, and also by-polls for a Karachi National Assembly and several Punjab provincial assembly seats, scheduled for next month. In this regard, the ECP has written to the army requesting security assistance for the polls. However, as the ECP secretary told the media in Karachi the other day, the military does not want to be deployed inside polling stations. Instead, troops will be available for security in the 'third tier'.

The military's wish to stay away from polling stations should be welcomed. While security is key to ensuring a fair and transparent election exercise, there is no reason why the police cannot offer sufficient security cover inside polling stations. Instead of approaching the army, the ECP should coordinate with the respective local administrations and police forces to ensure that personnel of civil law enforcement are around in suitable numbers to ensure a secure atmosphere on polling day. Of course, the army and paramilitary forces need to be on standby to respond to major security challenges should they arise, but it must be the police that should be primarily tasked with overseeing law and order in and around polling stations. Indeed, the events surrounding the NA-240 by-poll, in which one person was killed as rival partymen traded fire on the streets, as well as the toxic political atmosphere in Punjab, are cause for concern. There was also an armed clash in Lahore last week, involving supporters of the PTI and PML-N connected to campaigning for the PP-167 by-poll, which left a number of people injured.

Political parties bear a major responsibility for ensuring that their supporters and workers do not indulge in violence on polling day. There needs to be zero tolerance for election-related violence and mischief inside polling stations, as such activities deprive citizens of their right to choose their representatives in an atmosphere free of hostility and pressure. Hence, the onus is on the administration as well as political parties to ensure polling goes ahead peacefully.

Published in Dawn, June 25th, 2022

Polio concerns

THE fact that vaccine-derived poliovirus has been detected in London's sewage samples for the first time in 40 years should send alarm bells ringing locally, especially after British health authorities have said the virus may have been 'imported'. Pakistan may be one of the sources of the virus found in the UK, though it should be added that vaccine-derived polio is found in 22 countries, and results of genome sequencing will better explain the origins of the virus. Moreover, all the cases reported in Pakistan this year have been of wild poliovirus, not the vaccine-derived variant. That said, Pakistan's health authorities need to be on their toes, for if the London samples are found to be linked to this country, the consequences, particularly for Pakistanis wanting to travel abroad, as well as the country's reputation, could be grim. It is indeed unfortunate that while nearly all countries of the world have managed to eradicate polio, Pakistan and Afghanistan remain the 'final frontiers' where this crippling ailment has not been eliminated.

The results of Pakistan's anti-polio efforts over the past few years have been mixed, with the country coming close to eradication, only to find an explosion of cases soon after. For example, 10 cases have been reported in the country so far this year, while the tally in 2020 crossed 200. This pattern tends to repeat itself; for example, in 2017 only eight cases were reported, but the total crossed 150 cases just two years later. Most of the cases reported this year are limited to the North Waziristan tribal district. Therefore, along with continuing nationwide anti-polio drives, special attention must be given to the KP district in order to eliminate polio. The services of ulema and tribal elders need to be utilised to bring down cases of refusal and encourage people to get their children vaccinated, while there can be no room for fake finger markings. Eliminating polio

from Pakistan is possible, if the state decides to pursue this worthy goal with determination and focus.

Published in Dawn, June 25th, 2022

Outlawing torture

JUNE 26 is observed worldwide as the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. Considered one of the cruellest crimes against humanity, torture is particularly reprehensible as it violates the personhood of victims and robs them of human dignity. It is often used as a means of coercion and dehumanisation — to violently assert the perpetrator's power and dominance over their victims.

The United Nations notes that torture is absolutely prohibited and unjustifiable whatever the circumstances may be. Since this prohibition forms part of customary international law, it is, therefore, binding on all countries, including Pakistan.

June 26 had been marked as a day of support for victims of torture so that countries may be reminded of their obligations under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Pakistan is a signatory to that convention. Unfortunately, Pakistan's own legislative efforts to put an end to torture — described as an 'endemic' problem by Amnesty International — have repeatedly stumbled.

