

MONTHLY

DAWN

EDITORIALS

MARCH 2024

NOW THIS EDITION IS
WITH MOST LATEST

DAWN VOCABULARY



AGHA ZUHAIB KHAN



THE CSS POINT

Yes We Can Do It!

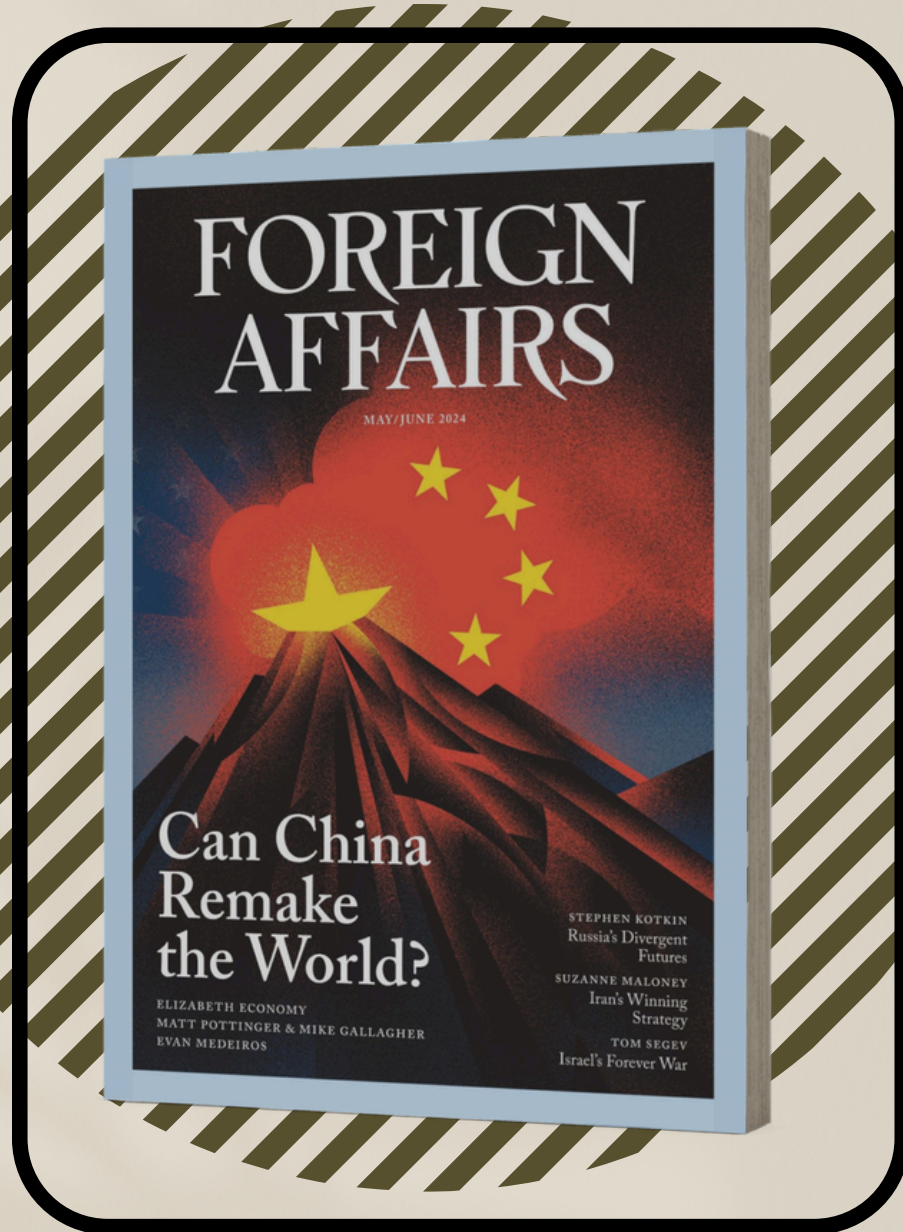
**DOWNLOAD
FREE
CSS/PMS
BOOKS**



+92 (333) 604-2057

www.thecsspoint.com

New MAY JUNE 2024 EDITION



WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM

Table of Contents

Fleecing power consumers	7
Missing the point	7
Starting over.....	9
Streets of death	10
Contempt ruling.....	11
Urgent challenge.....	12
Without VCs	13
More slaughter	14
Little respite	16
Prime minister’s challenge.....	17
Close to midnight	18
Losing history	19
Hate in Modi’s India.....	20
Climate realities	21
Reserved seats	22
Selective broadcasting.....	23
Ramazan prices	24
Poor performance.....	25
Healthcare rot.....	27
X disruption.....	28
Justice denied.....	29
A long road.....	31
TTP threat.....	32
Result tampering.....	33
Modi in Kashmir	34
Civilian dreams.....	35
New president.....	37
Handing over Discos.....	38
Bitter honey-traps.....	39

Biden’s Gaza ‘port’	40
Climate poverty.....	41
Caretaker debate	42
Crushing protests	44
Amnesty plan	45
PDM redux	46
Exclusionary law.....	47
Online darkness	48
Deadly devices	49
Border protests	50
Economic agenda	51
Irsa controversy	53
An open door	54
HDI decline.....	56
Moving away.....	57
Privacy in danger.....	58
The polio problem.....	59
Stateless humanity.....	60
X-communication.....	61
Provincial share.....	62
Defining extremism.....	64
Climate in focus.....	65
Growing rabies concern	66
Afghan turbulence	67
In disarray	69
Festering wound	70
Thrilling finish.....	71
Treading cautiously.....	72
Anti-Muslim India.....	73
X-cuses aplenty	74
Gwadar attack.....	75
Reactivating Nacta	76

No real reform	78
Death traps	79
Pipeline under fire.....	80
Bandit raj.....	81
Energy theft	82
Moscow carnage	83
Wily throw of dice.....	85
Rocketing TB	86
IHK political curbs	87
Taxing traders	88
Smog country	89
Planes and plans	90
Afghan return.....	91
Ceasefire, finally.....	92
Development costs	93
New terror wave	94
Selling humans	96
Data protection.....	97
Judiciary's SOS.....	98
Toxic emitters	99
Chipping in	100
'Source of terror'.....	101
Waste not, want not	103
Hike in power rates.....	104
Dashed hopes.....	105
DAWN Vocabulary March 2024	107

Fleecing power consumers

THE so-called independent inquiry committee, formed by the power ministry to probe charges of excessive billing by distribution companies, K-Electric included, in July-August last year, has absolved these entities of any “deliberate and mala fide” intent in issuing inflated bills to millions of middle-class households in the country. The committee has blamed the power sector regulator, Nepra, for acting prematurely and accusing the companies of overcharging their customers in violation of the Nepra Act. The committee released its findings days after Nepra let the distribution firms off the hook, cautioning them to compensate consumers who had been affected within the next one month, instead of punishing them for an illegal act that caused financial problems for tens of thousands of people.

