

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of March 2019

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Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

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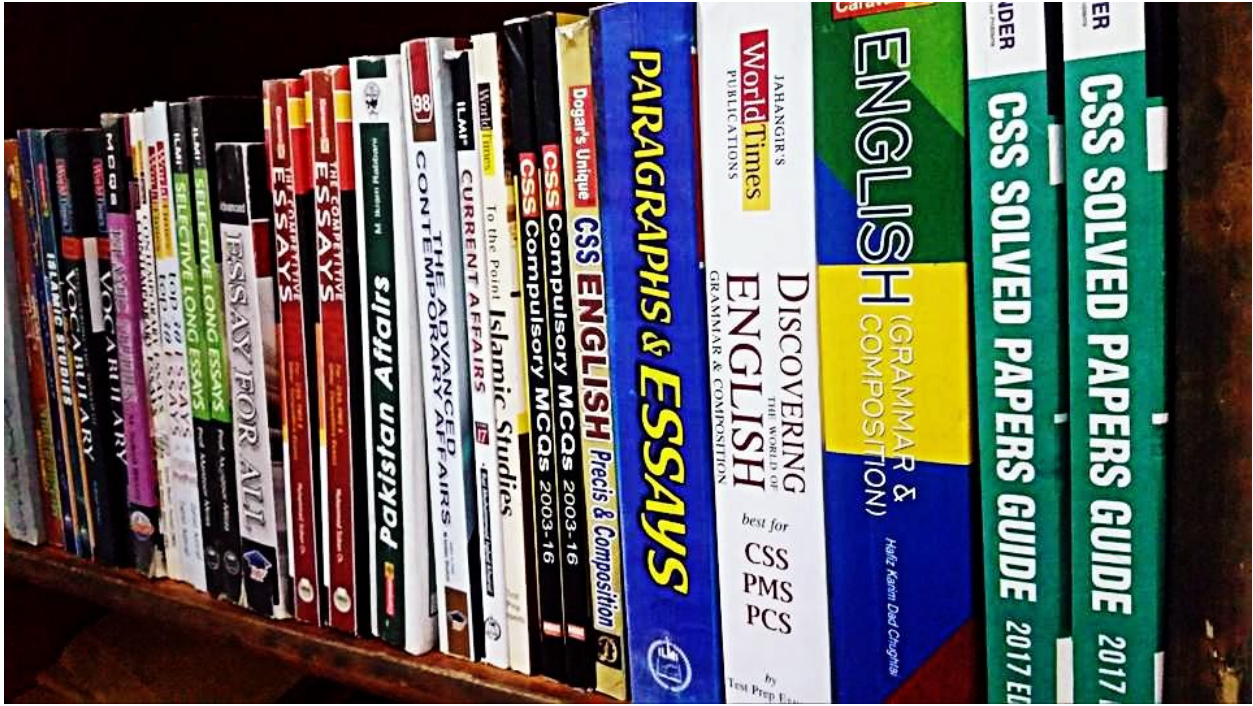
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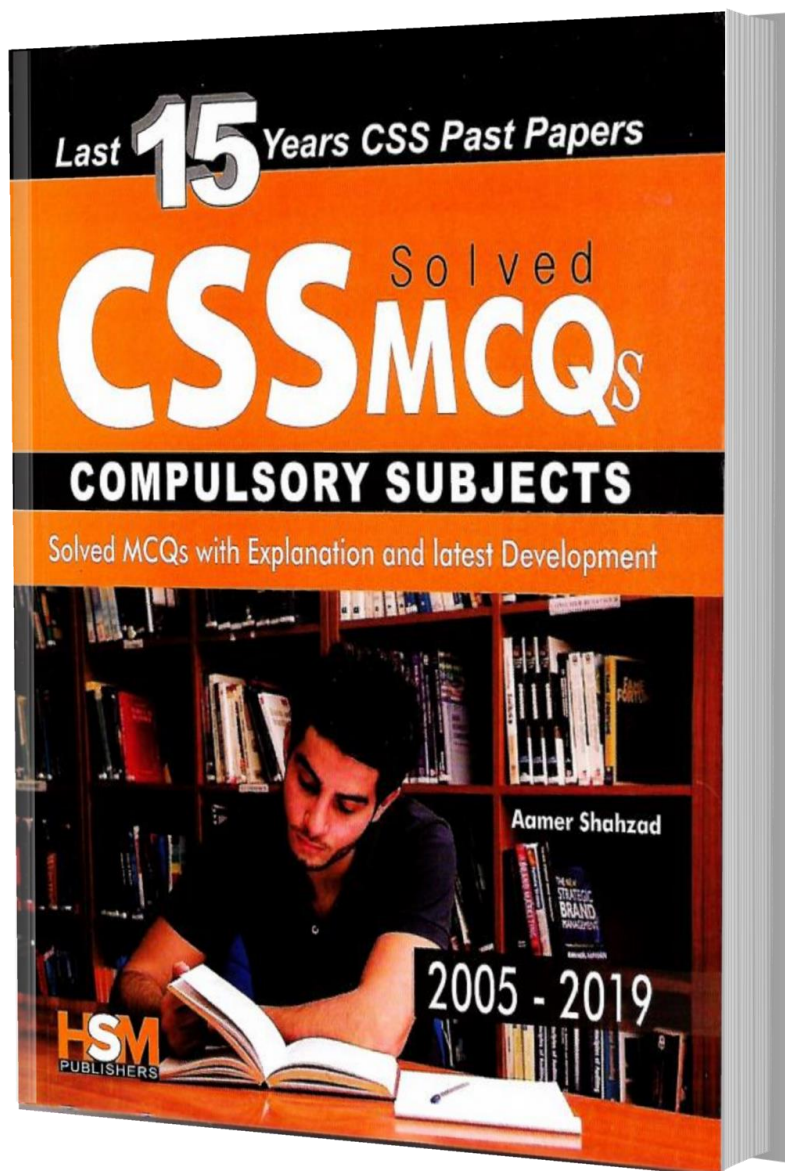
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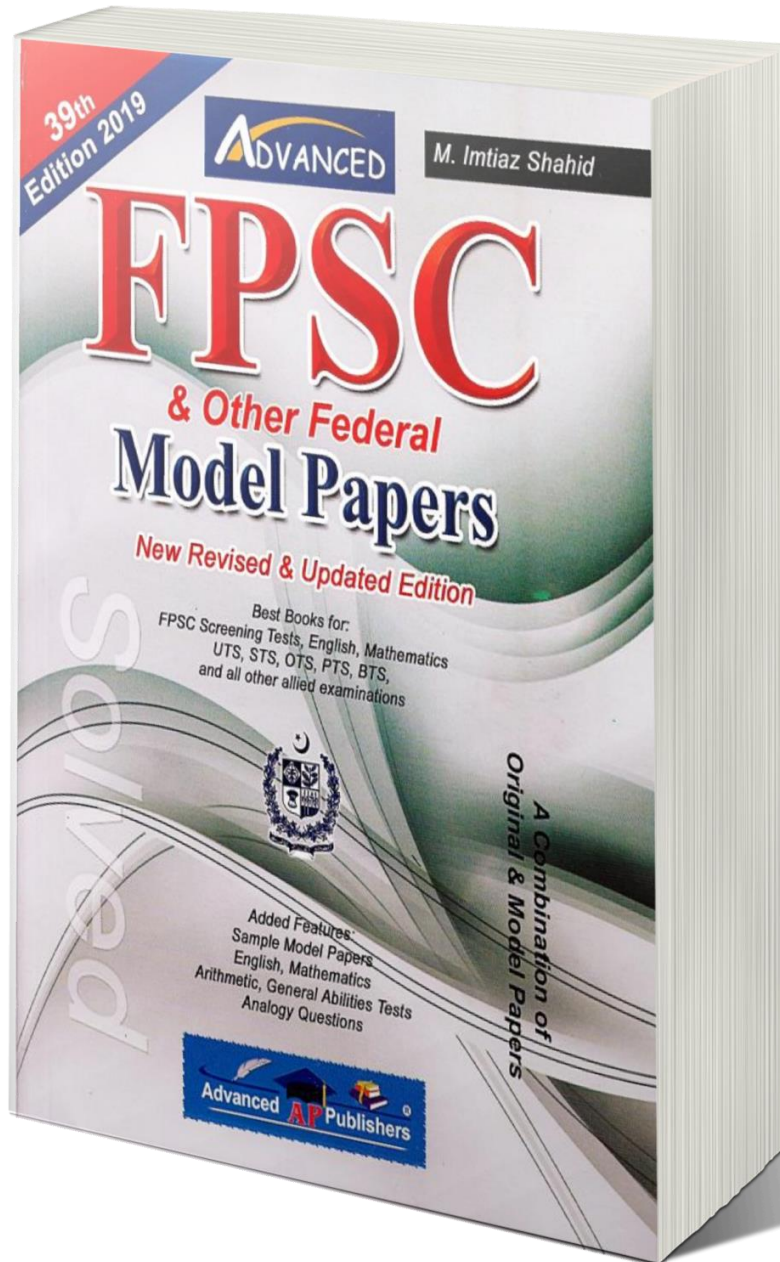
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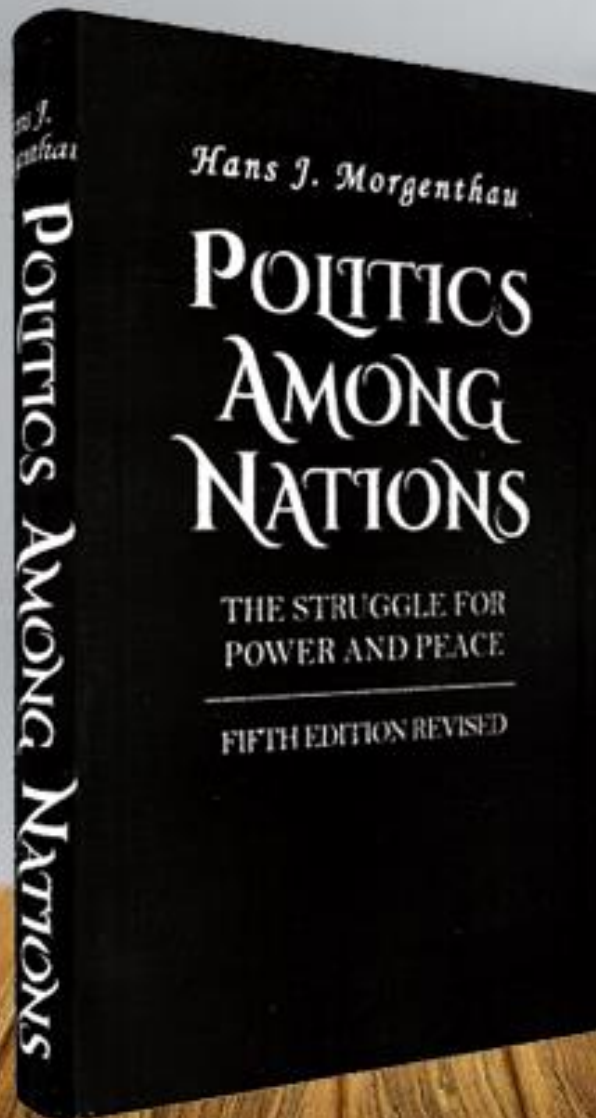


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Time for diplomacy

AFTER successive days of hostilities between Pakistan and India, Wednesday brought a respite from significant military action. Indeed, yesterday was dominated by Prime Minister Imran Khan's announcement that the Indian pilot captured by Pakistan will be returned to India today.

The swift announcement by Prime Minister Khan could help defuse a crisis that should not be considered over until India clearly and unambiguously signals that it intends to cease military hostilities.

A news conference held by representatives of India's armed forces after Mr Khan made his surprise announcement could be interpreted as a step in the right direction: no new threats were made and the focus was on the Indian version of what transpired earlier in the week.

Yet, it will almost certainly take more urgent diplomacy by the international community and a significant change in Indian rhetoric and actions before the risk of conflict, or worse, can be deemed to have receded at this stage.

The announcement by Prime Minister Khan that Pakistan will release the captured Indian pilot today was greeted by loud applause in parliament.

Throughout the present crisis, the national leadership has emphasised that while Pakistan reserves the right to defend itself against external aggression, Pakistan does not want and is not seeking war with India.

The prime minister has termed the pilot's release a "peace gesture", and New Delhi should use it as an opportunity to recast the discourse inside India, which has drifted dangerously towards jingoism and pro-war sentiment in recent days.

With so much of the war discourse focused on abstract and, arguably, removed-from-reality notions of pride and definitions of success, the captured Indian pilot has provided a human face to the potential costs of war.

Soldiers and the average citizen on both sides are on whom the costs of war would fall first, and disproportionately so. Policymakers and war architects must never be allowed to forget that reality.

There is a need also for the media, particularly in India, to dwell on its irresponsible role in seemingly cheering on armed hostilities between the two countries.

The Indian media immediately and overwhelmingly cheered on the Indian state's claim of having targeted an alleged militant training camp in Pakistan, while sections of the Pakistani media celebrated the downing of an Indian warplane and the capture of the pilot.

In the main, the media in neither country has attempted to factually contribute to the national discourse; it has focused, instead, on promoting unchecked and unverified state narratives.

A meaningful and sustainable ratcheting down of tensions will only occur when the leadership, media and influential elements in society in each country focus not only on what is required of the other country but also on the actions and introspection necessary in their own. It is hoped that the de-escalation will be swift and that a deep introspection follows in both countries.

Back to renewables

THE government has made the right decision to reopen the proposed investments in renewable energy that had been blocked last March. The renewable energy policy framework is in a state of flux at the moment as the new policy is being discussed among various stakeholders. There will undoubtedly be some level of discontentment within the renewable energy industry in Pakistan at the caveats in the decision, such as making those whose tariff determinations are more than a year old return to the regulator for fresh tariffs, which will doubtless be substantially reduced. Given the speed with which renewable energy tariffs are dropping worldwide, a system run by a single tariff-setting body like Nepra will struggle to keep pace. This is creating malignant incentives in some cases, where those who got in the door early have locked in very high tariffs competitive with thermal power for the next 25 years, while those left out have to see their tariffs being whittled down as time passes. This naturally creates unhappiness at the sheer disparity between the returns being made by different parties.

To really ignite the renewable revolution in Pakistan, the government needs to reconsider the model of setting upfront tariffs in the first place and, instead, move towards a market-based pricing regime. On top of that, we need to move away

from the model of large utility-scale projects and build the right structure of incentives to promote point-of-consumption generation for solar power — which basically means having solar rooftop panels, and encouraging people to invest in them. Simply tweaking the tariffs will only garner more wrangling among industry players as prices around the world continue to fall rapidly. This means a near-complete rethink of the private power policy under which all power generation has been contracted in this country for almost a quarter of a century now, and which has opened the doors to large-scale abuse and rent-seeking behaviour within the power sector. This government campaigned on the promise of change, particularly big change of the transformative type. In the power sector, it has a clear opportunity and mandate to work towards this objective. A surplus in power generation means there is a few years' gap in which to put in the plans, and the list of private investors ready to enter is quite long. The solar moment is now, will the government seize it?

Passengers' ordeal

WHEN the war drums are beating, the impact on citizens' lives in practical ways is immediate. On Wednesday, for example, more than 150 domestic and international flights were cancelled after the Civil Aviation Authority announced that it had closed Pakistan's airspace to all air traffic from 12.30pm to 5am on Thursday. Thousands of would-be passengers, some of them undoubtedly travelling for urgent reasons, or catching connecting flights for further destinations, were greatly inconvenienced. They were at least more fortunate than those on a Dubai-bound flight, whose experience was reported on this paper's website yesterday. According to one of the passengers, the plane was fully boarded and awaiting take off when it was announced that the flight had been cancelled and everyone had to disembark. But that was only the beginning of their ordeal. The passengers were told that since no vehicles were allowed within the vicinity of airport, they would have to leave the terminal on foot, lugging their suitcases — which took three hours or so to arrive — to the nearest main road in order to catch a lift back home. There were no arrangements to transport even the elderly and the ailing.

The spectre of a full-blown conflict between Pakistan and India has many people rattled, and understandably so. In such a situation, precautionary measures are necessary to prevent citizens being put in harm's way. The closure of the airspace is perhaps one aspect of this modus operandi; one cannot even argue with the

abruptness with which it was announced. That said, surely airport authorities should be better prepared for such eventualities, or at least scramble to make alternate arrangements that would lessen the passengers' distress. Could the airport's own vehicles not have been put into service to transport the passengers to the main road? The security protocol may say nothing more beyond the mandatory disembarkation of passengers once the closure of airspace is in effect, but what about the airport authorities' responsibility towards the travellers' well-being?

Towards normality

SLOWLY and incrementally, the region may be limping back towards relative normality, but there is still much to be done before the current crisis can be deemed to be over. Yesterday, Pakistan reopened its airspace and major airports in the country outside Punjab. Moreover, the Indian pilot captured after his plane crashed in AJK was repatriated to India as pledged by Prime Minister Imran Khan a day earlier. Meanwhile, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa had a number of meetings and telephone conversations with diplomats and military officials of international powers in which, according to a tweet by DG ISPR Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor, the army chief emphasised that Pakistan "shall surely respond to any aggression in self-defence". Incongruous, then, was Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi's announcement that he would boycott the OIC's Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in the UAE because of an invitation by the organisation to Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj to address the meeting.

Foreign Minister Qureshi's announcement was by and large supported by the national political leadership in the joint session of parliament — and it could represent a missed opportunity. In the midst of a crisis with India, to reject an opportunity to put across Pakistan's point of view to the OIC countries is a decision that will do little to advance this country's diplomatic position. Pakistan has improved ties with the UAE, which is hosting the 46th OIC Council of Minister meeting, and Saudi Arabia, which has significant clout in the OIC, after a dip following the Saudi-led war in Yemen. With those countries also seeking better ties with India, perhaps the UAE summit could have been an opportunity for mediation between India and Pakistan. And even if India is likely to have balked at mediation, the OIC ministerial summit has given Ms Swaraj an opportunity to make her case unanswered by Pakistan.

What remains to be seen now is how the Indian government responds to the return of the captured Indian pilot. The political opposition in India has begun to ask tough questions of the narrative put forward by the BJP-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, but hawkish elements in Indian politics and the media may try and push for further reckless action. If the peace gesture of Prime Minister Khan is spun as a victory in India, it could create a climate in which the Indian state will not only refuse to reconsider its repressive policies in India-held Kashmir but perhaps be tempted to consider fresh action against Pakistan. For its part, Pakistan must continue with its measured response of pledging to act only in self-defence, while emphasising the need for peace in the region. Domestically, the National Action Plan ought to be revived in light of recent events and the fight against extremism be taken up with vigour.

Hanoi summit

WHILE some foreign policy observers have described the recent summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Hanoi as a 'failure', perhaps it would be premature to rush to judgement. After all, in international diplomacy there are very few overnight successes, and seemingly intractable disputes take time and effort to resolve. This is the two leaders' second meeting; the first was arranged last year amidst much fanfare in Singapore. As per the reports emerging from the Vietnamese capital, North Korea was expecting full sanctions relief, while the US wanted Pyongyang to shut down its nuclear programme entirely. Expectedly, neither was willing to budge from its maximalist position, and the summit wrapped up without any significant agreement. However, as is clear from the statements of the US leader — "We just like each other", he said while referring to Mr Kim, while calling the Korean strongman "a character" — the possibility of future talks between the two states cannot be ruled out. Moreover, the diplomatic activity and exchange of pleasantries is in stark contrast to the name-calling both leaders indulged in not too long ago.

But beyond the photo ops and headlines, it will take significant effort to bring peace to the Korean Peninsula, perhaps the last Cold War battlefield. The goal should be to bring North Korea out of isolation and integrate it into the global mainstream. For that, the US needs to seriously consider lifting sanctions as a genuine gesture of peace towards North Korea. In return, Pyongyang should agree to reduce its nuclear arsenal and pledge not to threaten any state with the weapons. Of course,

this is easier said than done. However, China — considered North Korea's closest foreign ally — can play a role by convincing Pyongyang that it is better to engage with the world than to remain in isolation, while the more economically prosperous South Korea can also offer its neighbour incentives for peace. Also, while the bilateral efforts may produce results, perhaps a multilateral effort — led by the UN — would bear more fruit where bringing North Korea in from the cold is concerned. The communist state must be assured by the global community that its security will be promised and sovereignty respected. With bold diplomatic steps and a workable plan, it may be possible to bring peace and democracy to the Korean Peninsula, perhaps paving the way for eventual reunification.