The Senate had, in July last year, passed the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Bill with support from across the aisle. The PPP's Sherry Rehman had introduced the bill, and she had been supported by the then minister for human rights, PTI's Shireen Mazari. Considering it had bipartisan support, it was hoped that the bill would promptly sail through the National Assembly as well before being signed into law by the president. It is unfortunate that it has now been almost a year but we have yet to see it enacted as law.

There is no question that the state needs to considerably tighten its regulation of legal and criminal procedures to put an end to torture perpetrated by individuals acting on behalf of the state. The extent of the rot in our system can be judged by the fact that physical or psychological torture is now considered almost a given in police and intelligence investigations. The disease has spread due to the state's

failure to ensure that individuals tasked with investigating crimes and collecting evidence do their jobs while remaining within the ambit of the law they are supposed to uphold.

Since torturers face little or no retribution, extracting forced 'confessions' is often the easiest way for them to close pending cases. At other times, the tactic is used to 'teach a lesson' to those marked as 'undesirables' by the state, such as journalists and dissidents. The anti-torture bill passed by the Senate last year sought to put an end to this culture of impunity. It clearly defines what constitutes torture and lays out strict punishments to both penalise and dissuade those who may seek to perpetrate it. If passed, it would give some protection to detainees, while also pushing police, intelligence and other security agencies to build their cases against suspected criminals through robust, lawfully conducted investigations.

Published in Dawn, June 26th, 2022

Daska redux?

AS the clock ticks down on the by-elections scheduled for next month on recently vacated Punjab Assembly seats, tensions are quickly rising between the two main contenders. The PTI's central Punjab president, Yasmin Rashid, has accused the PML-N of using the state apparatus to 'fix' the results of the upcoming by-polls in its favour. She has specifically accused the Lahore DIG operations and deputy commissioner of facilitating the ruling party and has demanded that they be suspended from service.

Her concerns may not be without grounds. The party positions in the Punjab Assembly are quite precariously balanced, and the by-elections are going to be make or break for the incumbent government. Perhaps this is why the PTI stalwart fears that the PML-N "is desperately trying to steal the mandate of the PTI". It is also worth noting that some of the most serious allegations the PTI is now levelling against the PML-N are likely informed by the former's own experience of 'managing' the Daska by-election early last year. The Daska fiasco had seen every weakness of the electoral system thrown into the limelight. The PTI had made brazen use of state resources to force an outcome in its favour. The local administration was used to strong-arm voters and election staff. The

entire exercise was periodically disrupted by violence and culminated in the mysterious disappearance of an entire group of presiding officers late in the night. There is no reason, therefore, for the PTI to not believe that the PML-N will not try to pull a similar heist now that it is in power. However, it was the ECP which had taken a strong stance against manipulation of the electoral process back then, and it ought to be the ECP which should make every preparation to avoid a similar situation now. As the constitutional body mandated with holding free and fair elections, it must ensure that a Daska-like situation does not arise when Punjab heads to by-polls next month.

Published in Dawn, June 26th, 2022

High-profile case

IN a 'breaking news' culture, it is not often that such a significant development in a high-profile case can be kept so low key. However, news of the conviction earlier this month by an anti-terrorism court in Lahore of Sajid Majeed Mir, a top operative of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba, in a case of terror financing has trickled out only just now.

The court sentenced Mir, more well known as the alleged handler in the horrific Mumbai attacks of November 2008, to 15 and a half years behind bars and a fine of Rs420,000. His name had come up fairly early in investigations by US and Indian counterterrorism authorities into the attacks which killed 166 people, including 26 foreigners, at several sites in Mumbai.

After forensically examining intercepted phone calls recorded during the course of the attacks, the officials came to believe it was his voice directing the gunmen and urging them to kill. For several years, however, Pakistani authorities continued to insist that Mir was dead, a claim that the West refused to believe.

Weak prosecution and a poor conviction rate in terrorism cases were the final hurdle that Pakistan had to cross in order to be taken off the FATF grey list where it was placed in 2018. The conviction and sentencing of a senior-level LeT operative such as Mir no doubt carried considerable weight in the latest progress report submitted by Pakistan to FATF.