Though the committee admitted that overbilling was common and had been continuing for a very long time, it sought to justify this malpractice by blaming it on weather conditions, organisational and administrative weaknesses, and the shortage of meter-reading staff, transportation and up-to-date mobile handsets. It said Nepra had ignored these factors, while giving its ruling on the issue recently. On top of that, it pointed fingers at a retrospective increase in power prices in July, which had resulted in a sudden spike in consumers’ electricity bills “heavily encumbering the common man’s capacity to pay”. Even if the committee’s defence of distribution companies is accepted, there is no justification to let them perpetuate this old practice of showing higher recoveries at the expense of the unsuspecting consumers. It is also one way of hiding power theft by the powerful, and shifting the burden onto honest consumers. When seen in totality, the additional amount taken by companies last summer from their customers may be just a fraction of their total billing, but when seen from the perspective of individual consumers, the extra burden of even a few thousand rupees can be unbearable for most families.

Published in Dawn, March 1st, 2024

Missing the point

IN a change of heart, the caretaker prime minister attended the hearing of the Baloch missing persons’ case in the Islamabad High Court on Wednesday after

skipping two earlier summons. Yet much of what Anwaarul Haq Kakar said about the issue was problematic, indicating that the state is out of touch with the reality of the situation. Mr Kakar said that while the state is criticised for picking up suspected militants, civil society did not condemn insurgents. He suggested that since militants did not respect the law, they should not be treated as law-abiding citizens are, while also noting that the criminal justice system was on the verge of collapse. Where the failure of the legal system is concerned, this paper has always argued that if the courts and prosecution are not performing, the solution lies in fixing them; circumventing the legal system is not the answer. Regarding the state of law and order in Mr Kakar's home province, a deeper analysis is required.

Without doubt those who wage war against Pakistan should face the law. Yet it is also true that militancy — whether of the Baloch separatist variety, or the extremist strand championed by terrorist groups such as the banned TTP — gains its oxygen from deprivation and people's misery. When people feel the system has failed them, some take to militancy. Hostile foreign elements also exploit these weaknesses. The human development figures of Balochistan are hardly reassuring. According to Unicef, 78pc of girls in the province are out of school, while the World Bank says that in most of Balochistan's districts, nearly half of the under-five population is stunted. There are other similarly abysmal figures. Therefore, when the people see that their quality of life is not improving, especially as compared to other parts of the country, their disenchantment with the state grows. Moreover, the political process in Balochistan is seen largely to be compromised, adding to the people's disillusionment, as 'electables' are promoted over genuine popular representatives. The argument that tribal sardars stand in the way of progress is only partially true; the development statistics from districts where the sardari system is not in vogue are equally disappointing. So while the state must stamp out militancy, it also needs to make an honest appraisal of the underlying factors fuelling separatism, and address them judiciously.

Published in Dawn, March 1st, 2024

Starting over

THE four provincial assemblies and the National Assembly have now been sworn in.

Though rigging allegations and various election-related irregularities and illegalities have cast a dark shadow, these assemblies will represent the people as they oversee the next chapter of this country's governance. There is no sugar-coating the fact that there are immense challenges before them, the realities of which will begin to dawn as the dust from the post-election chaos begins to settle.

The country is socially and politically fractured, its institutions in crisis, its coffers nearly empty, and its economy in a tailspin. The compact between its people and the state appears broken, its administrative apparatus seems to be malfunctioning, and its judiciary has never seemed as helpless as before.

Dependent on liquidity and capital injections from foreign lenders, Pakistan is in the unenviable position of being just a few missteps away from catastrophe.

Yet if there is one thing the country has demonstrated time and again, it is that its people's will to endure is unconquerable. The citizenry will continue to hope that the men and women sworn in over the past week can steer the country back to stability and, hopefully, prosperity. Having taken their seats in their respective assemblies, they must now demonstrate that they are ready for the responsibility entrusted to them. The fate of millions depends on what path they take forward.

Given the difficult situation, both the government and opposition must resolve that their decisions will prioritise the public good over anything else. The government benches must realise that the public mood is extremely sensitive due to the unprecedented hardships the nation has suffered over the past two years.

It must get to work at once on ameliorating economic conditions. The opposition benches must realise that they will need to constructively guide the government, especially towards achieving common goals.

The question of legitimacy cannot be abandoned. Those who feel they were robbed of their mandate must continue their fight. They owe it not just to their voters but also to Pakistan's struggling democracy that they pursue the righting of the wrongs committed against it.

However, the focus of all stakeholders should remain on what future they want for the people of Pakistan. Lawmakers should use their presence in the assemblies to advance their legislative agenda and ensure that present and past mistakes are not repeated in the future. Much has been learned from political misjudgements of the past decade.

The time has come for the political leadership to demonstrate it is ready to move on. Parliament remains the most important forum through which a political negotiation on what tomorrow should look like for the millions who call Pakistan home can be held. Let the politicians figure out a way forward.

Published in Dawn, March 1st, 2024

Streets of death

A LIFE without a sense of permanence is one aspect of a human crisis as complex as homelessness. But the fact that our destitute are unsafe due to administrative neglect should be a matter of national shame. A hit-and-run accident left three shelterless siblings dead and two others wounded when a family, asleep on a footpath in Karachi, was run over by a speeding car on Wednesday. Although warnings and solutions have come thick and fast for long, they went unheeded. In 2022, the National Commission on the Rights of the Child put the number of street children in Pakistan at 1.5m. The figure has since, in line with inflation, risen. Informal estimates say that around 20m people in Pakistan are homeless. In 2020, experts stated that Karachi's "housing demand is 120,000 units per year".

Homelessness in a moribund economy becomes more than the absence of an address. It is wedged between socioeconomic issues — unemployment, paltry wages, high lodging costs, drug addiction, poor health — and social desertion among others, leaving multitudes, especially women and children, vulnerable to disease, crime, drug abuse, begging, climate crises, exploitation by the human

trafficking mafia — and death by rash drivers. The state simply cannot cut corners; rehabilitation initiatives, aided by provisions for education and employment, are an absolute necessity. Support in childhood, social empowerment for the marginalised with a vision to deliver housing and shelter facilities is the duty of every stakeholder. Moreover, the journey to save citizens is futile without a sensitised, disciplined thana culture. At present, street dwellers are rarely seen as even statistics by the police; most crimes against them and their deaths go unreported. Lastly, a surfeit of CCTV cameras and breathalysers should be put to use as tools to track rash drivers and book offenders for manslaughter. No more time should be lost in bringing the dispossessed to the mainstream for Pakistan to see better times.