Revenue shortfall

WELL past the mid-year mark in the fiscal year, the revenue performance of the FBR continues to lag behind its target. Latest figures for the first eight months of the fiscal year, from July to February, show that growth in revenue collection remains at a muted three per cent where it has stood more or less at the close of every month so far this year. With a persistent shortfall every month ranging anywhere from Rs30bn to Rs75bn, the total revenue shortfall has grown to Rs235bn for the first eight months of the fiscal year. At this rate, it is set to zoom past the Rs300bn mark before the fiscal year ends, making the job of the budget drafters that much more difficult as budget season approaches. Already this fiscal year has seen two separate mini budgets, both initially aimed at reducing the fiscal deficit, but which turned out to be exercises in doling out 'incentives' to industry in the hope that a quick revival would help bring about an auto correction in the growing fiscal imbalance.

That thinking is proving to be wrong with each passing month. Fact of the matter is that incentives to industry tend to work with an extended lag, at best, and often get consumed as rents before yielding any benefits for the state, whether in the form of increased exports or accelerating growth rate. This is not to begrudge the benefits that industry has been able to get from the government since it came to power. But the government needs to realise that it needs a vision on the revenue side more urgently with each passing month. Simply applying more pressure on the revenue apparatus as it stands, and serving more and more notices on private individuals and entities while ceremonially acknowledging those who are paying

large amounts of taxes, does not amount to a vision. The time to start working on such a vision is now so that it can be launched with the budget in June.

LoC attacks

THE continuing danger in the region has been bloodily underlined by ongoing violence along the Line of Control.

The violence has claimed the lives of four individuals, including two soldiers, in Azad Kashmir in what Pakistani authorities have described as unprovoked Indian attacks across the LoC.

India alleges that there have been several casualties on its side of the LoC, though this claim remains unverified as there are very few settlements along the LoC in India-held Kashmir.

Locals residing nearest to the LoC have had to either evacuate or retreat to bomb shelters.

Explore: 'We nearly die when we hear the guns': Families near LoC rush to build bunkers as fears grow

The peace gesture that Prime Minister Imran Khan had announced and has delivered with the repatriation of the captured Indian pilot on Friday evening does not appear to have had an immediate positive impact on the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

While there has been much focus on the statements of security strategists, war architects and cheerleaders for belligerent state action, it is important to not lose sight of the very human cost of conflict that is being inflicted on the people of the Kashmir region.

Read more: Who are the real victims of India-Pakistan tensions? It's Kashmiris

Yesterday, a BBC journalist tweeted pictures and a video of what he described as a “heartbreaking” situation in Azad Kashmir. The journalist filmed and photographed homes that were destroyed in Indian attacks across the LoC, the efforts of a lifetime, perhaps generations, wiped away in a moment.

From Kotli, the journalist showed a picture of three young boys lying injured on adjacent hospital beds and wrote the following: "These three brothers lost two siblings and their mother when their house was hit this week. The neighbours who rescued them can't bring themselves to tell them their mother is dead ... their father died years ago (not in cross-border firing) so they're orphans now."

Meanwhile, families across the LoC continue to suffer because of the repressive tactics by the Indian state. The situation of the Kashmiris is indeed heartbreaking.

Read more: [The human cost of Indian shelling across the LoC](#)

The past week has seen South Asia and the world once again confront the possibility of an unthinkable war between India and Pakistan breaking out.

That outright war will inflict incalculable losses has been brought vividly into focus by all right-thinking and sensible people in the region and beyond. But even in the absence of a war, the ongoing violence along the LoC demonstrates that misery and hardship can be inflicted on local populations in the name of esoteric theories, policies and tactics.

Perhaps few actions are as futile as the LoC attacks that continue with no end in sight.

It cannot be emphasised enough that it is the Kashmiri people who are suffering — in the name of defending the area.

The LoC violence must cease forthwith, the weapons must fall silent and the locals must be allowed to return to a semblance of a normal life.

Citizens of nowhere

THE plight of the Rohingya Muslims stems from their history of statelessness. Marginalised and discriminated against since the birth of the independent Burmese nation, or perhaps even before that, the 'world's most persecuted minority' was stripped of its citizenship status in 1982. The Rohingya, who are largely concentrated in Myanmar's impoverished Rakhine state — where their movement is limited and under constant state surveillance — are not even included in the country's list of 135 official ethnic groups. With no country to call their own, they are effectively rendered refugees in the world. Over the decades, hundreds of thousands have fled to Bangladesh, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to escape state oppression and the prison-like conditions they live under. But it was in 2016 that the world witnessed one of the worst horrors of our times play out, as evidence began piling up of what has been described as a genocide of the Rohingya people by the Myanmar military. Mass graves were unearthed, children conceived from rape were born into squalid refugee camps, and satellite images showed entire villages razed to the ground. Thousands of men, women and children crossed through dangerous waters and hostile territories to make their way into refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh. There are now over a million refugees living in Bangladesh, out of which around 700,000 crossed the border between August 2016 and December 2017 alone. Last year, another 16,000 Rohingya entered Bangladesh.

Now the Bangladeshi foreign secretary has told the UN that his country cannot accommodate any more refugees and is closing its borders. He further voiced his frustration at the inaction of the global community to help rehabilitate refugees, while reserving his harshest criticism for the Myanmar government. Indeed, it is unfair to expect a developing country like Bangladesh to take on such a massive burden of which the fault rests with the Myanmar military and government. It is also incomprehensible why the Rohingya would be willing to return to their 'home' given that Myanmar's government has failed to give assurances that they will be safe from another bout of violence. And it is especially shameful that the global community seems to have forgotten about the massacre they do not have to witness on their television screens anymore, as it washes its hands of any collective responsibility towards these citizens of nowhere. But it is unlikely the victims will ever forget.

Rescue 1122

THE Balochistan government's decision to set up a directorate and task force for the implementation of Emergency and Rescue 1122 services in the province is a welcome move that will provide some relief to the people there. The emergency service will be initially run from Quetta; it will be connected to the national highways, and there are plans to gradually expand operations. It will follow in the steps of Rescue 1122 in Punjab, which has saved thousands of lives in the province since its inception in 2004. It has been emulated with success in parts of KP too. The state of healthcare in the entire country is severely neglected, especially in its least developed province. If implemented, the service can help save many lives or provide first-aid emergency services in a fractured healthcare system with few state-run hospitals and long distances to travel in between. The few government hospitals in the province are inadequately staffed and lack even basic amenities; private hospitals are scarce and cannot be accessed by those who are unable to afford it; and charitable endeavours are limited.

Balochistan has high poverty and low literacy rates — with all their attendant discontents. It has experienced some of the worst effects of climate change and has grappled with the vagaries of nature; flash floods and drought have been common in recent years. It has also been one of the worst victims of terrorism, with some of the most terrible attacks in the country taking place within its precincts. Many lives are lost due to the lack of ambulances and readily available first-aid services; some people pass away just waiting for an ambulance to arrive, or during the often long journey to the hospital in carriers that lack the required life-saving equipment. Pakistan once broke the Guinness World Record for having the largest volunteer ambulance service in the world, thanks to the altruism of one man, Abdul Sattar Edhi. But private efforts can never make up for the inadequacies of the state.

Effective diplomacy needed

AS a new week begins and after a day of relative quiet on the Pakistan-India front, it is time for Pakistan to consider its next response to Indian belligerence in the region.

There are two main aspects to be considered.

First, the Kashmir dispute is once again on the international community's radar after India's wanton aggression against Pakistan. While Pakistan may not necessarily have gained much international sympathy in the stand-off with India, at a minimum the global community is once again aware of the perils of an unresolved Kashmir dispute. This, then, is an opportunity for Pakistan to diplomatically pursue the cause of the Kashmiris, particularly the violently repressed people in India-held Kashmir. Whatever the world is willing to believe about the rivalry between India and Pakistan, it is indisputable that the state of India has unleashed monstrous violence in occupied Kashmir that has caused the people of that region to rise up in mostly peaceful opposition.

If Pakistan is to effectively draw the international community's attention to the plight of the people of IHK and the overall Kashmir dispute, a sustained and coordinated diplomatic strategy will have to be deployed. Beginning with Pakistan's close allies in international forums, efforts should be made to initiate a debate on Kashmir and draw attention to India's actions in all international organisations. With the world having witnessed Indian belligerence in recent days, there may be a greater international appetite to assess the root causes of the ongoing tensions in this region.

Certainly, India is likely to push back against attempts to discuss its actions in IHK, but the role of effective diplomacy is to advance a principled position against reflexive opposition. Pakistan can and should beef up its diplomatic efforts at this time.

The second aspect to be considered is an urgent revival of the National Action Plan and the domestic fight against extremism. For Pakistan's lobbying on the Kashmir dispute and on behalf of the repressed people of IHK to be effective, there is also a need for a domestic reckoning against extant militant networks. Until now, when Pakistan has attempted to very rightly draw the world's attention towards Indian violence in IHK, the world has often chosen to emphasise Pakistan's need to do more against militant groups that are considered to be still active in Pakistan, despite being banned.

This county must fight all forms of terrorism, militancy and extremism for its own existence, security and well-being.

As Pakistan seeks to draw the world's attention to India's action in IHK, the world must not be handed an excuse to continue to look away at India's behest. Pakistan must do all that it can to bring the world's attention to IHK.

Educated extremists

THE trope of the madressah-educated or illiterate extremist from an impoverished background was comprehensively shattered when Saad Aziz was arrested for high-profile terrorist attacks in Karachi. Coming from a well-to-do family, the young man was a graduate of one of the country's most prestigious business schools. Yet, inspired by the militant Islamic State group, he went on to commit a number of heinous crimes — several within the span of a few weeks in the summer of 2015. On Thursday, an anti-terrorism court sentenced him to 20 years in prison for the attempted murder of American educationist Deborah Lobo in Karachi. Aziz, along with his accomplices, has already been sentenced to death in May 2016 by a military court where he was standing trial in 18 cases. Among these was the murder of rights activist Sabeen Mahmud, the targeted killing of policemen and the Safoora Goth massacre.

In 2010, Faisal Shahzad, an MBA from an American university and son of a senior Pakistan air force officer, attempted to detonate a bomb in New York — a crime for which he was sentenced to life imprisonment in the US. However, Shahzad seemed an aberration, a product perhaps of unique circumstances far from home. On the other hand, the arrest of Aziz and his accomplices five years later as suspects in multiple acts of terrorism was a watershed moment. It laid bare the fact that a radical mindset had been stealthily taking root among young, educated Pakistanis, who were now turning on their compatriots in savage acts of violence either directly or as co-conspirators. More arrests along similar lines followed in subsequent years. The case of Naureen Leghari, the medical student who travelled to Syria and received training from the IS, illustrated how even women from sheltered backgrounds can be lured into acting upon a Manichaeian worldview. These developments have been an inevitable outcome of allowing extremist ideologies to percolate through society for years; ad hoc and inconsistent efforts are not enough to effectively staunch their spread. Disaffected youth,

however privileged, not only in Pakistan but even in the West, can be drawn to narratives that appear to offer them an active role in 'righting' or avenging perceived wrongs. Having gained some respite after years of bloodshed, one should not assume that the danger posed by toxic ideologies has passed. A culture of debate and critical thinking is yet to be inculcated in society.

Peace prize?

IS it any wonder that it is Narendra Modi whom a South Korean Prize Committee has chosen to honour? Given the demands of geopolitics, one shouldn't be too surprised if the Indian prime minister gets a Nobel prize as well.

Each year the Nobel committee honours men and women who work for peace and for humanity's good. Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Yasser Arafat and our own Malala Yousafzai fall in this category. The recipients, for the most part, are deserving. But there is often the odd choice.

Consider the following. Like many Ashkenazi Zionist leaders who 'returned' to Palestine, Nobel laureate Menachem Begin was born in Belorussia, then part of the Czarist empire. He gained notoriety for his terrorism activities in 'mandated' Palestine, where he worked for a Zionist militant outfit. His tour de force was the bombing of King David Hotel in Jerusalem on July 22, 1946. The bombing killed 91 people, including 17 Palestinian Jews. As Israel's prime minister, and despite having innocent blood on his hands, Begin received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978. Four years later, he invaded Lebanon leading to mass civilian deaths, including the ones in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila.

Now, more than seven decades later, another leader accused of large-scale murder has received the Seoul Peace Prize.

Under the watch of Mr Modi, then chief minister of Gujarat, 2,000 people were killed in an act of carnage that sent shockwaves across the world. His 'keep away' order to his police enabled a mob to go on a killing-and-arson spree. A Muslim lawmaker was burnt alive. New Delhi-based EU diplomats who visited Gujarat concluded that the architect of the killings was the chief minister himself.

No wonder, many Western countries refused to grant him a visa — a decision later revoked when he became prime minister. In future, it would be better for an

organisation conferring such an award on the likes of the BJP leader to call it anything but a peace prize.

Palestinian rights

THE American establishment has always been in thrall to Israel. However, the Trump administration has shed all pretences of maintaining a measured attitude where the Arab-Israeli dispute is concerned, time and again demonstrating that it is firmly, unwaveringly on Israel's side. Perhaps the biggest example of this came late in 2017 when the Americans decided to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and relocate their embassy to the holy city from Tel Aviv. That this move flew in the face of international opinion apparently did not matter as far as Donald Trump and his team were concerned. Now, Washington has gone a step further and decided to shut down the US consulate general in Jerusalem (which was its primary conduit in the city to the Palestinians) and merge its operations with the US embassy.

While on the surface it may seem like a simple administrative move, it is clearly not, as the US is sending a strong message by further downgrading its links with the Palestinians, and pushing them to the margins. American officials have said the move was made for reasons of "efficiency", but the Palestinians beg to differ. As Hanan Ashrawi, a senior member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation put it, the merger of the consulate with the embassy is a "political assault on Palestinian rights and identity". Basically, Washington is indicating that in the Arab-Israeli dispute, it is Israel that matters to them, and the Palestinians are small fry whose rights can be ignored. However, the US should not forget that this demeaning attitude towards the Palestinian people will only breed more contempt for Washington in the Arab and Muslim world, and will send the message that where the Palestine question is concerned, the Americans cannot be trusted as impartial negotiators.

But perhaps the Trump administration is taking such brash steps because it knows that major players in the Arab world are willing to bypass the Palestinians and their rights in a bid to establish official relations with Israel. Sadly, the two-state solution as envisaged under the Oslo Accords is today an anachronism, with no one to stop Israeli expansionism and the Zionist state's brutal treatment of the Palestinians. And to add insult to injury, a 'peace plan' being trumpeted by Mr Trump's son-in-

law and Middle East point man Jared Kushner is being forced on the Palestinians. From the details available of this plan, it is all but a declaration of surrender for the Arabs, and a statement of victory for Israel. As experts have said, no Palestinian will be willing to accept this deal, which apparently, among other things, calls for the Palestinians to forget about Jerusalem/Al Quds. And with Jewish fanatics infiltrating Israeli politics and capturing state power, it is unlikely the Arabs of Palestine will get back their land, or their rights, anytime soon.

Bigoted minister

FAYYAZ Chohan, the improbably titled — now former — Punjab minister for information and culture, has once again demonstrated his boundless capacity for uncouthness and bigotry.

A video of him has emerged on social media that shows him making vile, derogatory remarks against Hindus in his trademark combative style. The occasion was an event in Lahore on Feb 24, and his words were ostensibly in response to India's aggressive anti-Pakistan rhetoric after the Pulwama attack about 10 days earlier.

'Never underestimate power of social media': Twitterati welcome Chohan's removal over anti-Hindu remarks

The video unleashed a storm of condemnation on social media, with many calling for the minister to be sacked from his post. Very appropriately, senior PTI leaders — including among others Shireen Mazari, Naeem ul Haque and Asad Umar — sharply rebuked Mr Chohan for his diatribe, reminding him that Pakistani Hindus are part and parcel of the country. The minister apologised for his speech, saying that he was addressing Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian armed forces and Indian media, not Hindus in Pakistan. That was not, however, enough to save his job and yesterday he was removed by the Punjab chief minister.

No one's religion should be used as a means to denounce or incite contempt against them; we know full well the kind of violence such words can instigate. Moreover, Mr Chohan cannot claim in his defence that he was only targeting certain Indian members of the Hindu community when adherents of that faith live within Pakistan as well. By his words, he has insulted our fellow Hindu citizens and

embarrassed his government that has only recently reiterated its resolve to act against all forms of extremism.

The age of faith: Religious intolerance in Pakistan

Unfortunately, Mr Chohan's remarks are indicative of a particular mindset in Pakistan. Far too often here, national identity is conflated with religious identity, even by the representatives of the people — Muslims, Hindus, Christians, et al. As a result, minorities can be made to feel that their love for this country is not a given. Instead, they must prove it over and over again by meeting an exacting standard not required of the majority.

Not that we are alone in the region where bigotry is concerned: an even more extreme version of it is evolving in Modi's India, with Indian Muslims suffering the brunt of the country's 'saffronisation'. Thankfully, the government on this side of the border has come out strongly against Mr Chohan's faux 'patriotism' and demonstrated that it will not tolerate such noxious views.

Rabies prevention

A QUICK look at the news in the past few days shows that there is a serious shortage of rabies vaccination in hospitals across the country. But this is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, Pakistan has consistently had a shortage of rabies and immunoglobulin vaccines, despite suffering from a relatively high percentage of dog bites. While only a few of the dogs turn out to be rabid, the number of deaths by rabies in the country is uncertain, as no wide-ranging study has been carried out. In rural areas, rabies has been found in sheep and cattle as well. Unfortunately, even though death from rabies is a horrifying sight, there is little knowledge among the general population and even medical practitioners in the country about what preventive steps to take. In case of a bite from a suspected rabid animal, the wound has to be washed with soap and running water; an anti-rabies vaccination has to be administered; and immunoglobulin injected around or inside the wound — all within the span of 12 to 24 hours of being bitten. But many medical practitioners skip these steps, or do not have the correct vaccination readily available.

Shamefully, until three years ago, outdated vaccination that was discarded by WHO was still being distributed in Pakistan. Currently, there are only four

companies in the world that create prequalified vaccines, that is, certified by WHO after a long process of evaluation of their safety and effectiveness. While all rabies vaccination is costly, prequalified vaccines from two companies in India are cheaper. Because dogs are the main carriers of rabies in urban centres, the knee-jerk response by authorities is to carry out mass stray dog culling. But this is not the solution. What the authorities must do is, one, set up a national rabies programme immediately; two, make prequalified vaccines and immunoglobulin available at all hospitals at a reasonable cost; and, three, raise awareness of rabies prevention amongst the local population and the medical community.

FATF action plan

THE finance secretary has warned that Pakistan risks coming under sanctions if the action plan given to the Financial Action Task Force is not implemented in full. Considering that he was present at the latest meetings of the global terror-financing watchdog held in Paris, and personally witnessed the proceedings, his warnings need to be taken seriously.

The prime minister has struck the right note in emphasising the National Action Plan once again and issuing the necessary orders to seize the assets and halt the operations of proscribed outfits. In the days to come, the resolve behind this move will be tested, and it is important that the government's focus not be diluted as it moves ahead to clamp down on banned outfits here.

Also read: 'Instead of accusing, world should assist Pakistan in fight against terrorism'

The finance secretary's remarks suggest that Pakistan had a difficult time at the Paris meetings of FATF last month. Eight organisations were named in the FATF press release issued afterwards. This is unusual, because while these groups have always been at the heart of Pakistan's dealings with FATF, they had never been named previously.

Pakistan on FATF's grey list: what, why, and why now?

Apparently in the run-up to the Paris meetings, Pakistan had submitted a terror risk assessment matrix to the Asia Pacific Group, the regional grouping of FATF to which Pakistan belongs. In that, it had designated the eight named groups as 'low risk', and this created problems in the Paris meeting. India seized the opportunity

and tried to rally countries to put Pakistan on the blacklist with immediate effect; it took strenuous diplomatic pushback from the government to pre-empt that move.

Having narrowly averted being blacklisted in February, the government must not allow history to repeat itself. The same steps have been taken by previous governments as well, only to be allegedly stymied by the powerful handlers that these groups have.

The presence of these groups drove Pakistan towards a difficult position internationally and imposed a steep economic cost as the country's financial system was flagged as being open to risk of terror financing. The grey listing, as it is known in FATF parlance, was lifted with great difficulty and much wrangling back in 2015 against Pakistan's commitments of further action against these groups. However, whatever action was taken was clearly not enough, and the country slipped back onto the grey list.

Today, we face the prospect of being put on the blacklist if concrete steps are not evident to what will undoubtedly be a sceptical FATF audience in June. These groups and their existence on Pakistani soil have become much more than a nuisance and an embarrassment.

It is quite clear that none of them should have any presence here. The finance secretary's remarks need to be absorbed fully and earnest action against proscribed groups must be taken immediately to eliminate the scourge once and for all.