Just a couple of months earlier, the Jamaatud Dawa chief Hafiz Mohammed Saeed was sentenced to 33 years behind bars in two cases of terror financing; he was already serving time for earlier convictions, also for terror financing. Taken together, the outcome of the prosecutions against Mir and Saeed was deemed, as indeed it should be, conclusive evidence of the country's commitment to putting militant actors out of commission.

The watchdog body in its latest plenary concluded that the country had "substantially completed" the two action plans it was required to implement; all that remains for Pakistan to exit the grey list is an on-site visit by a technical team to verify the steps taken. The last four years have been a sobering journey. The perception that elements in Pakistan were turning a blind eye to militancy, or worse, has cost us dearly in terms of international goodwill and economic losses. Now that this country has been nudged towards a more rational path, it must continue to stay the course.

Published in Dawn, June 26th, 2022

LNG crisis

Pakistan's energy crisis is set to worsen as LNG shortages persist. — Dawn/File

CASH-STRAPPED Pakistan's energy crisis is set to worsen over the next several weeks as it struggles to procure LNG at an affordable rate when little is available in an international market that has been sorely affected by the political fallout of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The global LNG shortages have sent the fuel's price spiralling to record highs. The state-owned LNG Ltd last week scrapped the only, but most expensive offer it has ever received against a tender for four cargoes of LNG for July shipments.

Qatar had offered an LNG shipment at just below \$40/mmBtu, which would have been the priciest for Pakistan if it hadn't rejected it. The most expensive cargo that Pakistan has ever purchased was at \$30.65/mmBtu in November 2021. This is Pakistan's third failed attempt to buy LNG cargoes for next month as it faces the threat of an escalation in blackouts that people are already trying to cope with across the country. The earlier two tenders issued in May and June had attracted three offers in total, which were scrapped as none was technically responsive.

Though the government says it is talking to various gas exporters, including Russia, to ease domestic shortages, it has so far not been able to lock any new deal to ease power outages amid surging electricity prices. Spawned by Covid-related supply disruptions and exacerbated by Russia's war on Ukraine, the spike in global energy prices has pushed domestic electricity fuel costs by more than 100pc.

The government plans to raise power tariffs by 47pc from next month to recoup some of the losses being incurred on account of expensive fuel imports. According to a report, LNG prices in Pakistan have already gone up by 40pc in recent months, despite most cargoes coming from cheaper long-term contracts with Qatar owing to expensive spot purchases by the present government in April to meet the power demand. Hence, the decision to reject the priciest LNG shipment was a prudent one.

With Russia determined not to let up until it secures its strategic targets, chances are that international gas supplies will remain tight and their prices elevated over the next several months. The situation may worsen if global supplies don't normalise before winter, when shortage of the fuel for heating will create more problems for cash-strapped countries like Pakistan.

The current supply gaps are already forcing developed nations like Germany to initiate gas rationing and consider retracting on their commitment to halt financing for overseas fossil fuel projects in a reversal of their plan to tackle global warming. Even if Pakistan manages to overcome its balance-of-payments crisis and raise funds to finance energy imports, it may face difficulty in procuring LNG due to its unavailability in the market. This looming winter supply gap calls for formulating a strategy to both minimise gas wastage and ration fuel while it is possible.

Published in Dawn, June 27th, 2022

Bloc politics

USING the platform of the 14th BRICS Summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping has made some interesting observations about the state of global politics, particularly the danger military alliances and blocs pose to world peace. In a clear swipe at the US and its allies, Mr Xi, addressing the virtual conclave, said that bloc-based

confrontation would result in “more turbulence and insecurity” while also observing that sanctions were a “double-edged sword” that “politicise the global economy”. The Chinese leader, instead, urged BRICS member states to support “true multilateralism”. In light of the Ukraine crisis, as well as US-China tensions, specifically over the Taiwan issue, the call to reassess military alliances and bloc politics needs to be heeded seriously, if any semblance of an international rules-based order is to survive.