Published in Dawn, March 2nd, 2024

Contempt ruling

AN Islamabad High Court decision penalising the city's deputy commissioner, a senior superintendent of police and a station house officer for violating court orders seems to be cause for some end-of-the-week hope after a dreary February. The court has held DC Irfan Nawaz Memon, SSP Jameel Zafar and SHO Naseer Manzoor guilty of contempt of court for issuing and executing multiple detention orders under the MPO ordinance despite having been ordered not to by the IHC. The Islamabad DC has been handed a six-month prison sentence, the SSP a four-month sentence, and the SHO a two-month sentence for contempt of court. All three have also been fined Rs100,000 each. The court of Justice Babar Sattar not only provided ample opportunity to the defendants to make their case during proceedings, but has also suspended their sentences for a month to give them a chance to appeal. It is uncommon for civil administration officials to face consequences for their excesses, which is why the judgement is being hailed as a positive development, more so since the executive has been behaving lately as if it is above the reach of the law.

The defiance shown by the Islamabad Police in response to the verdict is a clear symptom of the malaise. It seems there is a sense of complete impunity prevalent among those who routinely overstep their bounds in their zeal to exercise unlawful control over the people of Pakistan. Lawyers and observers have been outraged by the institution's announcement on X (formerly Twitter)

that Islamabad Police officers will have the judgement struck down through an intra-court appeal and that the three men will continue to work as usual till a final decision is reached. From the looks of it, the ICT Police seems to consider the court's judgement an 'affront' that can be disregarded on a whim. One is tempted to recall the infamous 'notification is rejected' tweet from a few years ago. Islamabad Police should realise that this is inexcusable posturing: obeying and enforcing court orders is not optional. With such attitudes prevailing at the top, it is clear why the police officers convicted of contempt had paid little heed to earlier orders and believed there would be no consequences for their unlawful actions. This culture of impunity needs to end.

Published in Dawn, March 2nd, 2024

Urgent challenge

PAKISTAN has been in a state of deep economic turmoil featuring a balance-of-payments crisis, high fiscal deficit, elevated inflation, unsustainable debt, low investments and a shrinking economy in recent years.

The reasons for the current upheaval range from defective fiscal and economic policies, and the global energy and commodity price spiral post-Covid, to the destructive floods of 2022. The political instability, ongoing since the 2022 ouster of the PTI, has only aggravated the economic tumult, with the country narrowly dodging a default last summer after being thrown an emergency lifeline by the IMF.

This picture underscores the huge challenge that awaits the incoming minority government of the PML-N and its finance minister whosoever it might be.

It was also acknowledged by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif when he warned his party's elected lawmakers earlier this week that the next two years would be challenging for the new administration due to economic and political uncertainty.

There is consensus that negotiating a new extended programme with the IMF — and quickly — to replace the existing interim facility will be the incoming finance minister's most urgent challenge. The successor IMF bailout is critical for

external sector stability and to unlock loans from other creditors at one of the toughest points in Pakistan's history.

Without an extended package from the global lender, it would be near impossible to fill the huge annual financing gap of at least \$25bn over the next several years.

The IMF will likely extend help but not unless the authorities commit to further belt-tightening steps needed for the country to stay on the path to recovery. The programme goals might prove extremely unpopular because they would limit the government's options to provide relief to the inflation-stricken people, or even please the investors looking for support to spur growth.

One of the toughest goals for the finance minister pertains to a large reduction in the fiscal deficit, which has averaged over 7.3pc over the last five years. The fiscal authorities must reduce the deficit to 3-3.5pc in the medium term to cut borrowings and the mounting debt, and reduce inflation to 5-7pc to facilitate rate cuts to spur investment and growth for job creation.

This is going to be the hardest of all reforms as it would require the finance minister to effectively tax his party's core constituencies: retail, real estate and large farmers, as well as do away with the wasteful expenditure on public sector businesses like PIA and eliminate energy and other subsidies to powerful business lobbies.

These are also areas wherein lie the interests of the powers that be. If the country is to be pulled back from the brink, the incoming finance team will have to prioritise economic decisions over political considerations and personal whims.

Published in Dawn, March 2nd, 2024

Without VCs

THE delay in appointing vice chancellors across Pakistan's universities has mushroomed into a crisis, with one third — 51 out of 154 — lacking regular VCs. Among those affected are the capital's Quaid-i-Azam University, Allama Iqbal Open University, and International Islamic University Islamabad, where the posts became vacant in November 2023. The leadership vacuum has persisted for

over one and a half years in the case of many institutes. The Punjab University Council of Professionals has criticised the Punjab government for its failure to fill the vacant posts, highlighting the detrimental impact on 25 universities within the province, including Punjab University. In the absence of permanent VCs, students are not only experiencing a decline in academic standards but also an increase in tuition fees. The HEC's call for a transparent appointment process has largely gone unheeded, with patronage, nepotism, and political influence continuing to overshadow merit and qualifications. Instances of highly qualified candidates being overlooked to accommodate politically favourable ones indicate a selection process marred by lack of integrity and transparency. Meanwhile, the decision to launch the PU Gujjar Khan/ Potohar Campus without adequate feasibility studies exemplifies the politically motivated decisions that prevail in the absence of strong academic leadership.

Universities are the bedrock of higher education, tasked with nurturing the intellectual growth of future leaders. The absence of permanent leadership hampers academic research and development, leading to a decline in educational standards and research output. This debacle could have been avoided through proactive planning and action. The caretaker set-up's failure in the matter underscores a lack of commitment to the educational sector's stability and growth. It is imperative for the new administrations to prioritise the appointment of qualified individuals to these critical positions. All stakeholders involved must reaffirm their commitment to education and ensure that such lapses do not further jeopardise the nation's academia and global competitiveness.

Published in Dawn, March 3rd, 2024

More slaughter

CONSIDERING Israel's long list of barbaric acts in Gaza — bombing hospitals; wiping out families; mass starvation; parading semi-clothed prisoners, etc — Tel Aviv has set the bar quite 'high' where state-sponsored violence against defenceless civilians is concerned.