De-escalation time

WE can perhaps breathe a sigh of relief. After several days of heightened tension between Pakistan and India following the Pulwama attack in India-held Kashmir, the signs of de-escalation are apparent. Islamabad's high commissioner to India should be soon on his way to New Delhi, and Pakistan says there will be no change in the schedule of negotiations with India regarding the much-awaited opening of the Kartarpur Corridor. A Pakistani delegation will travel to India for talks on March 14, and the Indians will reciprocate on March 28. If this happens, it would be a remarkable turnaround considering the fears of the people of Pakistan and India following the recent aerial misadventure by the Narendra Modi government. The build-up to a possible conflict had caused grave concern the world over, amid a

successful retaliatory strike by Pakistan and claims by the Imran Khan-led setup that the Modi administration had planned more raids into Pakistani territory. Such raids could have triggered a full-blown war of unprecedented consequences between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

However, on the face of it at least, this de-escalation has been a one-sided process, with the rulers in Delhi, who will be contesting an election this summer, maintaining a defiant, often intimidating, posture to all international requests and pleas for normalisation. The Khan government may be justifiably given credit for the decrease in tensions, but it knows how difficult it is for Pakistan to have a sustained dialogue with India. The latter, meanwhile, has preconditions: before holding talks that could lead to the path of normalisation, it wants Islamabad to take action against non-state actors on Pakistani soil suspected of conducting attacks in IJK and India. This is a sensitive subject not least because often the accusations are politically motivated and aimed at weakening Islamabad's principled position on occupied Kashmir which has been subjected to some of the worst forms of violence at the hands of the Indian forces. The situation is, indeed, very precarious and will continue to be unless India adopts a more flexible approach and engages in talks. The effort for peace has to continue with a clear understanding of all the factors that can easily scuttle a lifeline such as Kartarpur. Following the recent escalation in hostilities along the Pakistan-India boundaries, peace will look all the more fragile, and require protection against the agents of disruption who are forever looking for internal and external reasons to sell war.

PSL in Karachi

THE Pakistan Super League fever that has gripped the nation since last month is now approaching its last leg of eight matches commencing in Karachi over the weekend. The league, now in its fourth edition, has managed to generate excitement and competition to boost the morale of home fans after many contests in the UAE. With the PSL carnival set to begin in Karachi's revamped National Stadium, a number of top foreign and national players are likely to be seen in action. Fans will now witness five teams out of the six battling it out for the playoffs and eventually for the grand finale on March 17. The PSL's success augurs well for a country that has otherwise grappled with issues like political uncertainty and terrorism during the past decade and a half.

However, the security situation has vastly improved in the last three years. Cricket-starved fans in Pakistan are hoping that future editions of the PSL will become a home project. This would also fast-track the return of international cricket to the country. Having said that, the government and the PCB must ensure that security measures pose the least inconvenience to the thousands of fans who will be arriving to watch the match. As many as 13,000 policemen are to be deployed. Besides, several stringent security measures will be in place such as body scanners and mandatory checks of CNICs, while parking spaces in and around the stadium will be off limits, subjecting the fans, including women and children, to a long walk to the venue. Also, excessive focus on security measures are bound to send the wrong message to leading foreign teams like Australia, England, New Zealand and South Africa who have not toured Pakistan since 2009. So what better time than this to dispel that impression? It is imperative that the authorities send a message to all that while there will no compromise on safety, this will not prevent people from enjoying the game.

Struggle for space

AS women around the world gather to celebrate and show solidarity on International Women's Day today, Pakistan must reflect on where it stands with regard to women's rights.

Since Independence, and leading up to it, women have played an important role in upholding democracy. And while many have progressed socially and economically, others continue to be excluded, particularly the poor, who live under the oppression of both poverty and misogyny.

Take a look: How far women's struggle has pushed us forward

The modern women's movement in Pakistan traces its roots to 1981, when the Women's Action Forum organised against Gen Ziaul Haq's anti-women and anti-minority laws. Since then, there has been much more awareness, vocalisation and mobilisation for rights. While only a handful of activists put themselves on the front lines in the battle for change, and suffer the consequences for such agitation, everyone benefits from their labour in the long run.

The impact of women's campaigning can be seen in progressive policy as well as legislation enacted through the years, particularly in Sindh, which passed the Sindh

Child Marriage Restraint Act in 2014, increasing the age of marriage to 18. But while each generation saw a greater demand for rights, there was a simultaneous blowback from regressive quarters, and new challenges arose over time.

Also read: Women in Pakistan most vulnerable to harassment on Facebook, WhatsApp, says report

For instance, recent unprecedented technological advancements have led to another set of challenges: intrusion of privacy, stalking and gender-based bullying and sexual harassment. As more women enter the workforce, they are confronted with sexual harassment at the workplace and unequal treatment. Then there are women whose labour is not even recognised by the state, as it is relegated as 'informal work'.

Nevertheless, many pro-women and pro-children laws have been passed over the years, including the Women's Protection Act in 2006, which reversed some draconian clauses of the 1979 Hudood Ordinances (that saw the criminalisation of thousands of rape victims), brought rape under the Pakistan Penal Code, and made DNA evidence acceptable.

Pakistani law for women: A friend or foe?

In 2010, the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act was passed. Sindh and Balochistan passed the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act in 2013 and 2014, while Punjab passed the Protection of Women Against Violence Act in 2016.

That same year, another law abolished the loophole which allowed murderers who kill under the pretext of 'honour' to avoid imprisonment. The Acid Control and Acid Crimes Prevention Act, 2011, saw a significant decrease in the number of victims of the heinous crime.

Despite these laws being passed, there is little awareness of them among the general population, and a lack of sensitivity training for law-enforcement personnel. Until all forms of entrenched misogyny are rooted out, and until all women, men and transgendered people enjoy complete equality before the law — and until that law is implemented in letter and spirit — the struggle for greater space, representation and respect will continue.

Acts of impunity

A RECKONING of law-enforcement officials who abuse their power and act as judge, jury and executioner appears nowhere on the horizon. In a breathtaking display of callous indifference to public safety, the Punjab government has reinstated DIG Tahir Rai as head of the provincial counter-intelligence police. He had been removed from his position in the aftermath of the Sahiwal extrajudicial killings on Jan 19 in which a couple along with their teenage daughter and a family friend were shot dead by a CTD team. The horrific incident occurred when the victims' car in which they were travelling came under a hail of gunfire by the police. Nevertheless, CTD officials had the gall to claim that four 'terrorists' were apprehended in the 'intelligence-based operation' and that they had been killed "reportedly as a result of firing by their own accomplices". The blatant fabrication, one of several, was exposed by eyewitness accounts, including that of the couple's minor son who sustained a bullet wound in the incident. It soon emerged that three of the dead had no connection whatsoever with any terrorist organisation. In the ensuing furore, the IG Punjab declared that no one involved in the incident would escape punishment.

Yet, that is exactly what is poised to happen. The process began with attempts to discredit the young boy's account of how his family was massacred and gathered pace with alleged evidence of tampering by the police. The fight against terrorism has become a convenient pretext for law-enforcement personnel to commit a multitude of sins with absolute impunity. 'Terrorist' is a catch-all label, used to justify an epidemic of 'police encounters'; the fact that the cops themselves are rarely even grazed by a bullet in these purported shootouts raises no questions. On the contrary, so broken is the criminal justice system that a so-called encounter specialist like Rao Anwar can reach retirement without facing a single inquiry for his alleged crimes. The former SSP has yet to be indicted for the extrajudicial murder in January 2018 of Naqeebullah Mehsud — one among the nearly 450 people who, according to the police's own records, were killed in staged encounters ordered by Rao in Karachi's Malir district. As the Sahiwal case shows, the system shamelessly continues to protect its own. The government must not be party to the perpetuation of a cycle of violence and injustice that renders security more elusive than ever.

Stanley Wolpert

IN the very first sentence of the foreword to his book, *Jinnah of Pakistan*, Stanley Wolpert informs his readers what makes Jinnah a unique character in world history. “Few individuals,” he says, “significantly alter the course of history. Fewer still modify the map of the world. Hardly anyone can be credited with creating a nation state. Mohammad Ali Jinnah did all three.” This comes closest to, or perhaps surpasses, Aga Khan III’s view of the Quaid-i-Azam. Says the spiritual head of the Ismaili community in his *Memoirs*: “Of all the statesmen that I have known in my life — Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Churchill, Curzon, Mussolini, Mahatma Gandhi — Jinnah is the most remarkable. None of these men in my view outshone him in strength of character, and in that almost uncanny combination of prescience and resolution which is statecraft.” Obviously, Wolpert could not have done justice to Jinnah and to giants like Gandhi and Nehru whose biographies he wrote if he weren’t a scholar of history with an insight into the culture that developed because of Hindu-Muslim interaction spread over a thousand years. He was quite prolific, for his books on South Asia include a monumental *New History of India*. This profundity of knowledge enabled him to grasp the intricacies of the political, constitutional and — yes — violent struggle that ultimately led to the end of the Raj and the birth of what was then the world’s biggest Muslim country population-wise.

Jinnah of Pakistan traces the development of the Quaid’s personality from Bombay to London, where the law was his “universe”, to his return to India to be called the “ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity” till he realised there was no alternative to a sovereign state for South Asian Muslims. His book is replete with references to Dawn and the role this newspaper played in the Pakistan Movement. He kept writing for Dawn, and the last article he wrote was in one of this paper’s supplements celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of Pakistan. His scholarship will be missed.

A new FBR: miles to go...

IT is hard to tell whether Prime Minister Imran Khan’s warning to ‘create a new FBR’, if the existing one fails to live up to expectations, is an off-the-cuff remark or whether there is serious intent behind it. The PTI manifesto deals extensively with

the Federal Board of Revenue and promises to turn it into a completely autonomous body, like the State Bank. It talks of an empowered tax authority that will be able to operate independently of government interference. In his first televised address to the nation, Mr Khan had also promised to begin his reform agenda with the FBR. The tax body has occupied an important place in his party's scheme of change for the country, and if today the prime minister insists that he will build a new FBR, one can see a string of earlier such commitments that were made but that his government has so far not acted on.

The problem is that building a new tax authority is easy to talk about but difficult to accomplish. Thus far in all its consultations with its various advisory bodies, there has been no serious conversation under way about reforms in the revenue-collection authority. Back in November, a measure to separate the policy and operation wings of the FBR was announced with much fanfare. We were told that this would be a revolutionary step and would pave the way for deep-rooted tax reform in the country. Nothing much has come of this step. A cell has apparently been created within the finance division to deal with tax policy, but this is little more than a cosmetic measure. Other than this, the tax authorities have delivered a number of tax notices to certain high-net-worth individuals in the hopes of obtaining compliance, as well as realising some revenue. But over the past 10 years at least, successive governments have undertaken this exercise numerous times, and even though it helps keep some people on their toes regarding tax compliance, it yields little by way of structural change or revenue mobilisation.

In the meantime, the revenue shortfall is starting to bite. Latest data shows that the shortfall so far has reached Rs235bn and continues to increase. The tax effort is faltering and Prime Minister Khan is issuing emotional appeals to business leaders to pay their taxes as a national duty. Meanwhile, the finance minister also castigated the tax authorities for being too harsh in their dealings with the business community, and singled out issues such as the complexity of tax forms as inhibiting compliance. If there was any serious will or capacity on the part of the government to build a new FBR, surely its public utterances on tax matters would be far weightier than this. Revenues are key to stabilising the economy, and the government needs to get serious about it.

A brave voice

WITH the brazen murder of Afzal Kohistani, the main petitioner in the infamous Kohistan video scandal, a courageous voice has been tragically silenced. Afzal was shot dead in Abbottabad on Thursday evening by “unidentified gunmen” who escaped from the scene.

The murder comes weeks after Afzal demanded that law enforcement provide security to protect him from rivals who were threatening to kill him. He ominously spoke of a jirga which allegedly planned to kill him; he even said the Hazara police should be held responsible if something were to happen to him.

Know more: Kohistan girls case remains a mystery

Known to rights activists and the media as the central character who exposed the Kohistan jirga case — the alleged murder of eight boys and girls by members of their tribe after a mobile phone video of them at a wedding in a remote Kohistan village emerged on social media — Afzal was an unflinching advocate for justice, who challenged the violent tribal tradition of ‘honour’ killings to bring the suspects to task.

The brother of one of the boys in the video, Afzal made the news public, alleging that the girls had been killed in 2012 on the orders of a cleric. Former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry had taken suo motu notice of the case the same year and constituted a fact-finding mission which stated after investigations that the girls in the video were alive. Afzal, however, maintained they were dead and that false testimonies had been given.

His fearlessness and conviction finally bore fruit when a fresh case was registered last year, leading to the arrest of three suspects who confessed to killing the girls. But despite all his efforts to uncover a brutal murder, the state failed Afzal Kohistani. Despite court orders for his security, he was brutally gunned down in a bustling street by those who wish to silence voices that speak out against regressive traditions and senseless violence.

Afzal’s life — which is an inspiring lesson of perseverance in a society where self-righteous elements can kill over a self-created honour code — must not be eclipsed by his brutal murder. The KP government must launch a sincere probe into his killing, and also investigate why he was not provided with security despite the threats he was receiving. Those who orchestrated his murder and that of the girls and boys in the video are enemies of a free-thinking and progressive society, and must not be protected or ignored at any cost.

Drap CEO's removal

IT is a sad comment on the way things work here. The head of the Drugs Regulatory Authority of Pakistan was recently removed from his post when it was confirmed that the PhD he cited in his resumé was issued by an unrecognised university in Sri Lanka — that is if such an institution existed and if it ever issued that degree. It was this 'degree' that had tipped the scales in favour of the good former doctor when he had applied for the Drap job. For the cynics, getting the job on the basis of a fake degree was perhaps not too remarkable a feat, since, according to earlier news reports, the eager aspirant already had the improbable distinction of being resurrected from the dead. Yes, the same government officer had, allegedly, managed to escape an official NAB inquiry by faking his own death — although we have few details about how he managed to pull off that stunt. It is perhaps in keeping with how things operate here that he landed the senior-most job at a regulatory authority that has the task of protecting lives by curbing the sale and manufacture of all fake and spurious drugs.

And yet, whether one is shocked by the story or sees it as par for the course, it surely needs deeper inquiry. While much remains murky at this point, it would be appropriate to at least raise some questions. Given how prevalent the scourge of fake degrees is in the country, why was there no thorough background check of the erstwhile CEO's educational credentials? More importantly, how was the gentleman in question appointed to the post despite having been declared as deceased in NAB references against him — although he claims there was a typographical error in the documents? Truth may be stranger than fiction, but in this case it boggles the mind as to how an individual could get past many levels of officialdom, virtually unhindered, to become the head of an important national body. Indeed, it is not only the former Drap CEO who deserved to lose his job.

Crackdown in earnest

THERE can be no more kid-glove treatment, no more exceptions. Certainly, the state's crackdown against militant groups and its labelling of them as high-risk entities hereon subject to greater scrutiny shows it is moving with the urgency required of it. It must, if Pakistan is to meet the FATF's May deadline and avoid international sanctions that would likely send its economy into a tailspin. The

countrywide operation began just a day after the government included JuD and FIF in its list of banned groups. Provincial administrations sealed or took control of hundreds of madressahs, schools, mosques, etc run by these groups, as well as JeM, the already banned jihadist outfit that claimed responsibility for the Pulwama attack. The most significant action perhaps was that of the Punjab government taking over JuD's main centre in Muridke and barring its chief Hafiz Saeed from leading prayers. If, as alleged by the international community, the JuD leader has long been 'accommodated' by the Pakistani state, then this signifies a stunning reversal of fortune for him. Over 100 members of JuD, FIF and JeM have also been taken into preventive detention.

There is a need for absolute, unwavering clarity at this juncture. Compliance with FATF demands aside, acting against each and every militant group on its soil is a strategic necessity if Pakistan is to secure its future as a dynamic, forward-looking nation. Such groups cannot be 'managed'. Their inherently violent tendencies cannot be turned on or off at will. Moreover, at some level, militant groups — even those that do not carry out attacks within Pakistan — enable each other, if indirectly; all of them thus pose a security risk for the country. Mainstreaming some of them into electoral politics only radicalises mainstream political discourse. It opens the door for ultra-right elements that already boast formidable street power to enter the legislative arena and directly impact policymaking. Extremist ideologies, largely unchecked since decades, have also facilitated links of local terrorist outfits with violent pan-Islamist groups, and sullied Pakistan's global image.

This paper has repeatedly warned of the perils that lie in a selective approach to militant groups. Had the National Action Plan been implemented in its entirety, rather than under the exogenous pressure of the FATF, Pakistan would not have had such a formidable task on its hands today. That said, it is time to look ahead. The fact that the civilian and military leaderships are finally in agreement on the issue should enable the ongoing operation to be carried out more effectively. Local police and district administrations will play a pivotal role in dismantling militant infrastructure at the grass-roots level. Moreover, the state must lose no time in bringing prosecutable charges against at least the hardcore activists it has taken into custody: preventive detention will enable them to easily obtain bail from court. The time for half measures is over.

Saving a sanctuary

“NOW you are safe.” This simple message greets those who enter the Violence Against Women Centre in Multan. It is a statement many would take for granted, but for women attempting to escape from and seek justice for gender-based violence — in full knowledge of how vulnerable they are to violent, often fatal, reprisals — it represents sanctuary, a light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. But safety isn't merely born of a refusal to endure intolerable cruelty. The journey from victim to survivor is lengthy and arduous, especially while navigating a legal system in which patriarchy is deeply embedded and, in case after case, demonstrably privileged above the intrinsic rights of women. In recognition of the complexities of GBV, the Multan VAWC (a major initiative of the former provincial government's gender reforms agenda) is a one-window holistic operation providing shelter, first aid, medical and forensic assistance, police reporting and investigation, legal aid and rehabilitation services to victims. From March 2017 to February's end this year, 2,934 cases were documented by the centre — thousands of women possibly saved from becoming yet another grim statistic of harassment, assault, domestic abuse, 'honour' killing and more, not to mention the potential deterrent effect on abusers knowing that, at least there, a woman's testimony would be taken seriously. Such is the power and promise of the VAWC.

Two years since it opened its doors, however, the VAWC is itself in need of protection since its funding was suspended by the caretaker government last June. Its devoted staff, keeping the orphaned centre alive for nine months without salaries, is now forced to go on strike. Whereas the Multan centre was conceived as a flagship enterprise with more units slated for other cities across Punjab, the current government, now in office for over six months, has done little other than cite political and bureaucratic rigmaroles in response to earnest calls to restore funding and ensure the project's long-term viability. Women do not need their male representatives to make pretty speeches while playing petty politics on an issue so central to their lives. True leadership would recognise a visionary concept when it sees one, particularly when it is aligned so closely with the PTI's pledge of being guardians of the vulnerable. It would ensure that the VAWC's beacon does not go dark, and commit to bringing change for women across Pakistan by lighting more.

Return of artefacts

THE rightful ownership of heritage and artefacts is always a contentious issue — and more so in places where there is history of colonialism or foreign domination. It is also a topic that has figured in the conversation of partitioned states when they have had to decide how to divide their archaeological heritage. However, the ownership of heritage can also come under discussion within countries themselves. As an example, consider the fact that the National Museum in Karachi until recently had in its possession thousands of artefacts that had been excavated from Balochistan, most of them between 2,000 and 6,000 years old. The ostensible reason was that Balochistan has no museum of a stature where these could be adequately displayed for the public to help promote the history, culture and traditions of the area.

It is, then, a positive step that over 20,000 artefacts were handed over to the Balochistan government by the Sindh authorities recently. These include pottery, seals and coins excavated in Balochistan, from archaeological sites in several parts of the province. One hopes that these will now see the light of day (many of them had reportedly been stored in the basement of the museum in Karachi) and become a source of both learning and revenue. A museum in Quetta is still under construction, and many of the items, for the time being, will be housed in a cultural complex on the premises of the province's directorate of culture and tourism. Indeed, there is much to be showcased from this archaeologically rich province, and hopefully the Balochistan government will make further efforts in this direction. The challenges are numerous: for instances, work on the ancient site of Mehrgarh, one of the world's oldest settlements, has stopped as a result of tribal hostilities that have seen a number of relics destroyed on the site. This is nothing short of vandalism. The earth must be allowed to yield up its treasures that have been hidden from the human eye for millennia.

Fake news & war hysteria

OVER the past few weeks, the war drums have been beaten at fever pitch in South Asia.

Fortunately, although the danger of conflict has not entirely subsided, tempers have cooled considerably in the region.

This may be a good time, then, to deconstruct the build-up, climax and climbdown of the latest saga that brought Pakistan and India to the brink of war.

While much has been said about the political, military and diplomatic dimensions of the crisis, greater attention needs to be paid to the coverage of the events by the media, specifically fake news and the “currents of misinformation”, as one New York Times columnist put it, that surrounded the episode.

Propaganda, in times of both war and peace, is not new, as states have employed the media to wage psychological warfare against their opponents.

From Goebbels’ slickly packaged lies about the ‘glory’ of the Third Reich to the regular exchanges of propaganda between the Americans and the Soviets during the Cold War, the modern age is one that has seen misinformation deployed with aplomb.