After the Cold War, there were expectations that the end of confrontation between the two rival blocs might bring global stability. But while the communist Warsaw Pact went quietly into the night, Nato — the West’s sword arm — is very much alive and kicking. And as the Ukraine crisis has shown, the hatreds and mistrust that marked relations between the Eastern and Western blocs are very much alive. Undoubtedly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is totally indefensible. But, from a historical perspective, Moscow undertook its military adventure after its desire to join the Western military alliance two decades ago was reportedly rebuffed, and Nato started absorbing more and more former Soviet satellites, eventually ending up at the doorstep of an insecure Russia. Elsewhere, the Western bloc has firmed up military alliances against China, such as AUKUS and the Quad. Ironically, while India sits with Russia and China in BRICS, it is also a member of the anti-China Quad. While Russia and China are hardly role models of democratic governance, their opposition to Western militarism appears justified, especially in the eyes of the Global South: Vladimir Putin undertook the Ukraine offensive after witnessing the US-led West lay waste to Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. The fact is that if the West forges ahead in its attempt to isolate Russia and China, both powers will push back, and the resultant confrontation will have a debilitating effect on the global economy, particularly affecting the developing world. Therefore, both de facto blocs need to back off from their maximalist positions and disengage from conflict. Expansion of the conflict in Europe, or a military dimension to US-China rivalry, bodes ill for global stability.

Published in Dawn, June 27th, 2022

KCR dream

RAILWAYS Minister Saad Rafique has basically clarified what many a commuter in Karachi has known for long: true and sustainable revival of the KCR is not happening anytime soon. The minister made the remarks during a visit to the metropolis last week, though in a later meeting Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah told Mr Rafique that Karachi's traffic problems could only be resolved with the establishment of the commuter rail service. Once a viable and affordable option for intra-city travel, the KCR began its decline in the 1980s, and by 1999, the service had folded. Lack of maintenance and encroachments on its land were among the factors that contributed to the KCR's demise. Over the years, many efforts have been made to revive the service, with the Supreme Court pursuing the matter with particular interest. The apex court's insistence has borne some fruit, for a limited portion of the KCR was revived last year, running between Orangi and City Station. However, this can by no means be termed a revival of the original KCR circuit, which covered a far greater part of the city. Now, as the railways minister indicated, the state has pinned its hopes on Chinese help to truly revitalise the project and provide a proper urban rail system to Karachi.

The Sindh chief minister was very much on the mark when he told the railways minister that Karachi's transport woes can only be addressed by a modern urban rail system integrated with running and planned dedicated bus lines. The city has expanded exponentially, and people have to traverse long distances, and spend a lot of money, to get to their workplaces or educational institutions etc. The fact that Karachi's public transport system has practically collapsed has been highlighted numerous times in these columns. Therefore, to present a viable public transport alternative, and prevent millions more cars and motorbikes from clogging the city's streets, the KCR's revival is imperative. The state needs to ensure planning and funding are in place to realise this dream.

Published in Dawn, June 27th, 2022

Sindh LG poll mess

THE fears that many observers had about violence and mismanagement plaguing the electoral process have again materialised — this time during the

first phase of Sindh's local government elections held on Sunday. The debacle follows closely on the heels of the spectacle witnessed during the NA-240 by-polls in Karachi on June 16, when armed supporters of various political parties fought pitched battles, resulting in one death.

The LG polls, too, were not free of deadly violence. Two people were reportedly killed in brawls in separate incidents, while numerous irregularities were recorded during the election process in 14 of Sindh's districts. Voter turnout was also quite low, apparently due to a combination of fear of violence, voter apathy and scorching temperatures in many districts.

During the violence, the brother of a PTI candidate was killed in Tando Adam, while another individual was killed during a clash in Sukkur. There were also reports of election material being stolen from a Nawabshah polling station, while polling staff were reportedly kidnapped from an area in Kashmore. Considering these disturbing incidents, claims of a PPP victory in the first phase of the LG polls — as unofficial results indicated — sounded quite hollow.

What is more, nearly all parties, apart from the PPP, that participated in the LG polls have rejected the process as flawed. This includes the MQM-P and JUI-F, which sit with Sindh's ruling party in the federal coalition. There are serious allegations that the PPP used Sindh's official machinery and police force to influence the outcome of the LG polls.

PTI leader Ali Zaidi went as far as to label the Sindh Police as "PPP workers in uniforms" for their alleged role in electoral malpractices. With such a cloud hanging over the electoral process, can the first phase of the LG polls be described as free and fair?