Yet, as this monstrous campaign of violence continues, Israel has proved that it is adept at inflicting even more cruelty on the Palestinians. An example of this was the slaughter in Gaza City on Thursday, as Palestinians had gathered to collect food aid. Israeli troops were accompanying the convoy of aid trucks, and butchered over 100 Gazans; desperate, hungry people who are living in hellish conditions.

Instead of showing concern — Tel Aviv is bereft of all compassion — Israeli troops mowed down these forsaken people as they sought to grab what they could to feed their families. As usual, Israeli spin doctors are obfuscating the facts behind the atrocity, with some saying the deaths were the result of ‘pushing and trampling’, while others blamed ‘Palestinian armed groups’ for killing their own people.

Media reports have debunked these doubtful claims, with some sources confirming that Israeli troops opened fire, while UN observers, who met survivors of the massacre, said that most of the injured suffered from gunshot wounds.

There has been global outrage over the latest Israeli atrocity. But will it translate to an end to Gaza’s nightmare, and a long-term ceasefire? The signs are not encouraging. The US president has said he will initiate aid air drops for Gaza. Perhaps the Palestinians would appreciate it more if Mr Biden stopped supplying American arms to his Israeli friends — weaponry that has been used to butcher over 30,000 Palestinians since Oct 7. Israel’s extremist leaders are on an apocalyptic mission to ethnically cleanse Gaza.

The least the Arab and Muslim states can do is to initiate a total economic blockade of Israel until it stops the slaughter. Perhaps they can take a cue from brave non-Muslim states such as South Africa, which has initiated genocide proceedings at the ICJ against Tel Aviv, or Brazil, which has recalled its ambassador.

On the other hand, many of the Muslim states that have established relations with Israel have refused to sever them, while the Zionist state sources much of its oil and gas from Muslim-majority states. Until these double standards end, the massacre in Palestine will continue.

Little respite

IS inflation on its way out? The Consumer Price Index showed that inflation dropped to 23.1pc in February from 28.3pc the previous month, and 31.5pc a year ago, raising hopes. It is the lowest CPI reading recorded by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics in the last 20 months. Inflation peaked at 38pc last May. The PBS did not observe a month-over-month change in prices last month, reporting a broad-based decrease in the pace of price rise on account of falling food inflation, coupled with the high base effect of the last fiscal. The rates decreased in both the urban and rural areas, with core inflation, or non-food and non-energy inflation, also down from their higher levels. And yet, there will be little respite for households anytime soon, as overall price levels and the cost of living remain elevated.

Nevertheless, the drop in inflation seems to have encouraged some — such as a former finance minister, who called the reduction in the inflation rate “wonderful news” — to renew calls for early rate cuts to “reduce government deficit and also provide a much-needed respite to industry and consumers”. The calls for rate cuts are based on the assumption that the pace of increase in the prices of goods and services will slow down further over the next several months due to a high base effect, falling demand, easing of supply constraints and plunging global commodity rates. It means that if the trend witnessed last month holds, we should expect the State Bank to start monetary easing soon. However, the inflation outlook still faces risks that include a further increase in domestic energy prices, food supply shocks and an upswing in international commodity prices due to the geopolitics of the Middle East. Hence, inflation expectations remain elevated, despite recent improvements. On top of that, consumers must brace themselves for Ramazan inflation. Therefore, it might be too early to expect the State Bank to start to decrease borrowing costs.

A rate cut without a consistent drop in inflation might also not sit well with the IMF whose support is crucial for stabilising Pakistan’s external sector. We are also not aware if the IMF agrees to a new extended programme — and how quickly. What is certain is that any new programme will be accompanied by more stringent conditions. A report in a local paper claims that the IMF has advised the FBR to significantly increase the income tax burden for both salaried and non-salaried segments and tax the contribution of private employers to their workers’

pension fund, thus enabling the FBR to collect additional revenue. The proposal does not take into account the burden of inflation on the salaried classes. If implemented, this could prove to be the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Published in Dawn, March 3rd, 2024

Prime minister's challenge

THE new prime minister has taken the wheel. He must steer Pakistan to calmer waters at the earliest possible. Following a deeply contentious election, the opposition seems to be in no mood to let him get comfortable in his seat.

He can expect a tough fight over every piece of legislation his government brings to parliament. In fact, some of the more hawkish lawmakers affiliated with the PTI have made it clear they do not intend to allow him to function at all.

Regardless, the prime minister cannot afford to let himself get frazzled. It is his responsibility to bridge the gaping political chasm and restore some sense of unity within the nation as he attempts to tackle its historic social and economic crises. It will, without a doubt, require immense grit and a large heart to take the country forward as one.

Since Mr Shehbaz Sharif has chosen to lead, he should demonstrate that his second term will be better than the first. He must appoint a cabinet of capable individuals, chosen not for their proximity to the Sharif clan, but for how well-suited they are to manage the portfolios handed to them.

This is not the time to dish out ministries and important offices as payback for political favours. The PDM government offered ample lessons on why this would be a poor mistake to repeat during a crisis period.

Considering how much has been placed at stake for Mr Sharif to get a second chance to 'deliver', he must deliberate with great care on who will get him the results being expected from his government. He should remember that his

government will be walking a tightrope: policy confusion can quickly snowball into a national disaster. The PDM's last finance ministry was a case in point.

His other major responsibility would be to start shaping the contours of Pakistan's immediate political future such that the country can start to move on from the bitter unravelling of its sociopolitical order that marked the interregnum between April 8, 2022, and March 3, 2024.

This will require the PML-N and its allied parties to, first and foremost, put an immediate end to any plans to further victimise the PTI and also to start a process to reconcile with its leadership and its supporters even if it means taking the difficult first step. It has been repeatedly commented that it was the hubris of the PDM coalition and its backers that the people of Pakistan voted against in the recent election.

It would be a grave miscalculation to continue disregarding this as the new prime minister makes an attempt to lead the nation forward. Mr Sharif will need to show immense courage if he wishes to be remembered well.

Published in Dawn, March 4th, 2024

Close to midnight

THE Ukraine war has entered its third year, with no signs of a peaceful resolution. If anything, the principal protagonists — Ukraine and its Nato backers on one side, Russia on the other — appear to be digging in for the long haul. In a troubling indication of just how dangerous this conflict remains to global stability, Russian President Vladimir Putin's raising the spectre of nuclear war last Thursday, during an address to his nation, should be enough to get rational actors on the world stage to redouble their efforts to end the Ukraine war. In an ominous message to his Western and Ukrainian foes, Mr Putin reminded them that "we also have weapons that can hit targets on their territory", while specifically mentioning his country's nuclear-strike capabilities. He also reminded his adversaries of the unenviable fate the armies of two of Russia's historical foes — Napoleon and Hitler — suffered while trying to conquer his country. The Russian ruler's combative rhetoric is a likely reaction to French President

Macron's recent comments at a Nato meeting that Western troops could fight in Ukraine.