However, in the age of social media and citizen journalism, fake news has become a powerful and extremely dangerous tool in the hands of state and non-state actors, where misinformation and outright lies are peddled shamelessly to mislead the public.

Lynch mobs have murdered people over WhatsApp rumours while conspiracy theorists and others of their ilk have found an open field for feeding people lies through social media.

In the context of the recent Pakistan-India stand-off, the media on both sides has indulged in peddling propaganda and airing fake news.

At the outset of the crisis, India claimed killing 300 militants in the Balakot strike; as independent observers later noted, Delhi was hardly truthful in its assertions.

Moreover, armchair ‘generals’ on prime-time talk shows egged on their respective establishments towards war; the Indian media was particularly vitriolic in its shrill anti-Pakistan pronouncements.

It is important, for the sake of peace and the prevalence of truth, for saner minds in South Asia to rationally analyse the media coverage of the recent stand-off.

It should not be forgotten that the basic duty of the media remains truth telling, not leading the dance of war.

There are plenty of journalistic and social forums in South Asia that can be used to discuss how to handle such situations in future, particularly how to counter fake news — and editors can take a leading role in this.

In a region of over one billion people, and with both states possessing nuclear weapons, the stakes are simply too high to let the hawks and armchair warriors of the media play cheerleader for war.

The goal is responsible and accurate reporting, while there should be zero tolerance for fake news and conspiracy theories being trotted out on TV screens and websites in sensitive times.

Pror representation

TO celebrate International Women's Day, over 70 stock exchanges across the world saw women leaders from the business community ring the bell for greater gender representation. In Karachi, 15 businesswomen took part in the global event, as they rang the bell at the Pakistan Stock Exchange on March 8. It was a symbolic event, but one that highlighted an important issue: the lack of gender diversity in the corporate sector, particularly here at home. Empowering women in the economy and closing gender gaps is mentioned in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Yet, despite all the rhetoric of equality that corporations use each Women's Day, in reality few women actually break the glass ceiling. Last year, for instance, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report assessed 149 countries on gender equality on four indicators: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment. Pakistan held the second last position at 148. Then the Women on Board Pakistan trust in a survey found that there were only 41 women chairpersons, 10 CEOs and 11 CFOs in the 506 companies they surveyed in 2018. Out of 3,942 directors, a mere 11pc were women. Meanwhile, the State Bank has also encouraged credit provision to women entrepreneurs to help more women set up their businesses. It is unfortunate though that an SECP regulation declaring that all public interest licensed companies should have at least one woman on their board was recently relaxed for the time being.

Until a conscious effort is made to introduce and implement affirmative action and job quotas by the state and private sector, not much will change on the ground for women. And this extends beyond the corporate world to all professions where women are underrepresented, discouraged from entering, or forced to leave due to a hostile environment. It is certainly not because of lack of qualification or lack of competency that there are fewer women in the workplace or in positions of

authority, but more likely due to societal, cultural and familial stigmas and constraints. The belief that women belong in the home is so ingrained in our collective psyche that it will take generations to eradicate it. But we must start working towards it today. It is now a widely accepted fact that economically empowered women benefit the economy and help eradicate poverty. In other words, when women prosper, society prospers.

Not enough judges

It is a point worth noting. Supreme Court Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa has indicated, with all the restraint his office demands, that it is not the judiciary but 'someone else' who is responsible for the huge number of cases pending before the judiciary. His latest remarks with reference to the reasons why no genuine hope about clearing the backlog of 1.9m cases in the country can be entertained has come on the back of his mission statement about judicial reforms. From the outset, the chief justice has expressed a keenness to set the judicial house in order. His suggestions include the setting up of a three-tier system in which the responsibility of ascertaining case facts rests with the judges serving up to the high court level so that the Supreme Court is free to deal with questions of constitutional interpretation. Lingering at the back of all this, however, has been the crucial matter of an insufficient number of judges who can hear new and old cases. Justice Khosa rightly thinks that the numbers need to be sorted out quickly — clearly, by those who have the powers to legislate in aid of both the people and the judiciary.

Indeed, the figures are depressing. There are only some 3,000 judges and magistrates available to a population of over 200m. And what is worse, the chief justice has reconfirmed that a staggering 25pc of positions in the Pakistani judiciary are vacant. This shortage is reflected painfully in the huge backlog of cases that is a source of inconvenience for litigants, even though the statistics show that an effort is under way to fast-track the legal process. For instance, and once again the figure is provided by Justice Khosa, the courts in the country decided some 3.1m cases during the last year, with the heavily burdened Supreme Court disposing of no less than 26,000 of them. If this figure shows a praiseworthy effort, a much-needed increase in the number of judges is the next step needed to serve the cause of justice.

Repatriating ‘IS brides’

THE case of Shamima Begum has triggered a fierce debate in the UK on how to respond to the issue of citizens who joined the militant Islamic State group in Syria now seeking to return home. Born and raised in Britain, Shamima was just 15 when she left in 2015. Discovered last month in a Syrian refugee camp, nine months pregnant and unrepentant, she nonetheless wished to return home. Her statements triggered a wave of moral outrage in the country, with Home Secretary Sajid Javid leading the charge to block ‘terrorists’ from entering the UK, and stripping Shamima of citizenship — a move decried as effectively rendering her stateless, thus contravening Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. News of her newborn’s death emerged on Friday, a tragedy that might have been avoided had they been repatriated to the UK.

There has been some contrite policy revision since, with the Foreign Office indicating that it was mulling ways to bring children of British IS fighters back to the UK. But with reports that two more British women of Pakistani descent similarly having had their citizenship revoked, the government insists such women freely chose to join IS and must accept the consequences — a legally and morally questionable position against citizens essentially brainwashed by a death cult. In truth, the UK ought to reckon with the consequences of its past and current actions. Shamima, like many young British Muslims born to migrant parents, grew up against the backdrop of the UK’s involvement in the Iraq War and racial profiling post-7/7, as well as the Brexit vote and Windrush scandal in recent years. All these played heavily into the question of British identity and whether some citizens are more ‘British’ than others — a coded way of redefining the rights of non-white citizens as revocable privileges. And while many migrant communities remain insular, clinging to regressive traditions, this cannot be seen in isolation to the racist attacks and anti-immigration rhetoric they’ve experienced since the 1960s. These factors, and their analogues in other European countries, contributed to the alienation that made these so-called IS brides so susceptible to extremist propaganda and recruitment by IS.

Indeed, it is testament to how effectively the far-right agenda has permeated mainstream British politics that, instead of considering Shamima a citizen, a minor when she left, and likely a non-combatant — and debating how such citizens are to be repatriated, deradicalised and held accountable — the government is seeking

to divest itself of a many-headed hydra it has had a large role in creating. Britain, and the West at large, must realise the folly of this form of nativism. Instead of mulling over ways to denationalise their own citizens, the UK and the European Union must resolve this issue through deradicalising repatriation programmes that are premised on international human rights obligations — and compassion.

Glaucoma week

MARCH 10 to March 16 is recognised as World Glaucoma Week — a week dedicated to raising awareness of this neglected eye disease, also known as the “silent thief of sight”. Some of the symptoms of glaucoma include the sudden loss of vision, blurred and narrowed eyesight, redness in the eyes, and severe headaches. Patients also report pain in the eyes and seeing rainbow-coloured circles in the presence of bright lights. If left untreated, glaucoma damages the optic nerve of the eye beyond repair and can lead to irreversible blindness. Around the world, an estimated 3m people suffered from blindness due to untreated glaucoma in 2015, while another 4m experienced moderate to severe vision impairment. This figure is estimated to rise to a shocking 80m by 2020. According to the World Health Organisation, after cataracts, glaucoma is the leading cause of blindness in the world. Yet there is little awareness of this condition among the general population, and few get their eyes tested on a regular basis. Due to the lack of awareness and the inconspicuous and gradual nature of the disease in its early stages, patients delay seeing the doctor, until the condition grows so severe that they have little choice but to seek medical attention. Not surprisingly, most of the victims of the “silent thief” live in the developing nations of the world, where there is a lack of access to quality healthcare and a shortage of medicines. This is especially unfortunate given that the disease’s progression can be delayed if treatment begins in the early stages.

In Pakistan, it is estimated that around 1m to 2m people suffer from glaucoma, with nearly half of them having completely lost their vision, due to delaying visits to the doctor and receiving a timely diagnosis. Most patients are in the 40- to 80-year age bracket. As a consequence, doctors recommend that everyone over the age of 30 or 40 get their vision regularly examined, particularly if they have a history of blood pressure, diabetes or headaches and eye strain. The cost of medication is pricey, which results in some people not taking their medicine, even if diagnosed. There are also frequent reports of shortages of medicine and the required eye drops in

the market, which are not locally produced and have to be imported. The loopholes must be plugged in the diagnosis and treatment of a disease for which there is no cure.

Labour hazards

WORKERS in many trades in Pakistan are exposed to occupational hazards mainly due to the negligence of employers, and the apathy of the state. This sad fact was once again highlighted when six lives were lost on Saturday in Karachi's Clifton area. The workers were installing glass panes in a multistorey building when they fell to their deaths from the 13th floor as the construction lift buckled. Two of the deceased were brothers. The individual who provided the lift has been held by police while a case has been registered against the building owner and his partners. As reported, it was the police that rushed the unfortunate workers to the hospital, indicating that there were no emergency facilities available on-site, while the victims were working without any safety gear. The reality is that life is cheap in our society, and the welfare and safety of workers is the least of employers' concerns. Labourers in most cities and towns can be seen working on building sites without any safety equipment, and the threats to their safety increase when the building in question is a multistorey structure.

Workers in various other high-risk professions also complain of the lack of occupational health and safety measures, and while employers should answer for these lacunae, the state also needs to explain why it is so disinterested in the safety of workers. For example, the Sindh Assembly has passed the Occupational Health and Safety Act, but its rules have reportedly not been framed. It is not enough for officials to express sorrow over such tragedies; occupational safety laws must be enforced to ensure that conditions for workers are adequate and that people are not putting their lives on the line just to earn two square meals. Moreover, in case accidents happen, suitable compensation needs to be defined by the law so that families that lose their breadwinners can be given financial assistance.

Cricket or combat?

IT was the wrong call for the International Cricket Council to make. On Monday, the ICC's spokesperson revealed that it had granted the Board of Control for Cricket in India's request to allow Indian cricketers to wear army camouflage-style caps during a recent ODI, a stunt that sparked controversy over the weekend as Pakistani government and cricket officials rightly criticised this blatant politicisation of the game.

The ICC explicitly prohibits any form of attire that conveys messages "political, religious or racial" in nature.

To claim that this was merely a "fundraising drive and in memory of" the Indian-occupying troops killed in Pulwama, as Indian skipper Virat Kohli and the ICC have stated, is a rather clumsy smokescreen, and extremely irresponsible given the silly season of war-mongering hysteria in India against Pakistan at this time. But no matter the extent of national fervour, a cricket field is not a battlefield.

That the ICC authorised this spectacle, in clear violation of its own rules, when it has previously reprimanded cricketers for far more minor dress code violations, as well as shown leniency towards other violations by Indian players (recall 'Monkeygate') in general, is indicative of India's ever-growing influence over the world of cricket. It is an ingress that has led to an imbalance in how the ICC arbitrates in such issues.

If it is to maintain any credibility as an international governing body, it must formally reassess this decision and reassert the primacy of its code of conduct. Moreover, this moment also demands that Indian athletes and artists consider the broader implications of adopting the rhetoric of ultra-nationalism and the aesthetics of warfare.

Such personalities have always enjoyed immense power to determine public opinion, an influence which should ostensibly be used to advocate for peace by building bridges rather than burning them down.

And while that sometimes justifies rules against politicising sports being broken in favour of taking a conscientious stand, it takes no moral courage to don the cap of jingoism and cosy up to power.

World Bank funds

IN this era of skyrocketing foreign borrowing and slashed development expenditures, it is almost a travesty that the disbursement of up to \$2.3bn of World Bank funds should be held up due to bureaucratic red tape. The issues behind this delay are petty — such as the failure to open the bank accounts where the funds are supposed to be deposited. Other than this, there are conflicting procurement guidelines and staffing issues, because officers with a key role to play in the development projects for which the funds are intended have not yet been appointed. Up to 27 development projects of the federal and provincial governments are impacted because their funds have not been released. In the same period, the government has borrowed up to \$6bn from foreign sources, and is continuing to slash development projects in order to contain the fiscal deficit.

The irony of the situation is difficult to miss. Pakistan has borrowed extensively from the World Bank in the past, and though a great deal of bureaucracy is involved in dealing with this multilateral lender, it is not exactly an impossible task to do so. If the government is genuinely short of resources and opposed to slashing the development budget unless absolutely necessary, it is reasonable to expect that it would have focused on this issue and made an early, genuine attempt to unlock the funds and keep the development work going. The fact that it has dropped off the government's radar shows that the senior leadership of the economic team has been distracted from its core task. It has been unable to get a grasp on its own division and its associated departments, and navigate important issues through the bureaucracy even though it holds the key ministerial positions required for the job. Instead, the economic managers have touted borrowing from friendly countries as their signature achievement. This has to change. The economic team, led by the finance minister, must get a handle on the current state of affairs. To do this, the finance leadership has to extricate itself from the clutches of powerful vested interests that permeate the ministry, whether they pertain to the bureaucracy or private-sector lobbies or any other, and assert its own authority independently over the finance division. Such elementary failures of leadership happen when those at the top have gone into reactive mode, and are thereby failing to see reality with their own eyes.

Vertical cities

THE sky is the limit, said Prime Minister Imran Khan at the launch of the State Bank's finance policy for low-cost housing in Islamabad on Monday. He was

speaking in reference to his government's plans to encourage vertical as opposed to horizontal urban growth in order to conserve green spaces and prevent the pressure that overcrowding brings to bear on the environment. These stated objectives would be consistent with the importance that the PTI accords to environmental protection, illustrated in its flagship 'billion-tree tsunami' project to reclaim forest area in KP. The prime minister has also spoken about how multistorey buildings can be more affordable for the low-income segment of society. He alluded to this on Monday when he mentioned that his government wanted to incentivise private developers to construct apartment blocks in shantytowns.

The future of urban expansion in a land-scarce world certainly lies in a vertical direction. However, while looking at the sky, it is always prudent to keep an eye on the ground. The construction of high-rises, if undertaken without proper planning and strict implementation of building regulations, can have deleterious environmental and social effects. One of the main problems that arises in the context of Pakistan is the lack of truly independent planning agencies with the professional expertise to supervise the execution of their plans and ensure maximum public benefit from land use. Even the ostensibly autonomous Capital Development Authority in Islamabad, a city the prime minister has vowed to showcase as a model high-rise urban centre, functions under the federal government. Given the area's seismic vulnerability — demonstrated tragically in the Margalla Towers collapse in the 2005 earthquake — structural engineering requirements must be strictly enforced in the construction of multistorey buildings. And that is only one consideration in a comprehensive urban design exercise which needs to be carried out; a construction frenzy may have dangerous consequences.

Conditions in Karachi illustrate what unchecked proliferation of high-rises can do to the citizens' quality of life. The Sindh government's centralised control over land and the involvement of several of its top political bosses in lucrative construction projects has placed tremendous pressure on the city's already fragile civic infrastructure. To take but one example of this appalling violation of urban planning principles, 32 major roads in Pakistan's biggest metropolis were commercialised within 2016 alone and NOCs granted for multiple high-rises to be constructed on them. This was done without any consideration as to the limitations of the existing civic infrastructure including water and sewage lines. The conversion of low-rise, low-density areas into high-rise, high-density areas without corresponding addition

of public areas shrinks the footprint of green spaces, increases environmental pollution and introduces negative social consequences. Building high-rises, much like building dams, should not become yet another buzz phrase. Careful planning is a prerequisite.

FATF's conflict of interest

FINANCE minister Asad Umar has done the right thing by writing to the Financial Action Task Force and asking for one of the co-chairs of the International Cooperation Review Group — an individual who is a serving officer of the Indian government — to be replaced.

Given the co-chair's position, the question arises of a conflict of interest when it comes to dealings with Pakistan.

The ICRG is tasked with reviewing Pakistan's progress on its implementation plan to move out of the grey list, and its report will play a crucial role in the June meetings of the global financial watchdog when Pakistan's listing comes up for a decision.

Pakistan narrowly avoided being blacklisted in the February meetings of the global watchdog that monitors terror financing and money laundering. The meetings took place against the backdrop of the Pulwama attack and the subsequent rise in Pakistan-India tensions.

Departing from script, India made a spirited case for the immediate blacklisting of Pakistan at that meeting and found some backers around the table. Deft outreach efforts made by Pakistan's delegation in Paris and senior government officials back in Islamabad saved the day.

But since then, India has continued with its campaign and used diplomatic channels to reach out to member countries of FATF, urging them to support a move to blacklist Pakistan in the June meetings. And all this even before the implementation of the action plan had begun.

Since the Indian government is pushing this agenda through diplomatic channels, it is hard to imagine how the co-chair of the ICRG, who in this case holds a controversial position, will follow a line other than the one adopted by his government.

The individual in question is a commissioner in the Enforcement Directorate of the Department of Revenue in India's finance ministry, and as a mid-level bureaucrat it is unlikely that he will be able to exercise independent judgement in the case of Pakistan.

In any case, regardless of how he discharges his duties, the final outcome will necessarily suffer from a credibility deficit on account of his presence as co-chair, and give more fuel to those who are arguing that the entire exercise is an extension of regional geopolitics.

It is highly advisable for FATF to consider the request made by Mr Umar. This should be done with an eye to protecting the watchdog's self-professed mission as an independent, technocratic body that stands above politics.

Many member countries of FATF have genuine concerns about the alleged presence of jihadi groups in Pakistan, but their own credibility is at stake when pressing these concerns upon the authorities in Islamabad.

Surely another individual can be found to serve in the co-chair's position in the case of Pakistan, preferably from a state that does not make it known that it has an axe to grind with the country under review.

Punjab's prisons

ON Tuesday, the federal ombudsperson decried the delays in implementing reforms in prisons across Punjab in a meeting held in the capital. It was last September that the ombudsperson had asked the provincial governments to submit recommendations for jail reforms, in light of the Supreme Court's orders, which called for the formation of provincial district oversight committees for monitoring purposes, along with committees to look after the welfare of prisoners, particularly women, children and the poor. But this has not been the case so far, as the ombudsperson further complained that the district oversight committees were not allowed to visit jails for inspection. It is no secret that Pakistan's prisons are vastly overcrowded, beyond their original capacity, with outdated infrastructure. On Dec 17, 2015, the UN adopted the Standard Minimum Rules for

the Treatment of Prisoners, also known as the Mandela Rules — named after the South African president who spent 27 years of his life in prison — which recommends humane treatment towards prisoners, and advocates for their rehabilitation through alternatives to incarceration. Pakistan must look towards alternatives as well, as our prisons are packed beyond capacity.

In May 2018, for instance, there were a total of 83,718 prisoners languishing in various jails across Pakistan — and 51,535 of those were in Punjab alone. The vast majority of these prisoners are not even convicts, they are either in the process of trials or their trials have not even begun. Hardened criminals are lumped together with first-time or petty offenders. Furthermore, the lives of prisoners are governed by archaic, colonial-era laws that are reactionary or punitive in nature, as opposed to being reformatory, and end up doing more damage than good. Medicine and emergency services are not available to them, and the standards and hygiene of food are poor. There is also evidence of torture and discriminatory practices by superintendents towards the prisoners. Since they are viewed as the ‘rejects’ and ‘anti-social’ elements that ‘contaminate’ society, there is a view that they ‘deserve’ misery and punishment, and little attention is paid to their suffering, psychological and physical health. And so prisons end up being cesspools of disease and crime away from the glare of the rest of society. But nobody is born a criminal, and both state and society must reflect on their own roles in the creation of criminals.

Errant policemen

THE police in this country suffer from an image problem, and every so often incidents make the headlines revealing just why there is such a massive trust deficit between the law enforcers and the citizens.

Four policemen in Karachi were dismissed from service on Tuesday after a video emerged of them harassing a couple at the city’s Sea View beach.

The incident reportedly occurred on Sunday, and after the video went viral, police authorities moved in to take action against the errant cops.

The video is quite disturbing, as it shows the thuggish policemen in uniform manhandling a woman. The man making the video said the lawbreaking cops approached him and his wife and demanded money, while pointing guns at them.

Higher authorities in the police have done the right thing by taking action against such individuals, while Clifton SP Sohail Aziz, in whose jurisdiction the incident occurred, was absolutely correct in emphasising while talking to the media that police officers “are not supposed to engage in moral policing”.

It is a sad fact that in a city that suffers from a high crime rate, many policemen are more interested in extorting money from couples or shaking down motorists and bikers than curbing crime.

Some men in uniform are apparently not motivated to protect and to serve, but, instead, to harass the public.

The only way to address this malaise is to take strict disciplinary action against those found indulging in unlawful behaviour.