The ECP and the Sindh government share the blame for the electoral mismanagement witnessed on Sunday. Both these state actors largely failed to provide an atmosphere where Sindh's people could choose their local representatives freely and fairly — especially as the LG polls were held in the province after a gap of seven years, largely due to the PPP's disinterest in the process. Firstly, both the ECP and the Sindh administration need to address the incidents of violence as well as the serious allegations of electoral malpractice, or else the process will remain stained.

Secondly, going forward, both actors need to ensure the second phase, due on July 24 in the remaining districts, is free from such maladministration. Elections in the second phase will be held in Karachi and Hyderabad, and considering the history of political violence in both cities all stakeholders, including political parties, will need to seriously improve their game to ensure that electoral malpractices and violence witnessed during the first leg of the process are not repeated.

Published in Dawn, June 28th, 2022

State apathy

AN individual occupying a position of power which carries with it considerable social responsibility could not be expected to make such bizarre, irresponsible statements.

In a recent TV interview, the human rights minister, PML-N's Riaz Pirzada, made the claim that some missing persons had been "engaged" by hostile foreign elements, including the detained Indian spy, Kulbhushan Jadhav. In the same interview, he also seemingly defended security forces' heavy-handed tactics in counterterrorism operations while complaining that people had only started protesting and "raising the missing persons issue" after the state took action in the aftermath of terrorism incidents in Quetta.

Instead of using his office as a bulwark against inhumane practices, the minister seemed more keen that other agencies and ministries deal with outstanding human rights issues, ignoring the fact that elements within the security apparatus are the primary cause of problems like enforced disappearances.

It is a wonder why Mr Pirzada holds the human rights portfolio when his apathy on pressing concerns is so obvious. His callous remarks on missing persons are the latest example of the state victim-blaming rather than giving families of missing persons concrete answers about their whereabouts.

While it may be true that some individuals may have joined forces with inimical powers, it is up to the state to provide facts and information when it is aware of such cases rather than obfuscate an already contentious issue with what look like half-baked accusations. It is worth asking why such information isn't shared:

is it simply because the actual numbers would weaken the state's position on the matter? The people have a right to know.

During the interview, the minister also kept insisting that his ministry was powerless and that there was nothing it could do to address major human rights concerns other than act as a post office between citizens and the state. We cannot take two steps back every time we take a step towards resolving our issues.

The Constitution on which our state stands provides protections to all citizens. No individual or organ of the state can arbitrarily decide to act in violation of its provisions. The minister would do well to revisit his stance before further damage is done to the fight for civil rights. Pandering to powerful entities and allowing them a free hand to perpetuate a culture of impunity is a great disservice to those fighting for a better future.

Published in Dawn, June 28th, 2022

Lofty but fragile

PAKISTAN is set for its busiest mountaineering season in over a decade, with over 1,400 climbers from across the world attempting to scale its majestic peaks. As many as 700 permits have already been issued to international climbers — surpassing last year's 550. Not since the 9/11 attacks in the US and the subsequent 'war on terror', which made Pakistan a no-go area for foreign visitors, has the country seen such numbers. Earlier this month, a report released by the World Economic Forum showed Pakistan had risen by six points in the International Travel and Tourism Development Index and the country seems to be luring back tourists every year. Home to five of the world's 14 eight-thousander peaks, Pakistan's mountain wilderness has always been alluring. K2, the world's second-highest peak, is the main attraction and 400 climbing permits have already been issued for it. The influx of tourists, of course, opens up opportunities for locals as well as their businesses. Around 3,000 porters have already been engaged by various expeditions, and more will be required once other climbers arrive. The tourism ministry claims it has beefed up ground and aerial rescue teams in case of any untoward incident.

However, it is a delicate balance. Mountains are extremely fragile ecosystems, and most sensitive to climate change and the impact of human activities. Nepal's Mount Everest, the highest peak in the world, is already counting the cost of increased tourism. Microplastic pollution has increased manifold, creating issues for the environment. Authorities in Nepal are looking at moving the Everest base camp situated at the Khumbu glacier, which is rapidly thinning due to global warming and increasing human activity. There are lessons to be learned, and Pakistan needs a proper waste management system in its own mountainous areas. This should go hand in hand with an awareness programme on how crucial it is to protect these sensitive regions. It is imperative to ensure that the uptick in the numbers of foreign tourists does not come at a cost to the environment.