The mere idea of nuclear deployment by heavily armed militaries is frightening, especially when both sides take a rigid position that does not allow much room for a negotiated settlement. The West's threat of bringing Russia 'to its knees' is unlikely to intimidate Mr Putin. On the other hand, Moscow's efforts to take other states' territory by force is a recipe for continued conflict. The fact is that the Ukraine war — along with the bloodbath in the Middle East, and the confrontation between China and Taiwan — is amongst the global hotspots where even a conflict between two parties might spark a much wider conflagration. That is why it is in the interest of the international community to bring these conflicts to a peaceful close, or else prepare for massive turbulence in the global political and economic order. Any long-lasting solution must entail Russia giving up Ukrainian territory it has occupied, while the West should give Moscow guarantees that it does not seek to encircle it. These possibilities currently seem distant, as both sides have gone into Cold War mode. Perhaps this is why atomic scientists have put the Doomsday Clock at 90 seconds to midnight, with chances of turning back its hands diminishing rapidly.

Published in Dawn, March 4th, 2024

Losing history

WHILE we have history strewn all over, the debate around pro-preservation development is not loud enough. Last week, Wapda entered into a Rs46.5m cultural preservation contract with a consultancy firm for the "digitisation and 3D modelling of significant rock carvings within the impact zone of the upcoming Diamer Basha dam". It is no secret that northern Pakistan is a well of antiquity comprising innumerable rock carvings. Although the authority intends to devise a cultural heritage management plan to preserve prehistoric etchings, establish a museum, and encourage cultural tourism, experts believe that the dam's construction may put thousands of ancient engravings in jeopardy. The volume of potential damage can be assessed by the vastness of heritage in the locality — over 50,000 rock carvings and 5,000 inscriptions from the Epipaleolithic era to Buddhist times lie along the banks of the Indus, with ibex and sheep imprinted on the earliest petroglyphs.

Past incidents of apathy provide sufficient reason for concern: for example, in 1999, GT Road's expansion project destroyed two historic waterpower facilities and the connecting walls of Shalimar Gardens, while in 2020, WWF-Pakistan's intense pressure forced the Gilgit-Baltistan government to abort jeep rallies and a polo fiesta at Rama in Astore. While Wapda's is a heartening plan on paper, the fact remains that the culture and museum department in the territory is dormant. Clearly, authorities do not regret old lapses. Once again, short-sighted policies threaten priceless inheritance as perhaps only a few ancient boulders can be relocated to the Wapda office. Further, digitisation is not to be confused with investing in relics, and isolated samples impede tourism and research. The government has to change tack: it must become cognisant of the advantages of preservation, raise awareness about sites erased from state narratives and reimagine progress with a conservation method. The enforcement of the Antiquities Act, 1975, will ensure smugglers, vandals and imprudent planners face the law.

Published in Dawn, March 4th, 2024

Hate in Modi's India

AFTER a decade of BJP rule, communal forces in India are in the ascendant, making life for the country's minorities, particularly its Muslims, very difficult. According to a recently released report by India Hate Lab, a US-based research outfit, anti-Muslim hate speech has become commonplace in India. As per its data, 668 hate speech incidents were logged in the country last year. Not surprisingly, the advocacy group notes, 75pc of these incidents were reported from BJP-ruled states, while the incidents peaked during campaigning for state elections. This should send alarm bells ringing where the safety of India's minorities is concerned, as general elections in that country are due in April-May, and extremists are likely to light more communal fires to grab votes.

Sadly, this trend of anti-Muslim violence is likely to continue as the Sangh Parivar unleashes its shock troops to ensure another electoral victory for the BJP, its political wing. Moreover, if the BJP manages to form the next government, will it continue the politics of polarisation and hatred, painting Indian Muslims as the eternal 'other', to either be converted to Hinduism or live as second-class citizens

in the rashtra? The evidence, unfortunately, supports this likelihood. Meanwhile, India's avowedly secular parties have not done enough to condemn anti-Muslim hate. Brick by brick, the Sangh is seeking to destroy the edifice of Muslim civilisation in India that goes back a millennium. Of course, this civilisational project will not be possible without erasing all signs of Muslim culture from India's milieu. Though this is a tall ask, the Sangh's troops are committed to the cause. Vilifying Indian Muslims is just one chilling part of this grand crusade. This devious scheme also envisages the destruction of mosques and their replacement with temples, while the Sangh endorses violence against Indian Muslims, in an apparent move to 'punish' them for the sins — real or perceived — of mediaeval Muslim rulers.

Published in Dawn, March 5th, 2024

Climate realities

IN an uncharacteristic twist for March — which typically heralds the warmth of spring — several parts of Pakistan are grappling with extreme cold and incessant rains. From the waterlogged streets of Gwadar in Balochistan, through Quetta's icy roads, to the snow-blocked routes of Gilgit-Baltistan, and onto the flood-hit areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where the toll has risen to at least 35 lives lost, Pakistan is confronting the severe consequences of climate change. The disaster management authorities in the three regions are stretched thin responding to the challenges posed by these adverse weather conditions. In Karachi, a city accustomed to mild winters, residents find themselves compelled to unpack winter wear they thought they had stowed away for the year. Such surprises sprung by nature necessitate a shift in our national approach. Historical data can no longer be relied upon; we must bring climate adaptation to the forefront of our priorities.

To that end, the newly formed government must develop and implement a comprehensive climate adaptation policy. This policy should outline clear mechanisms for providing financial and technical support to the most vulnerable regions, ensuring an inclusive and equitable response to climate challenges. It is imperative that we invest in cutting-edge meteorological forecasting and early warning systems, especially for timely evacuations in disaster-struck areas. In addition, infrastructure resilience is of paramount importance, as evidenced by

the large-scale destruction of homes in KP. Our physical structures must be designed or retrofitted to withstand extreme weather. In tandem, we must build robust communication networks that remain operational during crises, ensuring that affected communities can receive aid and information when most needed. Moreover, community involvement is essential. Local communities equipped with the knowledge and resources to face weather-related emergencies can dramatically lower the risks associated with such events. Also, a relentless push towards climate-mitigation efforts is required. Initiatives such as afforestation and reforestation, wetland restoration, and sustainable land management not only reduce vulnerability to natural disasters but also contribute to the global fight against climate change. The past week has clearly demonstrated our vulnerability to climate change. It is imperative that we adopt a proactive stance to adapt to these new climatic realities. We can no longer turn away from the gauntlet of climate change; we are now walking through it.