Moreover, the force requires more women officers, such as the current Clifton SP, to sensitise the police and make it a more professional force.

When policemen break the law, they give a bad name to the whole force, and the sacrifices of many honest officers who have laid down their lives in the line of duty are forgotten.

Action against black sheep in the police force needs to be a constant process, and there must be zero tolerance for the sort of atrocious behaviour witnessed recently in Karachi.

Antimicrobial resistance

DOCTORS in Pakistan have called for improving sanitation, health and education as part of the SDGs in the wake of a global study that warns against the dangers posed by high levels of antimicrobial resistance, or AMR. The analysis, apparently a comprehensive one, was carried out in 74 cities in 60 countries, including Pakistan, and involved the examination of raw sewage samples. It led to the establishment of two categories, with Pakistan listed alongside those parts of the world where AMR is high. The exercise involved two doctors from Aga Khan University who were part of the experts’ team in the forefront of the country’s fight against the unprecedented outbreak of drug-resistant typhoid in 2016. It is with alarm that they have asked for urgent measures to effectively tackle AMR that may be an even more complicated subject to treat than understanding why the typhoid

patients did not react the way they were supposed to. Antimicrobial resistance is a broader term in comparison to resistance to antibiotics. According to definitions provided by UK Research and Innovation, whereas antibiotics are medicines used to prevent and treat bacterial infections, antimicrobial resistance includes “resistance to drugs to treat infections caused by other microbes as well, such as parasites (eg malaria), viruses (eg HIV) and fungi ...”

Doctors advise quick planning and implementation of strategies that target sources of increased AMR. Planning and execution are that much more difficult in a land where health is not a priority issue and does not go beyond the usual rhetoric. Obviously, the tackling of something as unheard of here as antimicrobial resistance would take quite a lot of initiative, the foremost need at the outset being for local healthcare managers to fully educate themselves about the danger and how that is apparently inherent in how we live our lives now. In that respect, a start may be made with a well-thought-out national campaign in the media that makes people aware without causing a scare. The campaign must begin now.

Post-IS scenario

WHILE once controlling a vast swathe of land in Iraq and Syria, today the militant ‘Islamic State’ group is left with a mere sliver of territory in Syria near the Iraqi border. That, too, is under bombardment by the US and its Syrian Kurdish allies, as family members of the militants have left the area in the thousands over the past few weeks. Soon after its rise in 2014, the self-styled caliphate sowed terror in the region under the watch of its ‘caliph’ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, throwing an arrogant challenge to governments in the Middle East and sending the international community scrambling for a response. At one point, it seemed as if many other regional states could be vulnerable too, as IS ‘provinces’ sprang up in ungoverned spaces in and around the Middle East. And while the US-led coalition, including Arab allies, played a key role in pushing IS back, it cannot be denied that

Iran's support to the Syrian and Iraqi dispensations was instrumental in dislodging the 'caliphate'.

Today, as the end of IS looms, some lessons should be learnt. Firstly, it should be acknowledged that Western adventurism in the Middle East — regime change in Iraq and attempted regime change in Syria — played a major role in creating the ungoverned spaces where the IS thrived. While Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Syria under the Assad clan were by no means model democracies, America's removal of the Iraqi strongman, and its efforts to get rid of Bashar al-Assad created power vacuums which were filled by the IS and their like — a reminder that nation-building exercises in the Arab/ Muslim world should not be indulged in by the West, as what emerges from such experiments can be much worse than the status quo ante. In fact, it is Middle Eastern governments that must lead efforts for organic change by being inclusive of all sects, religions and political orientations. For example, observers have noted that the alleged discriminatory policies of former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki helped create support for the IS in disenfranchised communities. And while the IS may be on the verge of defeat, it should be remembered that its ideology lives on and must be countered not just on the battlefield, but intellectually too. The sectarian, atavistic and anti-modern mindset championed by the IS must be challenged by ulema, Muslim governments and thinkers to ensure that such a movement does not re-emerge and attract disillusioned souls with its promises of an extremist utopia.

CPEC transparency

THE Special Committee of the Senate on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor has raised the demand for greater transparency in the execution of work under CPEC.

The government would be well advised to heed its words. The chair of the committee, Senator Sherry Rehman, said that her committee gets more information from the media than it does from the government, a state of affairs that is entirely unacceptable.

The ruling party, while it was in opposition under the previous government, used to regularly join in the chorus of demands for greater transparency on CPEC, and its representatives in parliament used to make the same demands at the time.

Now when they are in power they seem to have reverted to the same practice as their predecessor of keeping the country in the dark as large-scale work progresses under the CPEC banner.

Only last week, for example, Planning Minister Khusro Bakhtiar announced a series of decisions taken by the cabinet committee on CPEC from which it was quite evident that major changes will be made to Pakistan's policy environment in order to take the corridor project forward.

He mentioned that a series of projects in agriculture, education, health, poverty alleviation, water supply and vocational training is about to be finalised and will be shared with Chinese counterparts soon.

Apparently, Chinese experts have been consulted extensively in drawing up this list. Sadly though, Pakistan's own parliament remains unaware of what is being planned and how the projects will be paid for.

In addition, the minister also revealed that plans to shift the financing of the massive railway upgradation project known as ML1, which is the largest under the CPEC umbrella at \$8.2bn, have gone back to where the previous government had left them.

The then PML-N government intended to finance the project through a Chinese grant which would be repaid with interest from the government of Pakistan's resources. The PTI, upon coming to power, said it would like to renegotiate these terms to Build-Operate-Transfer instead, so that the repayment burden does not fall on the government and the Chinese can be asked to finance the project with their resources and recover their investment by operating the railway line themselves for a specified period of time.

It seems like the Chinese have refused this offer. Naturally, the government now has to consider the terms of repayment carefully, given the size of the project, and figure out how to manage them at a time when it is going to the IMF for balance-of-payments support.

Under an IMF programme, the government's economic priority would be to build foreign-exchange reserves and narrow the fiscal deficit, which could become a challenge if massive projects are launched with borrowed money.

The Senate committee is right to emphasise its stake in the enterprise, and the government should move to allay its concerns.

Data protection

SMART devices can make their users feel they have access to the world at the tips of their fingers. However, a recent survey indicates that many young Pakistanis do not realise that these gadgets can also be a gateway for the world to access their personal data. According to the results of the exercise, 83pc of the sample size of 500 university students were unaware that data on smart devices can be obtained by service providers and software companies who share this information with third parties. Ironically, in many cases the users themselves unwittingly give permission for them to do so by paying scant attention to consent forms before they agree to them. It does not help that the privacy policies of some of the most popular social platforms are, arguably by design, 9,000 words or longer.

The negative implications of smart technology are making themselves felt in ways not foreseen until now. Inadequately protected personal information can be used for data mining by marketing companies, research organisations, etc, sometimes to serve blatantly unethical, even illegal ends. One of the most infamous examples of this nature was of course the harvesting of millions of Facebook users' profile data for political purposes in the last US presidential election. There can also be social and psychological repercussions: careless data protection can put individuals at higher risk of cyberbullying and blackmail. With the rapidly expanding market for smart devices in Pakistan, people — especially the youth who are the most avid consumers of such gadgets — must take measures to protect themselves in the digital world. To that end, they should maintain high privacy settings on their smart devices; promptly instal security updates; secure their home WiFi networks; disable microphones and cameras when not using them; create 'strong' passwords, etc. The authorities too must enforce the provisions of the cybercrime law that criminalise unauthorised use of identity information. The risk of data theft is ever-present; the least one can do is not make it easy.

Marching for change

IN August 2018, a 15-year-old Swedish girl with Asperger's syndrome called for 'radical action' against climate change. Along with a handful of classmates, teachers and parents, Greta Thunberg began her strike from school. The threat of climate change was too great to delay action. Everything else — including her

education — could wait. Seven months later, Greta is joined by tens of thousands of students from across the world as they march for change, skipping school on March 15, 2019, in protest against the inaction of adults. The children marched in Stockholm, Bangkok, Berlin, Lagos, London, Lahore and several other cities. Since this generation is inheriting the world with all its chaos, it only makes sense that they lead the resistance to right wrongs. And Greta has become something of a leader of this resistance by taking on the burden of saving the world on her small shoulders at a time when the leader of the free world continues to deny climate change. Meanwhile, others continue to be apathetic if they are not directly impacted by climate change (yet) or watch on helplessly as they live through the death of coral reefs, suffocate in cities enveloped by smog, or find themselves displaced due to wildfires, floods and droughts.

In 2015, the Paris Agreement called for reducing global warming to below 2°C, yet the world is far from achieving that goal, and greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, despite greater awareness of the malaise. Just last week, the Global Environment Outlook report stated that 25pc of all premature deaths and diseases are caused by manmade pollution and environmental degradation. The findings of the report were conducted over a period of six years, with the help of 250 scientists from 70 nations. It warns of the losses to the global economy the destruction of the world's ecosystems is causing, with the livelihoods of billions of people in peril. Pakistan remains one of the most vulnerable countries to the risks of climate change, despite being responsible for only a small percentage of the world's global greenhouse emissions. The fact that we are primarily an agrarian economy, with more than half the population linked to agricultural activities, spells an even greater disaster in the making. "We are only seeing the beginning," Greta tweeted of the children's protests. For the sake of civilisation, one can only hope the adults are listening to her.

Jaish in the spotlight

In the aftermath of the Pulwama episode, Kashmir-centric militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad has been making headlines internationally, as the suicide bomber involved in the attack claimed to be a member of the outfit.

This has led India to call for action against the group, particularly against its head Masood Azhar. While India has been thirsting for revenge in the post-Pulwama

period, its efforts to blacklist the Jaish and its chief are not altogether altruistic. Delhi has made an all-out effort to prevent the Kashmir issue from being internationalised, and is presenting itself as a victim of ‘terrorism’ to take the focus of the international community away from its brutal tactics in the held region. Indeed, all of Pakistan’s attempts at talks or acting on CBMs have been held back by the Modi regime’s single-point agenda — to portray Pakistan as a hub of jihadi activity.

However, away from the Indian stance, there is still a case to be made for Pakistan’s clamping down further on the Jaish and others of its ilk — for its own security.

The dangers of the path adopted by the Jaish are clear. Masood Azhar’s aim was to blur the distinction between pro-Kashmir jihadi groups and those subscribing to sectarian militancy within Pakistan.

When Gen Musharraf proscribed the Jaish, he was targeted by the group, barely escaping two attempts on his life.

The attempt to rein in the Jaish’s activities caused a large section of the group to join hands with the TTP to attack the state and religious minorities.

Attempts to deradicalise militants also did not work, and it became clear that the danger of reprisals notwithstanding, stern action was necessary against all militants — whether they were allegedly using Pakistani soil to plan attacks outside the country, or killing and maiming thousands within the country. Indeed, Pakistan should have learnt a lesson from the Americans who encouraged jihadi elements in Afghanistan, only to be confronted by a monster of their own creation in later years.

Given this backdrop, many observers have emphasised the need to crack down hard on all such groups in Pakistan. Most have been banned but much more is required to ensure that they are eliminated and never come back to life.

If the world wants to blacklist Masood Azhar, there should be no hesitation on Pakistan’s part. Neither should China use ‘technical reasons’ to block such a move.

There are no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ militant groups; all have either caused or are capable of wreaking havoc in the country. That outlook is hopefully a thing of the past now, as the prime minister has promised that no groups will be allowed to use Pakistani territory for militant activities. He must make good on that pledge. This is the only

way Pakistan will regain the respect of the international community, and counter India's constant campaign to isolate it.

The winner is PSL

CRICKET and PSL must rank high among metaphors for the Pakistani spirit. The huge success of the fourth edition of the Pakistan Super League provides an insight into an exciting future for a country that has had more than its fair share of troubles in recent years. As far as symbolism goes, it is apt that the fourth PSL championship has been clinched by the Quetta Gladiators — a less fancied side at the launch of the competition four years ago, which has since surprised everyone with the grace and poise it has shown. The Gladiators, who played some of the most consistent cricket in the four PSL editions, set the standard, with foreign professionals complementing domestic talent. They beat Peshawar Zalmi in the final in front of a full house at Karachi's National Stadium in an example of comprehensive popular Pakistani backing for displays involving international participation. Peshawar might have lost it at the stage where it was picking the team for the big game, but this one-time champion has achieved much during the PSL's history and is going to be the team to try and beat during the next editions of the event.

Due tributes have been paid to Karachi and the country as a whole for being so actively involved in restoring what this cricket-loving nation has so desperately craved. Last year, only a few games and the final were played in the country in view of foreign cricketers' reluctance to travel to Pakistan because of their security perceptions. Most matches were played in the UAE, which graciously played host on Pakistan's behalf. The share of fixtures held in Pakistan, specifically Karachi, was increased this time around. And at the very top level, a promise has been made that, from next year, the entire PSL contest will be staged in the country. Greater meaning has been added to the pledge by a major architect of the cricketing renaissance here, with the army spokesman vowing to organise PSL games in areas most severely hit by terrorism.

Again, what is encouraging is that the International Cricket Council has pointed out how far the successful holding of PSL can go towards convincing the world that there is nothing extraordinary about a batch of cricketers from abroad playing in Pakistan. It is a future to look forward to, not just by the sport's fans, but by

everyone who understands how crucial such activity is in the life of a normal, progressive society. Hopefully, it is only a matter of time before all famous names — in fact, national teams — agree to come here. The credit goes to those who have worked towards this goal at the Pakistan Cricket Board and in other government departments, and above all, to those foreign players who were in the vanguard of the force that has performed the rescue act.

PTDC motels

NEWS of the plan to close six Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation motels and restaurants has coincided with the government's announcement of its new policy of relaxing visa applications of foreign nationals from 175 countries. The visa application fee is also to be slashed by 22pc to 65pc. As it is, there are worries about whether the country even has the necessary infrastructure to accommodate a large number of visitors for tourism purposes. Several of the motels that may shut down are located on important tourist routes such as Taxila, Chattar Plain, Astak, Islamabad, etc. The management says it has little choice as the chain is suffering monetary losses that run into millions of rupees each year. Just two years ago, in 2017, newspaper reports stated that all PTDC motels were being renovated to attract more visitors. And two years before that, in 2015, a similar announcement was made to update all motels. Since the passing of the 18th Amendment, the administrative control and the management of PTDC's assets and employees come under the federal government's authority. This had irritated the provinces, particularly KP, where many of the buildings were located. In 2014, the Islamabad High Court had to issue a stay order to keep the provinces from 'harassing' PTDC employees and interfering in its affairs.

Regardless of whether the authority comes under the provinces or the centre, the institution has struggled to meet its stated aim to promote and develop tourism in the country by marketing tourist products at home and abroad and developing infrastructure and quality services for both foreign and domestic tourism purposes. Many of the buildings remain empty, ghostly structures, instead of being the lively, welcoming places they should be. The failure is especially apparent with the latest announcement. Surely, there are steps to be considered before taking such an extreme measure, which will also impact the employment of several daily-wage workers, and inconvenience many other full-time employees. Perhaps there is a lack of vision, creativity and innovation in the department, as tends to be the case

in state-owned institutions — and that is where the private sector can come in. The private sector will have a better business sense and understanding of healthy competition and consumer needs, while retaining the government's control over regulation and policy, and keeping pace with international best practices.

Patriarchy strikes back

EVEN for a society that views most form of rights-based activism with suspicion, the backlash against Aurat March has been particularly acrimonious.

In the days since the protests were staged in several cities across Pakistan, countless women have been subjected to retaliation — from photos of their placards being doctored, to receiving death and rape threats, to having established political and cultural figures attack them.

Powerful men who rarely have much to say about women that isn't sexist sought to lecture them on gender equality, cast aspersions on their agenda (despite transparent manifestoes issued by the organisers), and from a perch of considerable privilege, claim that the exercise was 'elitist' despite its obvious diversity.

In turn, irresponsible sections of the press, eager to milk controversy for ratings, amplified the sanctimonious outrage of these usual suspects and their support bases by giving disproportionate coverage to certain placards rather than contextualising them along with the actual demands and the ideological framework of Aurat March.

Take a look: Should feminists claim Aurat March's 'vulgar' posters? Yes, absolutely

While the right-wing vitriol is hardly surprising, perhaps more disappointing is that some seasoned progressives, instead of extending guidance and support, sought to distance themselves or stay silent in the face of the onslaught against this new generation of women activists. Pakistan is not unique in how pervasive the myth is that feminism is somehow anti-male instead of pro-equality, or that human rights are finite resources that can't be extended to one without depriving the other. But the suggestion that some of the wit on display at the marches delegitimises and detracts from women's struggles is disingenuous.

The fact that female humour struck such a deep nerve underscores its potency to expose the fragility of patriarchy and undermine the received wisdoms that lend it power. The responses to Aurat March clearly prove that, across the political spectrum, there is a need to consider whether our words and actions are making this country safer and more equitable for women, or merely contributing to their exploitation and oppression.

More tax reversals

It is never a pretty sight to see a government bow before rackets and vested interests. That is precisely what our rulers are doing by rolling back the various penalties that had been added in preceding years for those who failed to file tax returns. While speaking at an event in Karachi, Finance Minister Asad Umar told his audience that the withholding tax on cash withdrawals by non-filers of tax returns would be withdrawn in the next budget since it was leading to a higher cash-to-bank deposit ratio, or CDR, in the country. A rising CDR is a sign that more and more transactions are being conducted in cash, and less and less of the country's money supply is entering the banking system. The minister is right to be concerned about a rising CDR, but surrendering to those who insist on remaining outside the tax net is not the way forward if the problem is to be addressed.

Early in its tenure, the PTI government started chipping away at the edifice of penalties that the previous government had attached to the transactions of non-filers of tax returns. The minister sought to reverse a prohibition on the purchase of new cars and property by non-filers, then quickly backed away from his stated purpose in the face of widespread criticism. Nevertheless, he went ahead with the move at the time of the next mini budget in January. That reversal was done in the name of reviving sales of new cars that had plummeted since the prohibition went into effect at the beginning of this fiscal year. The second round of reversals is being carried out in the name of controlling the CDR. One wonders what is next.

The idea of having an active taxpayer list was to enable such penalties in the first place. By ramping up the prohibitions, the idea was to slowly choke off the space for non-filers to operate, while supplementing the penalties with incentives to encourage tax filing. That effort now lies in tatters. Mr Umar should present his own vision for advancing the documentation of the economy. For the moment, the only effort under way for this purpose is an aggressive recovery drive by the FBR, where

notices are served on high-net-worth individuals and some are proceeded against with vigorous action, including imprisonment. Such moves only serve to further frighten those who are already complying, since trust in the capacity and integrity of tax officialdom is extremely low in the country. Prevailing common sense and accumulated experience tell us that any good documentation drive should target those who are refusing to file, and seek to minimise contact between the tax collector and the taxpayers. At the moment, it seems that the government is peddling backwards on this; the harm done will take many years to repair.

Law-abiding tenants

MANY acts of terrorism are criminal conspiracies in which a number of operatives play various roles to translate plans into action. These components, among others, include recruitment, recce of possible locations, logistical details such as transport, weapons, and giving shelter to the attackers. On Monday, an anti-terrorism court in Karachi found a man guilty of harbouring terrorists and sentenced him to 10 years in prison. According to the prosecution, the convict had obtained a flat on rent near Urdu Bazaar and when the police received a tip-off about TTP militants being holed up there, they raided the place. The hours-long armed stand-off that ensued resulted in injuries to two law-enforcement personnel and deaths of four terrorists, as well as a female accomplice and an infant.

Every individual who is party to a terrorist plot (or any other criminal conspiracy for that matter) is assumed to be acting in furtherance of a common objective. This is so even though he may not know the identity of the other co-conspirators — a tactic often resorted to by the criminal mastermind in order to prevent the entire plot from unravelling should one operative be apprehended. The individual could also be unaware that he is being duped into facilitating a crime. Owners of rental properties can be particularly vulnerable on this score; in the case cited above, the owner of the flat was fortunate not to be implicated as he had abided by the tenancy registration law. This legislation makes it mandatory for copies of rent agreements

and identity documents of new tenants, as well as character references for them, to be registered with the local police within 48 hours of moving into a property. Noncompliance can leave the owners liable to imprisonment and a fine. The purpose of the legislation is to curb the use of rented properties to facilitate terrorism and other crimes. There are several instances where properties have been rented specifically to aid in the commission of violent attacks. The multiple suicide-bombing in December 2003 that targeted then president Pervez Musharraf's convoy in Rawalpindi is a case in point. Two houses and a shop overlooking the road that the general was to travel on, and where the attack was planned, were acquired on rent in order to surveil the route. As happened in this instance, all the links in criminal conspiracies need to be unearthed to conclude a successful prosecution.