Published in Dawn, June 28th, 2022

System imbalance

SAGGING under the weight of internal weaknesses, the political system once again seems to be wobbling towards disequilibrium.

Monday's proceedings in the National Assembly saw the government's key coalition partners reacting angrily to being 'ignored' by the ruling PML-N. They accused the party of going back on promises that were made to them before the vote of no-confidence against former prime minister Imran Khan.

Their indignation was taken seriously enough that the prime minister hurriedly invited key leaders to PM House for a dinner the same night. Over dinner, he reportedly attempted to soothe nerves and assuage concerns, while trying to keep his allies from jumping ship before his economic and political stabilisation project is completed.

That is easier said than done. Judging by the way the proceedings in the Lower House played out on Monday, it seems that the goals of the federal cabinet and the smaller parties in the rainbow coalition are not aligned with each other.

The government clearly does not have much space to be granting wishes. It cannot, for instance, do much if an ally starts asking for development funds while the IMF is breathing down its neck. It also cannot do much about ensuring Ali Wazir's presence in the National Assembly, because it cannot afford to annoy the powerful quarters who do not want to see him there. Likewise, it cannot be expected to take serious action over allegations of rigging and violence during the recent local government polls held in Sindh, which nearly every party other than the PPP has denounced as being neither free nor fair.

The government will, of course, try to find ways to appease its disgruntled partners, but it is also up to the partners to meet it halfway. In case any ally decides to jump ship because the political costs of staying get too high, it could all be over for the government. As one lawmaker reminded the treasury benches, there are only two votes keeping them there.

The prime minister must also keep an eye on Punjab, where the government is balanced on a knife-edge amidst legal challenges to its legitimacy and a make-or-break by-election due next month. A loss there could be a fatal blow.

Meanwhile, Mr Khan has announced plans for another protest in Islamabad on July 2 — exactly a day after the government's budget for the next fiscal year goes into effect. He will have sensed the growing public resentment over painful budgetary measures and likely wishes to ride it back into national relevance.

With the prime minister intent on navigating the economy out of the ongoing crisis, the challenge will be to keep one hand on the wheel while he tries to keep his government together. As the challenges mount, it will take much patience and experience to see this summer through.

Published in Dawn, June 29th, 2022

BRICS exclusion

FOR Pakistan's sustained economic progress, it is essential for the country to maintain strong linkages with multilateral bodies that focus on trade and development. In this regard, it is unfortunate that Pakistan was unable to attend the High-level Dialogue on Global Development hosted on the sidelines of the virtual BRICS summit by China. Aside from the BRICS members, a number of

states, including from this region, participated in the event, which is being viewed as the first step towards the expansion of the multilateral body. The Foreign Office says “one member” blocked Pakistan’s attendance, with sources telling this paper that India — a founding member of BRICS — was responsible for this country’s exclusion. This, sadly, is the same attitude that has resulted in the paralysis of Saarc. Moreover, the authorities need to explore the reason why China did not push harder for Pakistan’s inclusion in the event, even though decisions within BRICS are taken with the consultation of all members. And though the FO insists Islamabad-Beijing ties are as strong as ever, irritants, if any, must be removed using diplomatic channels to ensure that bilateral relations remain strong.

It is possible that China is concerned about the security of its nationals working in Pakistan, especially after the terrorist attack at Karachi University in April in which three Chinese citizens were among the victims. The state needs to convince Beijing that it is doing all possible to ensure the security of Chinese nationals, and to bring to justice those responsible for terrorist attacks targeting Beijing’s citizens. However, it must also be said that were it not for China’s behind-the-scenes help, Pakistan’s exit from the FATF grey list would have been more difficult. It is therefore hoped that bilateral cooperation continues at the highest levels, and Pakistan is able to one day join BRICS and other development-focused bodies. Where India’s malevolent actions towards this country are concerned, there needs to be a new thinking in the subcontinent that focuses on cooperation instead of perpetual confrontation. India’s efforts to isolate Pakistan internationally will do little to bring peace to the region. Instead of indulging in mutually damaging behaviour, both states need to start afresh and work towards regional integration and South-South cooperation in general. Pakistan, thus, must liaise with its foreign friends, and keep channels open with perceived external foes, to ensure that this country has representation at all forums where developing economies gather for mutual benefit.