Published in Dawn, March 5th, 2024

Reserved seats

THE ECP's decision to deny the Sunni Ittehad Council — the new home of PTI-affiliated lawmakers who won the Feb 8 polls as independent candidates — a share of the special seats reserved for women and minorities has come as a disappointment to those who believed in the fairness of the electoral process.

Even though the much-delayed ECP decision, the latest in a series of moves ostensibly aimed at keeping the PTI out of elections and parliament, was not unexpected, many had hoped that the spirit of democracy would prevail over the technicalities cited by the ECP to justify its action.

According to the ECP, the SIC could not stake a claim to a share in the reserved seats “due to having non-curable legal defects and violation of a mandatory provision of submission of party list for reserved seats which is the requirement of law”. It defended its decision by pointing out that the SIC had not contested the elections for any seat in the national or provincial assemblies.

That is not all. The ECP generated more debate by allocating what many see as the SIC's share of reserved seats to other political parties. By saying that “the

seats in the National Assembly shall not remain vacant”, it has indirectly accepted the argument that the Lower House as well as three provincial assemblies, barring Balochistan, were incomplete when they elected the Speaker, deputy Speaker, the prime minister and the chief ministers.

According to media reports, the SIC’s combined loss amounts to 77 seats in the national and provincial assemblies.

The ECP might have its own logic but its order does ignore past precedent. For instance, the Balochistan Awami Party, which did not contest the first post-merger polls in former Fata, was allowed a reserved women’s seat after independents joined the party. Meanwhile, a 2018 Lahore High Court judgement held that a political party’s share of reserved seats was non-transferable. The ruling had come after a Returning Officer did not accept PTI nominees for reserved seats due to a slight delay in the submission of names.

In short, the ECP has exacerbated the crisis it triggered when it denied the PTI its election symbol, again on technical grounds — a decision controversially upheld by the apex court. Like the party symbol issue, the legality of the latest ECP determination will also be decided by the superior judiciary.

Unless addressed, such debatable actions will continue to impede the growth of democracy in the country. Today, these decisions are affecting the PTI; tomorrow other parties, which, for the moment, can enjoy their share of reserved seats and see their numerical strength enhanced in the assemblies, might find themselves at the receiving end when they fall out with the powers that be.

Published in Dawn, March 5th, 2024

Selective broadcasting

IN a democracy, the media serves as a guardian of public discourse, where the voices of all — especially the marginalised — find their echo. It is troubling to note how the state-owned Pakistan Television continues to censor some voices. Most recently, it refused to air speeches by lawmakers Omar Ayub, Mahmood Khan Achakzai, Akhtar Mengal and Asad Qaiser during a National Assembly session. Instances of such blackouts by PTV are rife.

In 2017, opposition members boycotted the budget session after PTV refused to telecast live the speech of then-opposition leader Khursheed Shah. In 2019, opposition parties accused then-PM Imran Khan of coercing broadcasters into blocking coverage of his critics. Channels were taken off air, and opposition events went unreported, an action PML-N's Maryam Nawaz branded as Pakistan facing its "worst censorship".

Similarly, then-chairman Naeem Bukhari's admission in 2020 that PTV would exclusively represent the government's stance stands in stark contrast with its stated vision of beaming content that is "objective" and "inclusive". Such bias in favour of the ruling party deprives the public of a holistic understanding of national affairs, breeding an environment of misinformation and disengagement.

A democratic society thrives on diverse viewpoints and robust debate, where state media serves the public interest by ensuring balanced coverage of all political perspectives. It is imperative for the integrity of Pakistan's democracy that PTV and other state-controlled media outlets remain impartial, providing equal platforms for all political entities. Regulatory frameworks should be revisited to safeguard against undue influence, particularly from the government, ensuring the media's role as the fourth pillar of democracy is not compromised.

The new government, led by the PML-N, would do well to remember that not so long ago they were the 'pariahs' that were being censored. They are now in a position to stop this ugly practice. This muzzling of 'other' voices only adds to the public's discontent and disillusionment.

Published in Dawn, March 6th, 2024

Ramazan prices

THOUGH inflation may have come down to a 16-month low, clocking in at 23.1pc, the modest gains may be wiped out by high food inflation come Ramazan. As the month of fasting approaches, prices have already begun to climb up across the nation. In particular, the cost of iftar and sehr staples — from meat to gram flour to some fruits and vegetables — has witnessed an upward trajectory in the run-up to Ramazan. There are various reasons for this, such as

high demand and limited supply, high global commodity and energy prices, as well as the age-old practice of price gouging and the creation of artificial shortages by market players to make a quick buck. Moreover, Ramazan-related inflation is a global phenomenon, and not limited to Pakistan. The trick is for governments to counter high prices through targeted subsidies, as well as ensure that traders do not flout the official price lists, in order to enable families to enjoy a decent spread.

On its part, the newly installed federal government has launched a Rs7.5bn Ramazan relief package through the utility stores. Only those registered with the Benazir Income Support Programme will be able to avail discounts on Ramazan staples. On the other hand, the new Punjab government has launched a scheme to deliver food packages to people's doorsteps for the holy month. Transparency should be ensured in these schemes so that food rations reach the neediest segments of the population, while the quality of foodstuffs should not be compromised. Aside from such schemes, local administrations will set up bachat bazars to sell discounted Ramazan staples. Here, again the quality of the food products on sale should be maintained, as in past years there have been consumer complaints of substandard items being sold. Aside from targeted schemes, the state should activate its price monitoring committees at the local level, so traders do not fleece consumers in the name of 'shortages'. While it is true that certain items do witness high demand during Ramazan, traders also jack up the prices of other foodstuffs, citing scarcity. This profiteering needs to be checked. Moreover, many charities will arrange Ramazan ration drives. These efforts need to adhere to certain SOPs so that the dignity of the recipients is not compromised, and proper crowd control mechanisms are in place to prevent stampedes.

Published in Dawn, March 6th, 2024

Poor performance

THE nation is glad to bid adieu to the caretakers. The day could not have come sooner. Interim governments are supposed to have a limited mandate tailored for the limited time they are given in office. They are expected to keep their head down, keep the country running day-to-day, and provide an enabling environment

for the smooth transfer of power within the 90-day deadline set in the Constitution.