Plastic sea

ON March 16, curators at a wildlife museum in Davao City in the Philippines, received a call to collect a young whale that was severely emaciated, breathing its last and vomiting blood. By the time the marine experts reached the site, the whale was declared dead. But the real shock came when the large mammal's body was transported to the museum's lab for an autopsy — 40kg of plastic bags were recovered from its stomach. This included 16 rice sacks, four banana plantation-style bags and multiple shopping bags. Unable to digest nutrients due to the massive amount of plastic clogging its intestines, the whale likely died from starvation or gastric shock. In May 2018, another whale was recovered from the waters of southern Thailand. After five days of suffering, the unfortunate animal coughed out bits of plastic before it passed away. During the autopsy, 8kg of plastic bags were pulled out from its stomach. In 2017, an Ocean Conservancy report found that the Philippines and Thailand were among the top five countries dumping more plastic into the ocean than the rest of the world combined. But the issue is clearly not just a Southeast Asian phenomenon.

Modern civilisation's addiction to plastic — and convenience — is costing the planet dearly. There is evidence that plastic has even infiltrated the deepest parts of the ocean ie over 10km below the surface. The worldwide production of plastic has increased to nearly 300m tonnes a year. Over 8m of that ends up in the oceans, where it can take anywhere from 100 to 1,000 years to disintegrate. When the first synthetic, mass-produced plastic was created in the early 20th century, it

was heralded as one of the greatest inventions of modern times. Low-cost and easy to manufacture, it went on to change every aspect of human life and commerce. Unfortunately, its greatest strength — its durability — has come to haunt us and our future generations. Plastic is suffocating us all.

Walking the talk on Fata

LAWMAKERS in the KP Assembly have rightly raised concerns about a time frame for the integration of the former Fata into KP. Specifically, they have demanded a targeted timeline for the extension of district courts, police and revenue systems to the tribal districts. During a session on Tuesday, opposition lawmakers criticised the federal and provincial governments, saying that the merger of the tribal districts with the province was done “without homework” and was leading to administrative and legal complications. They also stated that without a proper mechanism for ‘mainstreaming’, the lack of progress on the extension of the police system had left the Levies and Khasadar personnel in limbo and also created issues for land settlement.

Although the Fata-KP merger was signed into law in May 2018, there appears to be no practical movement on the critical components of mainstreaming the tribal districts — despite lofty promises and statements by both the previous and current governments. The delays can be attributed to several hurdles; the turf war between the bureaucracy and the police; the lack of a mandate for the caretaker government; post-election delays; and a lack of clear leadership since the new government came to power. In recent days, however, it appears that the prime minister and his cabinet have renewed their efforts on the Fata issue with the announcement of a three-week consultative process to discuss with locals a 10-year plan under which Rs100bn will be spent on the development of the tribal districts every year. The time frame will undeniably be contingent on the availability of resources, which means the government must be clear on how its proposed budget will be met. Beyond verbal assurances, there should be a dedicated and sincere focus on the issue of reforms and their implementation, and a detailed strategy with practical phases must be created with input from all stakeholders. The government’s declaration is encouraging, but the challenges remain serious and need to be addressed in a transparent and systematic manner for the sustainable well-being of the people of tribal districts.

NZ's example

LAST Friday's horrific attack on two mosques in the quiet New Zealand city of Christchurch shocked the world, with people of all faiths condemning the barbaric slaughter.

While the tragedy has started a much-needed global conversation about white nationalist terrorism, it has also brought into focus the compassionate response of the leadership and people of New Zealand.

Led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, the people of this land down under have shown many in both the East and the West how a tragedy of such huge proportions should be handled, and how governments should react in times of crisis.

Right after the rampage, Ms Ardern led from the front, meeting survivors and the heirs of victims, condoling with them and offering the full support of the state.

During a parliament session on Tuesday, Ms Ardern began her speech with 'salaam', while a cleric recited verses from the Holy Quran. It was also announced that the azan for Juma prayers would be broadcast nationally on Friday in remembrance of the victims of the massacre.

The way that New Zealanders have stood by a minority, largely immigrant community in their hour of need has been nothing short of admirable.

In contrast, in many other parts, governments and populations have hardened their stance. For example, the Trump presidency has been marked by divisive anti-immigrant rhetoric, with the American president supported in his views by the extreme right and white nationalists in the US.

As observers pointed out in the aftermath of the Christchurch attack, Mr Trump has never visited a mosque, despite the fact that millions of Muslims call America home.

Moreover, the extreme right has also been on the march in Europe; in some states, specifically in central and eastern Europe, ultranationalist parties or their supported candidates have entered the corridors of power.

The mood in much of the West, thus, is one of intolerance and fear — if not hatred — of the 'other'. Meanwhile in Pakistan (and many other Muslim states), the

treatment of minority communities, even those who have always lived here, is hardly commendable.

while there may not be a state-led effort to persecute non-Muslims, we have sidelined religious minorities, often remaining impassive even in the event of major attacks against them.

It should be remembered that New Zealand itself has gone through major changes over the decades.

Founded as a distant outpost of the British Empire and colonised by Europeans, its own indigenous Maori population was marginalised by the settlers. However, particularly since the late 20th century, the country has attempted to go beyond its colonial past and embrace a progressive future.

Perhaps this sentiment is best summed up by one of Ms Ardern's post-Christchurch tweets when she said, with reference to migrants, that "... New Zealand is their home — they are us".

Threat of floods

PAKISTAN has seen many floods, the one that hit the country in 2010 being the most destructive in its history. Over 2,000 lives were lost and more than 20m people displaced as a third of the country's total area was submerged in floodwater. The damage to infrastructure, agriculture, livestock and homes was estimated to be \$10bn, with millions of people losing their savings and livelihoods. Many affected by the deluge have yet to recover from the trauma they had suffered; the painful memories of the devastation suffered nine years ago are still fresh. The warning by two senior government officials that the country could face a "major or super flood" this year, then, would have been cause for much alarm for them. The officials told a parliamentary panel on Tuesday that the higher-than-normal snowfall in the north caused by climate changes this winter had increased the chances of a major deluge during the next monsoon season.

Natural calamities such as floods and earthquakes cannot be averted. But steps can always be taken to minimise the damage to the life and property of the people, so that these calamities do not turn into human disasters. Sadly, successive governments have failed to plan and implement measures to avert loss of life, property and livelihoods. Little has been done to protect the flood-insecure areas

of KP, Punjab and Sindh since the most devastating deluge hit the country. No movement has been made on the fourth Flood Protection Programme approved by the CCI in 2017, involving a total cost of Rs326bn. Approval for flood-protection projects is still being awaited from Ecneec. Paltry funds are set aside in the budgets to meet the challenges of climate change; only a small portion of these allocations is actually spent on addressing environmental concerns, because such plans involve a longer gestation time and are not considered popular enough to win votes. The chances of the government releasing even a small slice of the funds — Rs15bn has been demanded by the officials for flood-protection activities — are minimal. With the monsoon season approaching fast and snow on the mountains about to melt in a few weeks, we might be in for another human disaster in the country — unless priority flood-protection projects are implemented on a war footing, especially in the highly flood-insecure areas. That is the minimum a government can do for those living in the danger zone.

Samjhauta ruling

THE ruling in the Samjhauta Express bombing acquits all four accused. Twelve years after the incident, the apparently strong indictment of the accused has been trumped with a simple one-line message: the investigating agency has failed to prove the conspiracy charge and the accused deserve the benefit of the doubt. The fact that the prosecutors failed to apprehend three out of the eight people it wanted to charge-sheet is in itself indicative of just how impossible the trial was. Reports say there are no plans to challenge the ruling in a higher court. The ruling is an insult to the 42 Pakistani victims of the Feb 18, 2007, bombing of the train that had set off for Lahore, and a sharp reminder of how opponents of subcontinental peace are allowed to get away with the biggest crimes. It is a rebuke to the more than 20 victims of the explosion with Indian nationality and it is a snub to the efforts of those investigators of Haryana, where the incident took place, who tracked the suspects in a high-pressure probe.

There is a painful contrast between the work of police investigators assigned to look into this blatant act of terror in the initial stages and a special court of India's National Intelligence Agency which announced Wednesday's judgement. That police team overcame all kinds of pressure to first reject the opinion that this was an act carried out by a Muslim extremist group, and then to actually announce it was a job carried out by organised Hindu extremists. The prosecution termed it a

criminal conspiracy which threatened the “unity, integrity, security and sovereignty” of India.

If these strong words offered any hope to the families of the victims and to pro-justice people generally, the rhetoric eventually gave way to the usual politics. True to form, Delhi tried to find refuge in the exchange of allegations with Pakistan where both sides have pointed a finger at the other for not seriously prosecuting groups blamed for terrorist acts inside each other’s territory — this despite many appeals that have highlighted what dangerous consequences a half-baked probe of such acts could lead to. Pakistan’s reaction to the Samjhauta ruling has been as predictable as it is sharp. Islamabad’s response aptly underlines the fact that the terrorists had publicly confessed to their ‘odious crimes’. It says the verdict smacks of duplicity and hypocrisy and exposes the Indian policy of patronising Hindu terrorists. The distinction though is that it did begin with confessions — but the proceedings progressively degenerated into a cover-up for the accused. On its part, Pakistan can do better than India by taking the Mumbai terror case to its logical conclusion. This would show the world that it is serious about combating militancy and be a befitting response to India that stands exposed after the Samjhauta ruling.

Flames of bigotry

IT is yet another needless death at the altar of moral vigilantism. On Wednesday at Bahawalpur’s Government Sadiq Egerton College, a third-year student stabbed to death Khalid Hameed, head of the English department, accusing the professor of ‘spreading obscenity’.

It appears the young man had taken exception on religious grounds to a mixed gender event being held on the college premises — despite the institution being a co-educational one — and attacked Mr Hameed for his role in organising it.

The student, unrepentant and defiant, was arrested by police while the victim, unfortunately, succumbed to his injuries while being taken to hospital.

The state cannot escape responsibility for Mr Hameed’s terrible fate. Over the decades it has repeatedly capitulated to self-proclaimed guardians of public morality and allowed them to define ‘acceptable’ norms of behaviour.

Instead of being a bulwark against bigotry and intolerance, it has institutionalised religious discrimination, soft-pedalled hate speech and ignored the denunciation of individuals, or even entire segments of the populace, as apostates and/or traitors.

Educational institutions, which should encourage diversity and critical thinking, are particularly susceptible to moral policing of ‘wayward’ youth. This can take the form of diktats by the administration — such as attempts to enforce strict student dress codes — or strong-arm methods by conservative students, who conflate any form of enjoyment with immorality, to prevent or disrupt on-campus events.

Given the state’s historical appeasement of right-wing elements, at times to preserve tactical political alliances, the censorious voices and puritanical narratives have become ever more strident. Consequently, progressive thinkers and opinion-makers — or even anyone perceived to be so, such as the slain professor — find themselves extremely vulnerable to violence.

Blasphemy is an especially emotive term, capable of triggering horrific depredations: the mob lynching of Mashal Khan in April 2017 is but one example. Worst of all, such vigilante ‘justice’ is often worn as a badge of honour by the perpetrator.

Consider the depraved triumphalism with which Salmaan Taseer’s murderer ‘justified’ his crime, and his deification by segments of society that continues to this day.

A crackdown against extremist organisations may be ongoing and much needed. But what is to be done about a mindset that considers it incumbent on people — the ‘right’ kind of people, that is — to ‘purify’ society, by coercive means if necessary?

It may be an uncomfortable truth, but terrorist and sectarian outfits who commit wholesale slaughter are only an extreme manifestation of the same prejudiced, judgemental mindset.

Plight of LHWs

There is some positive news for Punjab’s Lady Health Workers who concluded their four-day protest in Lahore on Thursday. A committee has been formed to look

into their grievances that remain largely the same as they did over a decade ago — ie payment and raising of salaries, service structure, security — and respect. Specifically, this time around, the LHWs have presented a clear list of demands. These include a grade nine notification for their work; grade 14 notification for their supervisors; social security registration; the provision of pension and free healthcare; a 60-hour work week; transport facilities; and an allowance for food and water at work. Formed by Benazir Bhutto in 1994, LHWs provide indispensable services to the country's poor and marginalised, particularly in the rural and remote parts of the country. Some of the services they provide include awareness of hygiene and sanitation, family planning and contraception, polio eradication, health and nutrition, and midwifery. They also play a vital role in managing TB and hepatitis. A report published last year highlighted the key role of LHWs in the identification and reporting of over 800 cases of TB in rural Sindh in the previous year. Out of the 468,454 people who were verbally screened by the LHWs during their door-to-door visits, 3,987 cases were referred to public and private health facilities, out of which 77pc cases were tested.

In a country with few state-run hospitals and abysmal healthcare facilities — particularly when it comes to primary healthcare, preventable diseases, maternal and infant mortality, which form the foundation of a nation's healthcare system — the work done by LHWs in providing basic health services cannot be understated. Along with the heavy burden of their work and low salaries, they are subjugated to gender discrimination, harassment and attacks while performing their duties. Despite all their work for the nation, the previous government largely ignored their plight. Time will tell if this government will act differently.

A 'happy' country

PAKISTAN must have gone up in the estimation of the happy people of the world after the revelation that it is among only 20 countries to have improved their position on the World Happiness Index this year. It is quite a leap from slot 75 last year to slot 67 this time around. In fact, it seems that the position has been secured with people in this country, barring a few, not being aware of their state of happiness. Imagine if we had known that we were really happy; the news would have certainly made us even happier — and perhaps we might have gone on to rival the best on the chart, among them the Scandinavian countries. Still, it should be of immense satisfaction to the data minders as well as the less-number-savvy

leaders here that we top the group in our region — and by a margin that should make us the source of envy in our immediate surroundings. To begin with, we beat India by a long shot; India is at an abysmal 140th position. Afghanistan is located closer to India on this roll, ranked at 154th position, but it is again of some comfort to us that friend China features at number 93, where it must be coveting the company of a, shall we say, content nation like ours.

A sure recipe for joyous relief for Pakistanis, the list seems to be the outcome of considerable efforts undertaken by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network. In its annual exercise, the UN mapped happiness in 156 countries of the world, based on six indicators: income per capita, life expectancy, social support, freedom, generosity and corruption (hopefully the lack of it). It is obvious that Pakistan must have done remarkably well on all or most of these counts to make the grade. Greater faith in our abilities, a bit more freedom and generous self-belief to curb cynicism could push us further up in future happiness counts.

Squabbling politicians

IF there is one thing that the government and opposition parties could agree on, it would be disagreeing with each other at every opportunity — even if it meant that governance had to take a back seat with important decisions being perpetually stalled. Given a fresh opportunity to be at each other's throats, the PTI and its political rivals are at loggerheads on the important issue of the implementation of the National Action Plan — a collective vow taken by political parties and institutions, in the aftermath of the 2014 Army Public School massacre, to tackle the plague of terrorism. As expected, due to political differences, major opposition parties are considering a boycott of a scheduled briefing on the implementation of NAP. The JUI-F has announced its decision to skip the March 28 meeting and the PML-N and PPP are mulling the boycott option, with Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shahbaz Sharif stating that Prime Minister Imran Khan should brief the entire parliament instead of some lawmakers only, and the PPP saying it will be difficult for the party to sit with government functionaries after the “brutal police action” against its workers in Islamabad. Meanwhile, the government and opposition, by not holding the required consultations, have created yet another hurdle for the appointment of two ECP members.

That the two major opposition parties have serious political differences with the government — and vice versa — is hardly surprising. The months leading to last year's general elections saw petty one-upmanship, name-calling and vitriol by both sides broadcast live into homes. Several months after the elections, egos remain inflated; the prime minister does not want to face the ruckus in the National Assembly; both he and Mr Sharif refuse to talk to or even greet each other; and the political environment across the country reeks of acrimony. The difference now is that the campaign season is a thing of the past, and parliament with its pending decisions is in limbo.

The chaotic circus of angry lawmakers needs to urgently correct their attitude. With high-priority decisions like NAP and the ECP appointments at stake, both the government and opposition parties must allow saner voices to engage in dialogue and find a solution so that cordial, productive consultations can take place. In this atmosphere, the words of Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, who said, "One step at a time. Let us make a beginning", are encouraging and must seriously be considered by the top leadership of the PTI, as the responsibility to take parliament forward lies with the prime minister. Mistrust and tit-for-tat accusations must be reconsidered so that serious deliberations can take place on matters crucial to democracy. Both parties must realise that they cannot hold back the democratic process as they assuage their bruised egos — they must pause the fighting and respect the process.

Two steps back

IT seems as if nothing brings together men of competing ideologies closer than their shared mistrust of women asserting their agency. On Wednesday, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly unanimously passed a resolution condemning Aurat March that was observed across Pakistan on March 8. The resolution was presented by a woman parliamentarian from the MMA, levelling charges of "obscenity" against the protesters and their use of certain placards and slogans during the marches. The parliamentarians referred to the women — who consisted of a cross-section of society, belonging to a range of professions, of varying education levels — as "shameless". They complained that these "handful of women" (and men) were out to destroy the institution of the "family" and were part of an insidious "conspiracy" to destroy the very fabric of the nation. As hyperbolic as they may sound to more level-headed readers, none of these reactions are

particularly new or shocking. Such accusations have always been levelled against women's movements both within and outside this country in every decade. Each time women have collectively taken a stand against the injustices faced by their gender, or demanded equality in the eyes of the law and society, they have faced a backlash from reactionary forces. But perhaps the most peculiar of the complaints was with regard to one of the placards in Karachi that read: "apna moza khud dhoondo (find your own socks)" — an innocuous, non-threatening and light-hearted message ... one would think. And yet a KP parliamentarian felt affected enough to voice his concerns about the cruelty of expecting him to find his own socks at his age.

Unlike the Aurat March of last year, which was only held in Karachi and where criticisms were largely restricted to social media and away from the eyes of the mainstream, this Aurat March seems to have unsettled the corridors of power. The JUI-F's Maulana Fazlur Rehman lambasted the ruling party for allowing activities on International Women's Day, and ominously added that his party workers would curtail such activities themselves in the future if the government failed to do so; many will construe his remarks as a threat aimed at stopping women protesters. Meanwhile, the KP Assembly seems to be in no hurry to pass the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Domestic Violence against Women (Prevention and Protection) Bill. Perhaps they should reflect on why a few women's words offend them more than the violence that women face in their daily lives.

Spread of TB

PAKISTAN'S fight against tuberculosis has been a grim one. The country reports over 50,000 new cases each year; of particular concern are the 15,000 cases of patients who develop multidrug-resistant TB. There is much WHO focus on TB in Pakistan, and, with World Tuberculosis Day being observed today, there will surely be some discussion on the national strategic plan 2017-2020 for TB control. The conclusion will, unfortunately, be that millions of Pakistanis remain exposed to it. Thousands die every year after contracting the disease. Pakistan has taken steps to curb its spread but clearly lacks some fundamental tools in its battle. WHO has identified "delays in diagnosis, unsupervised, inappropriate and inadequate drug regimens, poor follow-up and lack of a social support programme for high-risk populations". One severe consequence is that Pakistan is ranked fourth among countries with the highest incidence of MDR-TB. This is a worrisome picture,

worsened by the fact that, although occasionally there are pledges to eradicate the disease, the subject has generally failed to cause national-level concern.

For too many people, TB routinely represents a peril of the past, one that in the modern age can be controlled with medication. Meanwhile, the official effort either hasn't been publicised properly or is overwhelmed by other urgent concerns in this vastly populated land. It will be criminal though if the battle to eradicate TB is given any less attention than it deserves — and it requires as much notice, time and energy as would any challenge of gigantic proportions. The eradication of TB, as well as other communicable illnesses — by 2030 — is part of the Sustainable Development Goals. But it seems that, going by the current status of the disease in Pakistan, the battle may extend well beyond that date, especially with the growing prevalence of MDR-TB that cannot be cured with standard first-line medication. It is time to create greater public awareness of how easily the TB germ can spread and to focus on early detection and effective therapy.

Trump's Golan tweet

WHILE Twitter diplomacy may have a few merits, tweets may not be the best medium to announce policy decisions regarding sensitive matters of global importance. However, the incumbent of the White House quite obviously disagrees with this notion, as Donald Trump's recent tweet on the Golan Heights has proved.

“After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognise Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights. ...” President Trump tweeted recently, eliciting a strong response from the Middle East. It seems the fact that the Golan is Syrian territory illegally occupied by Israel — and recognised by the world as such — matters little where the US leader and his coterie of pro-Israel hawks are concerned.

While the Israelis reacted gleefully to Mr Trump's act of 'generosity', others in the Middle East weren't quite so pleased. Syria itself has said that Mr Trump's action “reflects the United States' contempt for international legitimacy” and “blind bias” towards Israel. The Arab League, Turkey, Iran and Russia have also slammed the American move strongly.

The fact is that Mr Trump's move is part of a familiar pattern of appeasement of Israel and disdain of Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. This is only

the latest in a series of moves emanating from the Trump White House to have exposed the current US administration's true inclinations in the Middle East.