Published in Dawn, June 29th, 2022

Covid resurgence

PAKISTAN is facing yet another wave of Covid-19 infections, with health experts predicting a surge in hospitalisations by next week. Sadly, pandemic fatigue is

writ large everywhere — with no one bothered about wearing masks at restaurants, shopping centres, wedding halls, offices, etc. People are going about their daily lives without following safety precautions, endangering themselves and others. During the past few days, hundreds of cases have been recorded all over the country, and infections are steadily rising. The highest number of cases are being reported from Karachi where the positivity rate touched 22pc. Other cities too have reported relatively high rates of Covid infections — Mardan has a positivity rate of 9pc, Hyderabad 8.5pc, Islamabad 3.45pc and Peshawar 3pc. The fresh wave of infections is being attributed to a super contagious Omicron subvariant, the BA2.12.1, which was first detected in the country in the second week of May. But lethargy has prevailed in the weeks since its detection. According to officials, the number of reported cases and positivity rates of different cities have more than doubled since the previous week, indicating the fast transmission of the virus. Some health officials attribute this rapid transmission to the hot and humid weather prevailing in many areas of the country. Though the NCOC, now part of the National Institute of Health, has instructed people to wear masks while travelling by public transport and on domestic flights and trains, other parallel measures by the federal and provincial governments remain conspicuous by their absence.

It is against this background that a meeting of the NCOC was held on Tuesday where the authorities decided to ramp up testing, ensure contact tracing and undertake aggressive campaigning to promote mask-wearing. It was reported that the Sindh government might soon announce a strategy for curbing the alarming rise in infections. The authorities should implement strict prevention measures at the earliest, because even a moderate rise in hospitalisations in the current economic climate might prove too much for the country's fragile health infrastructure.

Published in Dawn, June 29th, 2022

Attack on polio team

THE threat of deadly violence never seems to diminish for health workers and police officials involved in door-to-door polio vaccination campaigns in the country. On Tuesday, two policemen and a health worker were killed when unidentified gunmen opened fire on them in North Waziristan's Datakhel tehsil.

The attack took place in the Tang Kali locality near the Pak-Afghan border. This is the second such attack since January this year when a policeman escorting a vaccination team was shot dead in Kohat. The attack in North Waziristan has come on the heels of an aggressive resurgence of the wild poliovirus in the area. Since only April this year, at least 11 cases of the wild poliovirus have been reported from a cluster of high-risk union councils. These cases had surfaced after a hiatus of 15 months that had given hope that Pakistan might be on the brink of eliminating the crippling disease from its territory. However, as the attack demonstrates, Pakistan still has a long way to go before achieving polio-free status. Moreover, refusals still remain high in North Waziristan. According to reports, silent refusals by parents and fake markings on children's fingers were one of the key reasons for the abnormally high number of cases.

Though the investigation is still ongoing, the latest attack on the polio team reflects the high mistrust of official authorities in this area. The issue of refusals is a long-standing one, and WHO and Unicef on many occasions have asked the Pakistani authorities to address the problem of missing and invisible children who remain outside the umbrella of immunisation campaigns. On the other hand, as the wild poliovirus remains endemic only in the Pak-Afghan region, cross-border coordination for its elimination is the need of the hour. Recent events have made it clear that aggressive campaigning for the administration of the polio vaccine is no longer enough, and that a wide-ranging, sensitive and strategic effort is required to address the public's suspicions regarding the government's anti-polio efforts.

Published in Dawn, June 30th, 2022

More 'prior actions'

JUST when we thought that everything with the IMF had finally been settled for the resumption of its stalled bailout funds, the lender has come up with new 'prior actions' before it signs the staff-level agreement with Pakistan and releases the dollars badly needed to shore up our declining foreign currency reserves and prop up the rupee.