As a rule, caretaker governments should be entirely unremarkable and completely forgettable; instead, these last interim governments will be remembered for the controversial legacy they leave behind. They not only overstayed their lawful term, they also wore out their welcome due to several key appointees' unwillingness to keep within their lane. And, by the end of it all, the caretakers somehow managed to leave the country in an even worse shape than it had been when they had taken over.

The period between August 2023 and March 2024 will be remembered for the intensified oppression of already marginalised communities, the uprooting and expulsion of Afghan refugees, the repression of a certain political party, the curtailment and evisceration of democratic norms, possibly the most controversial general election held in recent history, and the reversal of hard-fought digital freedoms. As the country slid deeper and deeper into the abyss, the interim government either stood by and did nothing or made excuses for the various forces responsible for trampling upon the Constitution and abusing the law.

Had the caretakers focused on their task and sought to deliver conscientiously, according to the terms under which they were entrusted with the responsibility, the country may by now have been on the path to healing. For this, there is no forgiveness for the caretakers' failures. The country will continue paying the price for their complacency for a very long time.

Things perhaps may have turned out differently had the country been handed over to leaders with fewer personal ambitions. Alas, some of the caretakers seemed to consider their appointment an opportunity to demonstrate their 'utility'. The prime minister repeatedly gaslighted the victims of state excesses and also demonstrated a knack for doublespeak, especially when confronted with the failings of his government. The IT minister would have nary a clue about the internet restrictions that were enforced willy-nilly under his watch.

The journalist appointed information minister had great difficulty getting along with a free press. There was also the interior minister, who controversially

resigned just a month and a half before the elections to contest a seat. To be fair, a few of the appointees did quietly manage to accomplish something positive. Unfortunately, their contributions will not amount to much when this period is reviewed in history. Thankfully, we can now move on.

Published in Dawn, March 6th, 2024

Healthcare rot

THE exploitation of the Sehat Sahulat Programme in Punjab by the medical community is both alarming and disgraceful. Designed to provide crucial health services to the underprivileged, the scheme has, instead, been hijacked by money-grabbing elements within the healthcare sector. An example of this greed is the disproportionate number of caesarean sections carried out in private hospitals, ostensibly for financial gain rather than medical necessity. From 2016 to January 2024, a staggering Rs16.36bn was claimed by private hospitals for caesarean and normal delivery procedures, with an overwhelming majority being C-sections. The stark disparity in the number of C-sections performed in private versus public hospitals is telling. In 2023, private hospitals conducted 197,376 caesarean procedures, compared to 97,390 in public hospitals. The years before saw similarly disproportionate figures, underscoring a concerning tilt towards unnecessary C-sections after the launch of the health card scheme in 2016.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case. It echoes a past scandal under the same programme, where the Punjab Institute of Cardiology was found redirecting patients to private facilities, compromising patient care for monetary benefits. In other incidents, cardiac patients were administered expired stents and several diabetic patients' vision was compromised after they were treated with substandard injections. These scandals highlight a systemic rot within Punjab's healthcare system, characterised by negligence, corruption, and poor accountability. Addressing these challenges demands more than ad hoc interventions; it requires a systemic overhaul to instil ethical practices and accountability in healthcare. The onus is on the government to undertake rigorous measures. An independent probe is required to ascertain why so many women underwent C-sections and whether they were even needed. To address graft, stringent oversight mechanisms must be instituted, besides comprehensive audits of healthcare programmes, and severe penalties for those found exploiting

such initiatives for personal gain. It is crucial to ensure that such egregious abuses of trust do not recur.

Published in Dawn, March 7th, 2024

X disruption

DESPITE a court order directing the restoration of citizens' access to popular microblogging platform X and past rulings against the blockage of internet services, the social media service has remained inaccessible in Pakistan for more than two weeks.

Though such decisions are usually officially 'justified' by the authorities based on some pretext or the other, this time, the state does not seem too bothered about providing any explanation as to why users are being denied access to X.

This 'strategic ambiguity' from the authorities has added to the confusion surrounding the status of the service in Pakistan.

For example, according to an account shared by one of the lawyers representing a case against the suspension of X, a representative of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority — which, among other things, also regulates internet access — flatly denied that the service was blocked during a Tuesday hearing on the matter in the Sindh High Court.

He then attempted to convince the judge by pointing to an open X application on his phone as 'proof' of a claim that flew in the face of the findings of various international internet watchdogs.

The question arises: if the country's top regulator is claiming that it is not doing the blocking, who, then, is preventing access to X?

The recently departed caretaker government had acted as if the matter was no big deal: none of the relevant ministers had deigned to comment on or explain why anyone within Pakistan's territorial boundaries could not access one of the

most popular social media platforms in the world without a VPN, even though they were posting on the platform periodically during their last days in office.

The silence from official quarters has continued even though new assemblies have been sworn in, which suggests that the authorities aren't very concerned that a major internet service remains suspended, apparently without the knowledge of the country's top regulator.

Given the state's nonchalance, one would naturally assume that the authorities are either afraid to speak openly on the matter or are deliberately misleading the courts while hoping that the citizenry will quietly accept this new 'status quo' over time.

Neither is an acceptable scenario. X is a valuable source of information for millions around the world, and access to it cannot be denied arbitrarily. The state must, at the very least, explain itself.

Published in Dawn, March 7th, 2024

Justice denied

THERE have been many crises in Pakistan's torturous history that remain unresolved, lacking closure mainly because the nation — particularly its institutions — failed to acknowledge the 'whole truth' of these events. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's 1977 removal in a military coup, and his subsequent hanging in 1979, are part of this list.

Both were epochal events that changed the trajectory of Pakistan's history; their after-effects still haunt the system. In this regard, the Supreme Court's observations on Wednesday, regarding Bhutto's trial, are an important milestone in the nation's legal and political history.

The apex court was hearing a reference filed by Asif Ali Zardari in 2011, when he was president, seeking the court's opinion on Bhutto's death sentence. The PPP founder had been convicted by a Lahore High Court bench of the 1974 murder of Mohammad Ahmed Khan Kasuri; the SC, in a split 4-3 decision, had upheld the

LHC verdict, paving the way for the execution of Pakistan's first popularly elected prime minister.

While noting that the law does not provide a mechanism to set aside the original judgement, the Chief Justice of Pakistan Qazi Faez Isa noted in the short order that the LHC trial and the SC appeal in Bhutto's case did "not meet the requirements of the fundamental right to a fair trial and due process". The SC's observations have validated what legal experts have been saying for decades: that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's conviction was a travesty of justice — a 'judicial murder' as his party has put it.