For example, late in 2017, the US 'recognised' Jerusalem as Israel's capital, going against international consensus that the holy city is disputed territory; this year, the decision to 'merge' the US consulate in Jerusalem (which principally dealt with Palestinian affairs) with the American embassy was also seen as a snub to the Arab side, while Washington's support for illegal Israeli settlements is perhaps at its highest level ever.

The message from Mr Trump seems to be one of denigration of Palestinians and granting legitimacy to the Israeli occupation. The Zionist state has a voracious appetite for Arab land; Mr Trump and his team in Washington are creating an enabling environment where Tel Aviv can take what doesn't belong to it, and get away with it. However, as observers have noted, the latest move of 'gifting' the Golan to Israel is likely to fuel more violence in the region.

Thus, any peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute at this point seems remote, and more turbulence is the likely fate of the region

Reprieve for Bahria Town

THE denouement of the Bahria Town case pertaining to its project in Karachi, instead of correcting a rotten-to-the core system that facilitates ruthless business interests in land, may unintentionally embolden it further.

After months of wrangling, the apex court finally accepted the real estate behemoth's offer of Rs460bn as payment for 16,896 acres it illegally acquired for its housing project in Malir district.

In exchange, the rights to the land are to be transferred to Bahria Town; meanwhile, NAB has been restrained from filing references against the firm's directors and officials. However, in case of any default in the payment schedule of the settlement, the accountability body will be free to file corruption references against the developer after getting permission from the court.

Bahria Town was a test case. The outcome of the years-long proceedings could have put the brakes on the unbridled mafia of private mega developers who include

or have connections within the highest echelons of power, and that harness the state's coercive powers to deprive rightful owners of their land.

It could have determined whether those who broke the law and gamed the system would receive their comeuppance.

The reason the case dragged on as long as it did was because individuals and organisations, including NAB, which should have furnished the court with the information it sought about Bahria Town's shenanigans in Malir, delayed, misled and prevaricated.

Despite all these efforts at obstructing justice, the Supreme Court's damning May 4 verdict found indisputable evidence of criminal conspiracy between Bahria and Sindh government functionaries and shed much-needed light on what has been a grossly underreported plunder of the city's precious real estate.

Unfortunately, the most recent order does not prescribe commensurate sanctions against the perpetrators. Instead, the apex court has retrospectively legalised what the earlier three-judge bench had determined was a blatant fraud, even more so given that the land handed over to Bahria on a platter by Sindh's venal bureaucracy was to be developed for low-cost housing.

The Rs460bn settlement — equivalent to no less than \$3.2bn — offered by Bahria, albeit at the nudging of the apex court, only indicates the developer's deep pockets and the colossal fortune it has already raked in.

According to a detailed estimate in the May 4 verdict, which took into account a mere 7,068 acres in its Karachi project, Bahria stands to make a net gain of around Rs225bn from marketable land alone, ie not counting potential profits from built-up units, such as houses, apartments, etc.

Consider that the settlement agreed upon is for 16,896 acres — which is also grossly off the mark. Bahria Town Karachi today encroaches upon at least 30,000 acres. What is to stop this juggernaut from continuing to flout the law? Can we hope that those with a duty to hold the powerful to account will monitor its actions?

Lessons from Malaysia

THE visit by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad provides a good opportunity to reflect on what Pakistan can learn from the example of Malaysia. Since the 1980s, that country has undergone a profound transformation from primarily being an exporter of raw materials to becoming a manufacturing powerhouse and one of the largest and fastest-growing economies in Southeast Asia. What stands out for Pakistan in the Malaysian example is the long-term nature of economic decision-making and the strong policy continuity in the pursuit of strategic economic goals. The country has had its fair share of political turmoil, and most recently, we have the example of an aggressive accountability drive under way against the former prime minister Najib Razak, who has been accused of massive corruption in a state-run fund. He faces 42 charges of corruption, money laundering and the abuse of power while in office, and though the trial continues to face delays, he has been arrested four times since losing power last May. Before him, the current deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, also faced imprisonment three times on charges that seemed political motivated, with the first sentence actively supported by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad himself. Today, Anwar Ibrahim, is back in a coalition however, and widely considered to be the successor to the prime minister himself.

In all this, we have seen a strong focus on economic improvement as the primary task of the state. Despite political storms and aggressive accountability drives by incumbents against their predecessors, economic policy sees continuity, and long-term goals are not clouded by politics. The manifesto of the ruling coalition government, that has brought together two leaders who were bitter foes in the past, emphasises goals such as a free media, an independent judiciary and an end to corruption and the abuse of power. Malaysia's leaders recognise the importance of strong institutions and a free media for economic growth. For strong and sustainable growth that transform a country, long-term investments in education and health are critical, and ensuring growth as an inclusive process is also central. Malaysia's example indicates as much.

It is a valuable lesson for Pakistan's political leadership to learn, and not just for those who are in power today. Holding the economy hostage to political compulsions, gunning for short-term, high-visibility and project-led growth and grooming a dependence on external assistance to compensate for a losing competitive advantage have impoverished our country and are eroding its democratic creed. Like Malaysia, we need to marginalise extremism from our society, focus on high-quality education and health for the population, and work on long-term economic priorities in order to chart a transformative path forward. Above all, Pakistan's leadership needs to absorb the full ramifications of Malaysia's key lesson — that the prosperity of its citizenry is the first and foremost task of the state.

Gender wage gap

It is a matter of grave concern that Pakistan has the highest gender wage gap in the world.

A recent World Bank initiative, Pakistan@100, has produced a report which primarily focuses on what the country will look like when it turns 100, and how it can increase growth through reforms that will drive economic and social prosperity for its citizens.

While the study touches upon several economic, environmental and social aspects, a startling fact that is highlighted is the scale of disparity between male and female participation in the workforce. For a population of 208m people — nearly half of it comprising women — the statistic of 26pc female participation is abysmal.

The report further states that for a sustainable development path, Pakistan must work on building an inclusive society that empowers groups economically as well as socially.

There are some very important lessons in this study for the government. With specific regard to female labour force participation, there is a serious gap which if addressed can drive up growth significantly.

It highlights several areas on which the government can focus in the near future in order to remove barriers to women's empowerment. These include increasing access to education, spreading awareness of reproductive rights, working on anti-

child marriage bills, passing home-based and domestic workers' laws, establishing safer public spaces and creating an enabling environment for businesses owned by women.

For the long term, the government must pay attention to legislation that reduces gender-based discrimination, and develop programmes that increase the access of disadvantaged groups to public services and economic opportunities.

With Pakistan having the highest fertility rates in the region, it is also crucial for both the federal and provincial governments to dedicate resources to work on the difference between desired and actual fertility rates, as they limit gender empowerment; work must be done to encourage women to make their own decisions.

There is no doubt that Pakistan desperately needs more of its women to join the workforce. After all, equality is a harbinger of a just society.

The report paints a beautiful picture for a possible future for our country with the following words: "Imagine a Pakistan in which all girls and women make their own decisions on pregnancy, work and age to get married. Imagine a Pakistan in which women regularly compete with or outperform men for the best jobs as doctors, scientists, policymakers and civil servants." The country's leaders must make this possible.

Prisoner's death

"NEITHER reason nor sensibility allows me to believe that we can execute a mentally ill or disabled person," stated the now former chief justice of Pakistan, Mian Saqib Nisar, when reviewing the death penalty handed out to Kaniz Fatima and Imdad Ali, death-row prisoners who suffer severe mental disorders. Despite having the death penalty hanging over his head halted four times — a situation that is highly stressful for convicts and their families — it seems that neither reason nor sensibility, not even compassion, were in evidence in the case of Khizar Hayat. He had been placed on death row for killing a police officer back in 2003. Recently, a two-member bench had referred Hayat's case to a larger bench of the Supreme Court which was reviewing the cases of Imdad Ali and Kaniz Fatima. After spending 16 years of his life in jail — the last six in solitary confinement, with his mental health getting worse in the confines of his cell — Hayat passed away on

March 21, 2019. Diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in 2008, the former policeman spent his last days in critical condition at Jinnah Hospital in Lahore. For several days, he had been so ill that he could not even take medicine or food and had to be force-fed. Despite requests by doctors to place him in a mental institution (in accordance with the Pakistan Prison Rules), all such requests were rejected by the Punjab authorities.

Khizar Hayat never saw justice in his lifetime, but there are still over 8,000 prisoners languishing on death row in Pakistan. Many remain undiagnosed. Most of Pakistan's overcrowded prisons lack a separate psychiatric ward and do not have professionals visiting regularly. So far, only Sindh has passed legislation that combines psychiatric health with the criminal justice system. And while they wait for their next hearing, Imdad Ali and Kaniz Fatima have yet to be examined by the special medical board appointed by the court four months ago.

Forced conversions

THE alleged abduction of two young Hindu sisters, Reena and Raveena, from their home in Daharki last week is one of only a handful of the many claims of forced conversions in Sindh that actually gain public attention.

Too often, officials casually lean into the suggestion that such incidents are simply a matter of women deciding to convert and marry of their own free will, a 'family dispute' that should be resolved privately, ignoring the power dynamics that make this so suspect.

The fact is that the majority of new converts in Sindh are young women or minor girls from socioeconomically vulnerable Hindu families.

The nexus of power — politically influential families, clerics and seminaries — behind this phenomenon are also well known to all, while religious minorities have repeatedly pointed to a lack of appropriate concern displayed by police and judicial officers.

In this case, too, despite the fact that an FIR was registered under the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Act, 2013, the police seemingly attempted to minimise the allegations by pointing to a video of the two girls claiming they had chosen their fate voluntarily.

The truth about what has happened to Reena and Raveena can only emerge after a thorough and impartial probe, and it is hoped that the investigation will be swift now that the prime minister has taken notice of this case. But, beyond that, there is a need to address the systemic failures that enable such forms of religious persecution to flourish.

A move by the Sindh legislature to criminalise forced religious conversions and forced marriages was torpedoed in early 2017 when the then governor refused to ratify it.

The government was forced to capitulate to pressure exerted by the religious right that conflates safeguards against coercion with 'obstacles' in the path of those who wish to convert. Human rights groups have now called on the provincial government to resurrect the bill.

Indeed, such laws are needed across the country, for the guarantee of life and liberty of Pakistan's religious minorities must be wholeheartedly embraced by all our citizens.

India's Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj's needless intervention into what is an internal matter for Pakistan was clearly politically motivated, yet Minister for Information Fawad Chaudhry should not have taken the bait.

The state has a responsibility to preserve and protect the right to freedom of religion, guaranteed under Article 20 of our Constitution. But it is impossible to deny the fact that religious minorities are, in many ways, more vulnerable than safe in Pakistan.

National discourse on minority rights, particularly of Pakistani Hindus, should not be framed in opposition to India's own abysmal track record regarding religious minorities, but of its own accord, in unqualified commitment to affirmatively upholding their fundamental rights.

In a country that takes pride in the white in its flag, even a single violation of minority rights should not be tolerated.

Gas price increases

PREDICTABLY enough, the managements of the two state-owned gas utilities — Sui Southern and Sui Northern — have filed their revenue requirements for next year and asked for a tariff increase of utterly unsustainable proportions. This was expected all along because it is what the managements of these public-sector utilities have always done: pass on the costs of their own ineptitude to the consumer. Luckily, there is a system in place to check this. The companies can only submit their revenue requirements to the regulator, who then has to hold an open hearing and decide how much of the amount requested can be allowed to be raised through tariff increases, and how much must come from raising operational efficiency and other means. After that, another layer serves as a further check, where the government has to notify the price determined by the regulator, which they can do in totality or only partially. So for now the managements of the gas companies have demanded more than doubling of the gas tariffs for consumers in order to meet their revenue requirements for next year. But there is ample space within which to deny this request, question its assumptions, and return to the companies a tariff that encourages them to raise next year's revenues through system improvement and plugging leakages.

At some point in the future, there is no doubt that the government will have to undertake the task of deep-rooted gas price reform. This is apart from the reform of the state-owned entities and their governance. The pricing regime under which our gas sector operates is woefully outdated and should have been reformed towards greater flexibility and market-based pricing many years ago. There is little doubt as well that such reform will push the price of gas up for most consumers and thereby exact a steep political cost from the government, perhaps one reason why no government has shown much eagerness for the job. Through it all, the government must ensure that it remains in the driving seat as the reforms are implemented. Vested interests in the gas utilities and their managements, as well as industry, will stir mightily when this moment arrives, and keeping up the initiative will be a big challenge. Preparation for that moment begins with telling the errant gas companies that the days of billing the consumers for the managements' failures are over.

‘Sohni dharti’ — always

THE mention of Shahnaz Begum, who passed away in Dhaka recently, reminds us of the black-and-white TV days, and of the unqualified love of the land which she conveyed through her sweet, tuneful voice. *Sohni dharti* Allah rakhay and *Jeeway Pakistan* are two of the country’s most loved and inspiring songs. It was these two numbers that almost five decades ago brought Shahnaz Begum (later Shahnaz Rahmatullah) fame and followers in droves. As fate would have it, it turned out to be a parting gift for the Pakistani people from the Bengali singer, who returned to Dhaka. Her journey towards greater melodic maturity continued in the newly established Bangladesh, earning her many accolades from both ordinary listeners and those who sat on award-giving juries. But quite remarkably, in Pakistan, she was through all these years celebrated on a massive scale — purely on the basis of the two patriotic numbers and a few ghazals that she had recorded in Urdu. There was no ebbing in her popularity, her youthful voice etched in memory for all times to come. Pakistanis would always be eager to catch a glimpse of Shahnaz Begum, just as they would be keenly following the news about the latest activities of Runa Laila, a Bengali singer of exceptional talent who once dared rival Madam Noor Jehan.

Shahnaz Begum’s passing is a reminder of the complementary relationship the two wings of Pakistan had until the creation of Bangladesh. She was one of the many from the eastern part who enriched Pakistani art — and there are a number of others whose talent first emerged in the then eastern wing of the country, not least among them all-time top actors Shabnam and Nadeem. There is a long list of creative people from East Pakistan in all areas of the arts whose names come to mind as a major influence on evolving Pakistani expression and Pakistani memorabilia. The past may be another country, but what’s common and shared is too powerful to be denied

Golan and beyond

REACTING to Donald Trump's recognition of the Golan Heights as Israel's territory, the Zionist state's overjoyed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that his country "never had a better friend". There is good reason for the Israeli leader's adulation for the man in the White House; while US administrations over the decades have always gone the extra mile to protect Israel — particularly its blatant human rights abuses and barbaric treatment of Palestinians — perhaps no other American president has been so unabashedly pro Tel Aviv. Whether it is the 'recognition' of the disputed holy city of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, granting carte blanche to illegal Jewish settlements on Palestinian land, or now recognising the unlawful Israeli occupation of Syrian land, Mr Trump has pulled out all the stops to accommodate Tel Aviv, particularly Mr Netanyahu. And these convenient facts certainly won't hurt the incumbent Israeli leader, who will be fending off several challenges to himself in the general elections due early next month.

However, while Mr Trump's actions may help Benjamin Netanyahu electorally and nudge up his own ratings with his evangelical supporters, the American leader is playing with fire by trying to redraw the map of the Middle East in an imperial fashion. The Golan was lost in the disastrous Arab-Israeli War of 1967, along with the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. While Egypt eventually won back the Sinai after a peace treaty with Israel — denounced by the Arab world — the rest of the aforementioned Arab land remains under Tel Aviv's control. Only Lebanon, through Hezbollah, has managed to liberate Arab land from Israel's clutches. Donald Trump has rewarded Israel's illegal occupation and encouraged its never-ending desire to devour Arab land. However, the meekness and acquiescence of the Arabs in front of both Israel and the US over these moves is depressing. Perhaps if major Arab powers — especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia — had sent clear signals that illegal occupation of Arab land was unacceptable, Washington would have thought twice about going ahead with this audacious move. The OIC has been similarly ineffectual in resisting the encroachment of Arab and Muslim land.

The US 'recognition' of Israeli control over the occupied Golan may be farcical — Mr Trump has in effect endorsed Israel's occupation of land that belongs to neither of them. However, the move is bound to have far-reaching implications. Currently, the Middle East is in a state of flux with great uncertainty. If Israel — under American patronage — undertakes any further adventures in the region, the reaction may result in a wider conflict. For example, Jewish extremists have threatened to desecrate Al Aqsa; Israel continues to brutalise the Palestinians; and

Tel Aviv has struck both Hezbollah and Iranian targets inside Syria. Should any of these parties choose to respond to Israeli provocations, a new conflagration is bound to erupt in the Middle East.

Wheat challenge

WITH the next wheat harvest just a few weeks away, the largest cash crop in several districts of Punjab is facing quite a widespread disease attack. At least a fifth of the crop is estimated by the provincial agriculture department officials to have been infected by yellow rust disease. However, experts say, the disease is unlikely to cause a major dent in the overall yield unless weather conditions enable it to return over the next few days, with daylight temperatures dropping below 20°C. The more-than-usual humid weather accompanied by lower temperatures because of excessive rains in the province has been one of the main reasons for the emergence of yellow rust in the wheat-growing areas. Nevertheless, the disease has affected the crop mostly in areas where farmers used either unapproved wheat seed varieties — primarily to save money and cut the cost of production — or the ones approved only for Sindh's climate conditions. The reuse of the same seed variety for more than two years could also be another factor for the return of the pest infestation. The latter was first spotted in the third week of last month, but the provincial agriculture department's failure to take appropriate measures let it spread to cover 20pc of the total area under wheat cultivation. That was not all. The department also failed to educate the worried growers who had started spraying insecticides directly on the maturing grains to control infestation in a bid to avert crop losses. It is feared that this practice could have rendered the cereal from the disease-affected areas unfit for human consumption.

The attack, however undamaging it may be for the overall crop size, should be taken by the authorities as a warning from nature. Experts have been cautioning successive governments about the potential impact on agriculture of shifting weather patterns owing to climate change in the region. The situation calls for strengthening the agriculture research institutes so that they can carry out a comprehensive study on the changes in weather and their effects on crops, as well as suggest actions that are required to adjust our existing agricultural practices to new conditions. At the same time, the government should also invest in the development of new seed varieties that are strong enough to withstand the impact of changing climate for all major and minor crops, and encourage the use of new

technologies to prevent pest infestation and disease attacks and increase yields. These actions will mean nothing unless farmers are also informed and educated on the changes that threaten their livelihoods and the country's food security.

The hunger problem

A RECENT report highlighted the prevalence of malnutrition in Pakistan, describing harrowing scenes of underweight children at a state-run hospital in Sindh. Out of the 150-250 children that would visit this hospital in one day, one-fifth suffered from malnutrition. Along with the lack of access to proper nutrients, poor sanitation and hygiene practices increase the risk of malnourishment, which hampers both human development and economic growth. Malnutrition is a global problem, and nearly half of all deaths of children under five is caused by it annually. But our malnutrition problem is particularly inexcusable as the country is not suffering from a food shortage, the report states. Rather, the issue is one of unequal distribution of resources and wealth, which leaves those at the bottom unable to afford even basic nutrients for a healthy lifestyle.

Hence, globally, Pakistan has one of the highest rates of stunting. According to the National Nutrition Survey of 2011, 44pc of children here are stunted because of poor nutrition, frequent illness, and insufficient psychosocial stimulation in the first few years of life. Women's health is neglected and maternal malnutrition not only leads to higher mortality rates among women, but also foetal growth restriction, increasing the risk of stunted growth and other disabilities in children. Last year, a UN study found that only 4pc of Pakistani children received a "minimally acceptable diet". Another report published by the planning ministry stated that Pakistan loses \$7.6bn — that is 3pc of the total GDP — each year due to malnutrition. In 2015, Pakistan took the pledge to becoming a 'zero-hunger' country by 2030, as prescribed in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Clearly, we have a long way to get there, but the right time to form pro-poor policies is always now.

Mending the system

FINALLY, after years of empty rhetoric, there are tangible measures being taken to fix Pakistan's broken justice system. Among the most recent such steps is the establishment of a cell to monitor and evaluate proceedings at model criminal trial courts to be set up in each district with the objective of dispensing expeditious justice. The cell will be headed by Islamabad District and Sessions Court judge Sohail Nasir who will report directly to Chief Justice of Pakistan Asif Saeed Khosa, indicating the importance that the country's top judge places on the initiative. The MCTCs will be equipped with all facilities to ensure that the monitoring cell, which will provide the courts with detailed protocols including trial scheduling, has uninterrupted online access to the proceedings. Another essential step towards the provision of speedy justice came about a few days ago when Justice Khosa announced the formation of a seven-member bench to determine the definition of 'terrorism' and the cases that fall under it.