The Memorandum of Economic and Fiscal Policies received by Pakistani authorities from the lender the other day clubs together the pending seventh and

eighth performance reviews of the programme. That will help Pakistan receive up to \$1.9bn but not before the government does a little 'more' to earn it. Resultantly, the approval of the agreement and consequent release of the funds have been delayed to end July or early August. This will, in all likelihood, delay the 'unlocking' of other committed multilateral and bilateral assistance and dampen market sentiment, even if temporarily.

Indeed, most new loan conditions pertain to the measures the government has already committed to with the Fund. But the lender wants those to be formalised and given legal cover.

For example, it has asked the government to sign an MoU with the provinces to jointly produce a cash surplus of Rs750bn to help Islamabad meet the condition of keeping the consolidated fiscal deficit for the next year at around 4.9pc of GDP. Then, the Fund wants the government to present the plan to impose a petroleum development levy of up to Rs50 a litre on fuel to the cabinet for its approval to meet an enhanced PDL target of Rs855bn before concluding the deal. Likewise, the IMF wants a series of structural benchmarks such as the increase in electricity prices to be implemented prior to finalising the staff-level agreement.

Editorial: IMF agreement

However, the 'fresh' demand for complete deregulation of the petrol pricing mechanism allowing the market to determine its retail prices could still be a sticky issue. The condition is understandable given revenue losses of about Rs200bn due to the previous government's politically motivated decision to cut prices and freeze them for four months.

The implementation of most of these prior actions shouldn't take more than a week. The government has already conceded a lot to revive the programme by making a fiscal adjustment of over Rs1.7tr or 2.2pc of GDP, the biggest adjustment in a single year, mostly through further taxation on existing taxpayers whether businesses or individuals, at the cost of the political capital of the ruling coalition, especially the PML-N.

In such circumstances, it is unfair of the IMF to defer the approval and release of its funds for another five to six weeks, given that the delay will bring more pressure on both the fiscal and external accounts and hurt market sentiment. It,

therefore, is crucial that the Fund reconsider its stance and release the funds at the earliest to calm the uneasy markets.

Published in Dawn, June 30th, 2022

Growing power crisis

THE country's escalating power crisis risks exacerbating the law-and-order situation as people take to the streets in the hardest-hit areas. Moreover, the energy crunch has hit telecom companies hard, with a spill-over effect likely to hamper communications and deliver a blow to businesses dependent on seamless internet connectivity, leading cellular mobile operators have warned. Therefore, the power crisis risks spawning several new crises. Major power riots are already being witnessed in Karachi, with people venting their anger against prolonged cuts in the sweltering weather by staging protests in several areas of the city. Among the worst hit has been the Mauripur Road area, where residents of Lyari and the surrounding neighbourhoods staged a lengthy protest on Tuesday. Bedlam was witnessed as police tried to reopen the key artery, resorting to baton charge and tear-gas shelling. An elderly protester lost her life during the melee, though police deny she died due to their actions. According to media reports, the national energy shortfall on Tuesday was a massive 9,000MW, with Karachi, Peshawar and Multan reportedly the most affected cities. Meanwhile, the leading cellular firms of the country have written to the government, warning that if prolonged power outages and restrictions on the import of batteries continued, there could be a disruption in telephony and data services due to blackouts at towers.

Subjecting people to lengthy power cuts — often unscheduled — in such unforgiving weather is indeed inhuman. But, unfortunately, there is little the government can do at this point, especially in the midst of a grave fuel shortage, to rectify the outcome of years of mismanagement. People are unable to get a good night's rest, while high fuel costs rule out the use of generators for those who possess them and UPS systems are unable to be fully recharged. Water supply is also curtailed due to the power cuts. The frustration thus snowballs until enraged people hit the streets. The minister of state for petroleum has said that loadshedding will be overcome by mid-July, though the state needs to work on ways to save electricity — for instance, by ensuring that markets close early —

even as it works out a long-term plan to address shortcomings in the energy sector. With regard to the concerns of the telecom providers, the government needs to liaise with them and see how their issues can be addressed. If communication and digital commerce avenues are compromised, it will only add to people's woes.

Published in Dawn, June 30th, 2022