Delay is among the most serious of the multiple problems that plague the criminal justice system: there are around 2m cases pending before various courts in the country. According to a recent Nacta report, Pakistani prisons house 57pc more inmates than their authorised capacity and two-thirds of the prison population is either awaiting or undergoing trial. In many instances, prisoners have been acquitted after enduring years of incarceration. Insufficient human resources; sloppy case management; archaic court procedures; incompetent police investigations; and corruption, especially in the lower courts — each of these contributes to interminable adjournments. However, flawed drafting of the anti-terrorism legislation has also considerably exacerbated the situation. A special law, enacted for a specific purpose, must have a narrow ambit; instead, the ambiguous definition of 'terrorism' in the ATA enables overly broad, arbitrary and even malicious application of the terrorism clause. As a result, the ATCs have become bogged down with cases that should be dealt with by ordinary courts. Rather than address the issues that impede the functioning of the criminal justice system — such as by appointing more judges, rationalising the ATA, etc — the civilian leadership has cited delays in ATC trials as a compelling reason to set up special courts. The opaque procedures employed by these parallel mechanisms of 'justice' are antithetical to the principles of due process, in which transparency is a key element.

Meanwhile, civilian courts have been further diminished and projected as being chronically ineffectual. The possibility of redressal has always been within reach. Perhaps we are at last on the cusp of such a change in direction, and if so, it cannot come a moment too soon. Our recent history illustrates the consequences of tolerating a long dysfunctional justice system, for that is what provided militants in Swat a pretext for their brutal rule. The very human need for timely justice must not be thwarted.

Karachi violence

FOR the past four decades or so, Karachi has experienced several waves of violence, with periods of uneasy calm in between.

Sometimes bloodshed has manifested itself in political killings, at other times ethnic violence has erupted, while the threat of sectarian trouble is always bubbling under the surface. Throw into this lethal mix the incidence of deadly street crime, and a picture of a metropolis constantly on edge emerges.

While the city has seen some semblance of peace since the 2013 law-enforcement operation, this calm is often shattered by violent incidents that remind both the state and citizens how fragile the situation in Karachi is. Just on Wednesday, a number of violent incidents took place in the city, including murders and break-ins. In one incident, a teenager was shot dead upon resisting an attempt to rob a few thousand rupees.

Over the past few weeks, a number of high-profile attacks have taken place, including the targeting of religious scholar Mufti Taqi Usmani; a police guard and another individual accompanying the mufti were killed, and though police claim to have made headway in the case, no solid leads have emerged. Only a day after the attack on the mufti, Wajahat Hussain, a youth related to an MWM leader, was gunned down in Orangi Town.

From circumstantial evidence, it seems the same set of elements that had previously sown chaos in the city have become active again. However, only a proper intelligence-based analysis can uncover the sources of instability.

It needs to be ascertained where the threats are primarily emanating from. Have sectarian killers and political assassins become active again, or does the threat lie elsewhere, for example in killers for hire? Are local criminal gangs taking

advantage of the chaos in Karachi, or are foreign players meddling in the city's peace?

The situation needs to be studied deeply by the law-enforcement and intelligence apparatus to break the latest cycle of violence. Moreover, one key reason for recurring bloodshed is the fact that Karachi is awash with guns. Other than lip service, over the years no government — federal or provincial — has considered a serious de-weaponisation drive for Karachi. That is why everyone from professional killers to street criminals is armed to the teeth, and able to take precious lives at will.

The authorities need to arrest the rising violent crime graph before bloodshed once more becomes routine in Karachi.

Prisoner's death

YESTERDAY'S paper carried an appalling report on the killing of an elderly Pakistani fisherman in an Indian prison. Like hundreds before him, the octogenarian had crossed into Indian territory unknowingly in a boat with six others in 2017. In times like these, with the war drums beating and emotions running high in both countries, authorities have to be even more vigilant about prisoners' safety — particularly in India, which seems to have been caught in a war frenzy in recent weeks. This is especially the case after Indian prisoners stoned to death 50-year-old Shakirullah, a Pakistani inmate serving a life sentence in a jail in Rajasthan, and who had accidentally crossed the Sialkot border in 2003. Authorities said an argument had broken out between Shakirullah and the Indian prisoners after the attack on Indian soldiers in Pulwama, for which the authorities in Delhi held Pakistan responsible. When his remains were returned 12 days after his killing, a postmortem revealed that vital organs were missing from his body.

What is most shocking about the latest incident is that it was not the prisoners but the jail authorities themselves who apparently carried out the brutal assault on the helpless old man. Fishermen are already one of the poorest and most vulnerable groups in this region. In Pakistan, many belong to the Burmese and Bengali communities, and may not even have basic citizenship status. They have nothing to do with the decisions made by those in power, and they cannot be expected to see an invisible border in the sea when they are out making an honest livelihood. Earlier this year, India handed a list of 347 Pakistani prisoners languishing in Indian

jails to the Pakistani high commission, as a reciprocal gesture to Pakistan's handing over of a list of 537 Indian prisoners to the Indian high commission. Out of the 537, 483 were fishermen. For the sake of basic human decency, if nothing else, all fishermen should be released immediately, especially if their safety in captivity cannot be guaranteed.

Anti-poverty initiative

THE steps announced by Prime Minister Imran Khan as part of his anti-poverty initiative 'Ehsaas' sound innovative and sincere.

The amendment to Article 38 (d) of the Constitution to redefine access to food, shelter, clothing, health and education as a fundamental right would certainly, in a legal sense, change the relationship of the state with its citizenry. Along with this, Mr Khan also announced an increase in the amount of money the state intends to spend on underprivileged segments of society — from Rs80bn to Rs120bn by 2020. The prime minister also announced a new ministry for social protection and poverty alleviation would be set up, though the details were scant.

All of these are sound priorities to pursue for a leader, and there can be little doubt that Mr Khan, on his part, has shown a sincere desire to deliver to the poor. The problem is with the path forward.

In the past, too, we have heard the prime minister speak about stunting in children and malnutrition, and the distribution of poultry as income support for low-income households. To date, there is scant evidence that much has been done to follow up on these announcements. To earnestly improve access to food, shelter, clothing, health and education, far more than constitutional amendments will be required. The prime minister said that after the amendment has been made, any citizen would be able to approach a court and demand his or her fundamental rights.

The first thing that will be required will be the numbers in parliament to make this amendment to the constitution. Given the kind of relationship that Mr Khan and his government have with the opposition parties, this looks like a challenging task.

Second, the capacity of the state to actually produce results is debatable. What is obstructing better health and education outcomes at present is not the fact that they are not legally recognised as fundamental rights. Instead, the challenge lies

in the lack of resources, overlapping jurisdictions, and the absence of any commitment made by the political elites to prioritise social welfare objectives and give their undivided attention to the task. A constitutional amendment will give the courts the power to carve a role for themselves in the provision of social services, but this does not mean that the judiciary would be able to deliver the services in question.

It is good for Pakistan that its leadership should speak of poverty alleviation and social service delivery as important priorities of the state, and seek innovative ways to improve performance in these crucial areas. But both priorities have highly developed approaches and a wealth of past experience to learn from. A new ministry will have much to reflect on and learn, before it can embark on an effective course of action.

PPP's 'safe' journey

BILAWAL Bhutto-Zardari's train march through parts of Sindh has generated quite a lot of interest all around. The march has come at a crucial time for the PPP and its co-chairman Asif Zardari, who arguably wields the greatest influence within the party as it stands today. The party is trying to keep its profile high and its chin up as it faces challenges to stay relevant nationally and not lose its popularity in Sindh. It is not an easy task given that not much has been done to stop the PPP's descent into a state that is often associated with corruption. The cases brought up against Mr Zardari and his associates by NAB are making life difficult for the party amid warnings that the accountability body is going to turn up the heat further. In the circumstances, it is easy to see Mr Bhutto-Zardari's train campaign as an attempt to save his father against any action that the authorities may be contemplating. The timing must also have been determined to an extent by the fact that a blazing sun is to soon beat down upon the plains, making political movement such as train marches difficult.

The choice of the route that Mr Bhutto-Zardari has taken — through areas which his party dominates — is understandable. Pictures facilitate the message that is ultimately rooted in the old notion that the PPP is using its so-called Sindh card. That's not all. The images of the march bring out another reality that is not appreciated by those who were only until recently chanting slogans that the PPP was the only political outfit with a national presence. Maybe, the isolation does add

to the intensity of the message, if the purpose of the ruling party in Sindh is to play the victim card. Having said that, showing the will to stand by Mr Zardari is not the only message the PPP should be conveying. There must be a bigger message — of siding with the people. The PPP is seen as not wanting to go beyond the areas under its control. The impression conveyed is that the PPP leadership has failed to win back territories that the party has ceded over the years; its lack of success has much to do with stories of the alleged corruption of its top leaders as reflected in the media. Mr Bhutto-Zardari's journey within Sindh tends to expose his weaknesses outside his safe zone.

Domestic violence

THE harrowing case of a woman in Lahore who was allegedly tortured by her husband and ignored by the police, as well as the response since her video statement became public, underscores how seriously this country needs to have a meaningful conversation about domestic violence. In its most brutal manifestation, domestic violence is at the heart of numerous murders of women by their spouses and other family members reported daily across Pakistan. Against this backdrop, countless women from every socioeconomic background suffer in silence from economic, mental, sexual and physical abuse. Escaping an abusive household is near impossible, especially in a culture that blames, shames and silences victims who lack support from families that, instead, force them to reconcile with their abusive partners. There is exhaustive research to support the fact that the point at which a woman tries to leave her abuser is precisely the one at which she is most vulnerable to a possibly fatal assault.

It is thus absolutely essential — the difference, in many cases, between life and death — that when women do overcome this monumental first step, we set the right tone at every level of intervention. While an internal inquiry is currently being conducted as to whether the battered woman was initially turned away by officers, this is certainly not a unique phenomenon for victims of domestic violence in Pakistan. Besides sensitising staff at police stations, there is a need for more dedicated state facilities and personnel modelled on existing crisis centres. The media, meanwhile, must realise that speculative, sensationalist reporting not only puts the individual at greater risk but reinforces dangerous societal narratives about abuse. And as consumers of these invasive portrayals of victims of violence, we as a society need to examine our compulsion to fixate on selective outrage,

when all around us — in fact, in our midst — are signs of abuse that we casually ignore. Women can no longer wait. We need to have this conversation now.

NFC talks

AFTER a gap of many years, discussions on the next National Finance Commission award are finally moving forward again, and the finance minister's announcement that the aim is to have a new award by December is an indication of serious intent. The timeline is realistic and the talks have acquired structure and momentum since they restarted in February, while the second meeting concluded yesterday.

The most important thing to keep in mind for the federal government, the curator of the entire process, is that the NFC operates on the principle of consensus. Nothing should be done to undermine the spirit of consensus in pushing towards a final outcome.

This award is being negotiated exactly 10 years after the last consensus-based NFC award was announced, and success on this front will be an important and lasting part of the PTI's legacy. But should the federal government depart from the principle of consensus in pushing for its demands, it is likely to lead to the breakdown of talks, which would only cement the growing perception of the PTI as a party that is unable to carry the others along.

More than any other forum, this is the place where the finance minister and his team need to demonstrate a delicate touch and their prowess in the subtle art of negotiation. The provinces are entitled to press for their demand to continue the process of devolution further in the face of the federation's desire to reclaim fiscal space at the expense of the provinces. Whether or not they choose to press ahead, this entitlement is a political choice each provincial government will make, nothing more.

The sharp erosion of fiscal space at the centre has been under discussion during these talks, and indications suggest that Sindh alone, being the only province ruled by a party from the opposition, is putting up a spirited fight against the strong appeals coming from the centre to arrest and reverse the growing transfer of resources to the provinces. The federal authorities at the table must realise that those responsibilities that belong to them, whether funds for Fata, Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan or for bodies like the Higher Education Commission, are

squarely theirs to discharge. They can request the provinces to share the burden of the expenses associated with these. They can press their case with data, with appeals to patriotic duty, perhaps even invoke moral obligation. But they cannot demand these resources as a right or something they are entitled to, nor can they seek to take them from the provinces in a non-consensual manner. Rather than using the NFC as a forum to only seek a new formula for how the resources of the state will be distributed among the federating units, the government should steer the talks towards how the revenue and the governance responsibilities of the state will be shared.

Teachers' protest

PARTS of Karachi's so-called red zone presented the look of a battlefield on Thursday, as police officials cracked down hard on protesting teachers. The educators had been agitating for the past several days — for changes in service structure and other professional matters — and held peaceful demonstrations in several of Sindh's cities. However, their decision to march on Chief Minister House in the provincial capital resulted in an ugly showdown with the police. The images coming out of the melee were appalling, with teachers tear-gassed and some bloodied as law enforcers unleashed their batons on them. The police say they took action because the teachers tried to hold their demonstration in the high-security red zone. However, this is no justification for meting out such brutal treatment to teachers protesting peacefully for their demands. In a democratic society, non-violent protest is a right guaranteed to all, and crushing such demonstrations with brute force is totally unacceptable. While PPP chief Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, whose party rules Sindh, and the provincial chief minister have both condemned the police action, far more needs to be done to sensitise the police and the administration to handle such situations in a non-violent, humane manner. For the PPP particularly, which says it adheres to democratic values and has a history of street politics — recently witnessed when protesting PPP workers clashed with security personnel outside the NAB offices in Islamabad — such conduct by law enforcers under its provincial government's watch is unfortunate.

Thursday's incident also shows how brutalised society has become. Violence is the norm; when people do not get their rights they take to the streets, and should they dare protest in front of symbols of state power, the response from the state can be brutal. Sindh is not alone as the situation is the same across Pakistan. What

is needed is deep reflection by the state, as well as society, to break this vicious circle. The lack of social cohesion in the public must be addressed, so that people don't have to take to the streets to air their demands. And if they do choose to exercise their right to protest peacefully, then it is incumbent upon the state to control crowds in a manner that is non-violent. Sindh's teachers' issues may have been resolved for the moment. But an effective complaint redressal mechanism and a peaceful way to manage protests are still required, so that such ugly incidents are not repeated.

Muzzling critical voices

IT would be comical — if it weren't for the fact that it so perfectly encapsulates how shrunken the space for free speech and expression in Pakistan now truly is. More alarming still is the seeming enthusiasm of civil authorities to take a page out of the fascist's playbook to hasten the demise of civil liberties.

The notification of an inquiry — lodged by the FIA's cybercrime wing citing a directive from the interior ministry — against several journalists and groups for participating in a "targeted social media campaign" to criticise the Saudi crown prince during his recent visit to Pakistan has been decried and derided in equal parts since it came to light. Even officials within the ministry and FIA have expressed confusion about how to proceed, since there is (as yet) no statute under which to prosecute citizens for expressing solidarity with and sharing images of slain journalists such as Jamal Khashoggi.

Whether or not the FIA is merely rubber-stamping, it points to an increasing misuse of the investigatory body as a literal thought police to control and silence online voices, which dovetails with a general escalation in abuses of power to gag the press and curtail fundamental rights of free speech, expression and information.

It is even more puzzling since only days prior to the delegation's February visit, another circular issued by the ministry alluding to "nefarious interests" keen on "maligning" the Saudi prince was leaked — and denounced by the minister of state for interior, who said that the government was investigating the matter "as per the directives" of the prime minister.

While the findings of that probe have yet — if ever — to be shared, the fact that no official wishes to claim the animus for either this or the resurrected attempt to target

independent and critical voices is positively Kafkaesque. With truth so much stranger than fiction, perhaps it is futile — even dangerous — to demand who really is behind Pakistan's draconian descent, with all its attendant absurdities.

Action required

REALISATION is growing in Pakistan that it needs to do more vis-à-vis banned organisations with an alleged presence on its soil. Prime Minister Imran Khan has chaired two high-level meetings of the civilian and military leaderships within a span of three days to address the shortcomings in the government's counterterrorism and anti-extremism strategy. The state has of late demonstrated a renewed resolve to dismantle militant networks and put a stop to their activities. Earlier this month, it banned the JuD and FIF and launched a countrywide crackdown against their assets. Provincial administrations sealed or took administrative control of hundreds of madressahs, mosques, hospitals and ambulances run by JuD and FIF, as well as the already proscribed JeM. Now comes the truly challenging task — to identify the weaknesses in the state's strategy that militant groups can still exploit in order to survive.

For one, the state could revisit some of its earlier anti-extremism measures and build upon them. More than four years have passed since NAP was announced in the immediate aftermath of the APS attack. However, what began as a 20-point flagship plan has since become a footnote in this battle. The action taken in the light of NAP has largely been piecemeal; a few preachers of hate arrested, some jihadi literature seized, and so on. Among the few points followed through on was the controversial step of establishing military courts. Nevertheless, NAP has the potential of forming the bedrock of a properly fleshed-out, integrated plan of action with timelines whereby progress can be realistically assessed. Other existing resources can be harnessed for the purpose, such as Nacta which is as moribund as ever after having fallen prey to politicking. In fact, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif did not call a single meeting of the premier counterterrorism body during his tenure. Instead of reinventing the wheel, such as setting up the National Internal Security Committee, why not strengthen Nacta and make it the robust entity it was meant to be? After all, both bodies have an identical *raison d'être* — specifically, inter-provincial and inter-agency coordination on security matters.

The state's next steps are critical. It must ensure for the country's sake that extremism cannot take succour anywhere. Banning organisations is one thing: their top leaders should be prosecuted for enabling and abetting violence that has claimed tens of thousands of innocent lives. Moreover, the state's broad-based actions — legislation, regulations, data collection, etc — to tighten money-laundering procedures will not be sufficient unless complemented by activities at the ground level. The involvement of local administrations and law enforcement is important here, for the money trail that sustains extremist outfits can take many circuitous routes that sidestep the formal monetary system. There must be no doubt left that Pakistan is anything but fully committed to the global fight against terror financing.

Stunting crisis

ACCORDING to a recent Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey, every third child under the age of five in Punjab suffers from stunted growth. Figures for children in the rural parts are particularly alarming at 34.3pc, compared to 26pc in the urban areas. Just a day before these figures were revealed in a report by the Punjab Planning and Development Board, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced his grand social welfare and poverty alleviation programme, while mentioning that the prevalence of malnutrition and stunting among children was one of the biggest challenges facing the country. It was in a similar vein to his inaugural speech to the nation as prime minister in August during which he held out X-ray images of brains of children suffering from stunting — these were significantly smaller than the brains of healthy children. According to Unicef, 38pc of children under the age of five are stunted in South Asia, ie 64m children. In Pakistan, the figure is even higher than average at 44pc — the third highest in the world. The main causes of stunting amongst children are poor diets resulting in insufficient nutrients in the first two years of life, combined with poor hygiene and sanitation practices in households. Unwashed fingers are used to feed children, resulting in faecal bacteria entering their bodies. Additionally, a report by the World Bank last year revealed high rates of E. coli in ground and surface water when untreated faecal sludge and wastewater seeps into the irrigation supply due to open defecation and badly planned sewerage drains.

There is another factor that causes high rates of stunting in South Asia, and that is the poor nutrition of mothers before and during pregnancy. Indeed, a significant

percentage of stunting in early childhood occurs in the womb due to maternal malnutrition. Due to deeply ingrained societal biases, women's health and well-being are largely ignored. In many households, girls are often fed after the boys or given the leftovers to eat. Consequently, over half of all South Asian adolescent girls are underweight or anaemic. The importance of breastfeeding in the early years, along with awareness of better nutrition and hygiene practices, must be reinforced through various forums, including the media, in order to obtain the desired behavioural changes in the population. But unless the gross gender imbalances in our society are addressed, children (and women) will continue to suffer on account of choices they have not made.

Press under fire

WITH the arrest by the Philippines government of journalist Maria Ressa on Friday, press freedom has taken yet another hit. Ms Ressa is and has been a long-time critic of President Rodrigo Duterte, and she and her website Rappler have faced a string of criminal charges in recent months that have prompted allegations that Ms Ressa and her team are being targeted for their work. After all, Mr Duterte has also threatened other media houses critical of his regime, including the Daily Inquirer newspaper and broadcaster ABS-CBN. This is not the first time that Ms Ressa, in her words, has faced “the rule of law [...] [being] weaponised”. She was first arrested in February on an ‘internet libel’ charge, a move that invited condemnation from press freedom activists around the world. The latest charges allege that she and her colleagues at Rappler violated constitutional rules regarding foreign ownership of the media, even though the matter at heart is merely an investment made by the US-based Omidyar Network (the latter was established by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar). Of course, the reality is that Rappler has been a prominent critic of the Philippines president's way of cracking down on the narcotics trade; he has used methods that have claimed thousands of lives — to the extent that rights groups allege crimes against humanity.

Ms Ressa has paid a hefty bail and is for now at relative liberty, but the case comes as a chilling reminder of the manner in which the press and freedom of expression are under fire in so many countries around the world. With the experience of the Zia era in particular, Pakistan is all too familiar with censorship; the danger remains as many voices for democracy find themselves under duress, if not direct threat, to abstain from expressing themselves freely. Also, as in Pakistan, in other

countries, too, certain media owners influence news coverage of their respective media outlets. It needs to be recognised that a free and vibrant press is essential to the functioning of democracy.