It can be asked why an over four-decade-old case was dusted up when blatant injustice continues to be meted out today. Perhaps revisiting the Bhutto case is relevant because of these very injustices. It shows that even popularly elected prime ministers can be humiliated, incarcerated and even sent to the gallows when the state desires it, and that the legal system can be manipulated to suit the whims of powerful forces.

Similar criticism of the judiciary has followed Imran Khan's iddat case, as well as Nawaz Sharif's run-ins with accountability courts in years past. That is why, as the chief justice observed in the short order, the judiciary should, "confront our past missteps and fallibilities with humility, in the spirit of self-accountability".

This need for internal introspection is required in all institutions: the judiciary, the establishment, as well as the political class. The SC's observations on the Bhutto trial are a confirmation of the fact that in the past, the pillars of state — guided by the doctrine of necessity — have participated in undermining the constitutional order they had sworn to protect.

Though the grave injustice done to Bhutto cannot be reversed, state institutions can pledge to not repeat the wrongs committed during this sordid chapter of Pakistan's history.

Published in Dawn, March 7th, 2024

A long road

International Women's Day is being observed today, the time of year when women are celebrated for their invaluable contributions to societies around the world. It is also a time to acknowledge the stark challenges they face.

Globally, women in conflict zones, such as Gaza and Sudan face unspeakable hardships. They endure starvation, brutal hostility, sexual violence and severe health risks. Many — in both areas — are going into labour without medical aid or undergoing C-sections sans anaesthesia.

Closer to home, Pakistani women grapple with a spectrum of issues — from gender-based violence and inadequate healthcare to systemic barriers in education and employment. The incident in Lahore, where a woman narrowly escaped a frenzied mob looking to level a 'blasphemy' charge, and the brave intervention by a female police officer, highlights the urgent need for tolerance and legal reforms.

Despite these challenges, there are beacons of hope and success. Pakistani women like the shepherdess from Shimshal valley and the midwife providing care during floods represent the indomitable spirit of women facing adversity. They were featured on the BBC's list of 100 inspiring and influential women from around the world for 2023.

In addition, Forbes' recognition of Pakistani businesswomen Shazia Syed and Shaista Asif showcases the potential of our women in leadership roles.

Moreover, Pakistan's Aurat March reflects a powerful demand for rights and justice, echoing global feminist movements. This year it has demanded, among many things, rights for home-based workers, an end to gender-based violence, democratisation, safe housing for vulnerable groups, and urgent action against forced conversions and enforced disappearances.

As Pakistan celebrates its first female provincial chief minister, it is a reminder of the progress made and the journey ahead. The state must prioritise women's safety, healthcare, education, and economic inclusion. Ensuring women's rights

and participation in all spheres of life is not just a moral imperative but also a necessity for Pakistan's development.

This Women's Day, let us commit to taking steps towards a future where gender equality is not an aspiration but a reality; a future where every woman can exercise her rights fully and contribute to progress without fear or favour. Let us ensure that next year, we have more reasons to celebrate and fewer to lament. The road to gender equality is long, but with collective action, a more equitable future is within reach.

Published in Dawn, March 8th, 2024

TTP threat

DURING a discussion in the Security Council on Wednesday, Pakistani Ambassador to the UN Munir Akram rightly observed that, left unchecked, the banned TTP could become "a global terrorist threat". Considering the TTP's links with Al Qaeda, and its blood-soaked campaign inside Pakistan, the world should be concerned about the group's activities. Mr Akram added that it needed to be probed how the TTP could secure high-grade weapons, and from where it acquired its funds. He also asked the UNSC to endorse Pakistan's demand that the Afghan Taliban cut their ties with the TTP. This demand is not new; Islamabad has publicly and privately, in subtle as well as stronger language, called upon Kabul to rein in the TTP. Pakistan's calls have been met with a mixed response: there has been little action by the Afghan Taliban, though they have claimed they will not let their soil be used by anti-Pakistan militants. There are reports they have imprisoned some TTP fighters and shifted them away from the Pakistan border. But the attacks have not stopped.

What is needed from Kabul are solid steps, not half measures. Clamping down on the TTP, and then allowing them to wreak havoc in Pakistan will not work. At the UNSC meeting, Roza Otunbayeva, the secretary general's special representative on Afghanistan, appeared to endorse Pakistan's position, observing that "there are well-founded concerns over the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan", while mentioning the TTP by name. Pakistan's new government should implement a dual-track policy to neutralise the TTP threat. Firstly, it must keep channels with the Afghan Taliban open and continue to

communicate its concerns about terrorist activity originating in Afghanistan. Secondly, Pakistan should cooperate with other states at the UN as well as regional blocs, such as the SCO, to make it clear to Kabul that hosting militants will end any chance of wider acceptance of the Afghan Taliban regime by the international community.

Published in Dawn, March 8th, 2024

Result tampering

THE botched conduct of the Feb 8 election continues to haunt the Election Commission of Pakistan. After failing to meet the legal deadline of Feb 22 to publish all Form 45s, the Commission finally released the documents on Tuesday, in the process triggering another storm of complaints regarding blatant and, in some instances, rather crude manipulation of electoral results.

The Form 45, which is a tally of all votes cast at a polling station for each of the contesting candidates, is the formal documentation of the first and most important step in the post-poll vote-counting exercise. A copy of it is supposed to be issued to the nominee of each candidate who witnesses the count of ballots. Since the result of an election is built on the consolidation of individual Form 45s issued by presiding officers from each polling station, the integrity of these forms is what ultimately legitimises the poll exercise.

In the case of the recent general election, many candidates had complained that the Form 45s they received from the presiding officers in their respective constituencies were showing very different results than those announced by the ECP after unlawful and as yet unexplained delays.

There were several rival candidates and even entire parties endorsing the PTI's claim of victory on various seats based on the Form 45s collected by them, even though official results had declared some other candidate as the winner. Since the ECP's copies of its Form 45s had not been shared till earlier this week, it was impossible to determine where exactly the official count and the Form 45s issued to candidates had deviated. The documents now released seem so full of inconsistencies and errors that they have bolstered the persistent allegations of

widespread tampering with results and strengthened independent observers' demands for a transparent audit of election results.

Where, on the one hand, the ECP insisted on rigid interpretations of election rules and laws to deny the PTI its bat and the Sunni Ittehad Council its share of reserved seats, it cannot expect the nation to look the other way when it comes to its own violations of legal deadlines and failure to explain the glaring anomalies in its announced results.

This duplicity cannot be condoned. Given how crudely vote counts have been overwritten in some of the Form 45s shared by the ECP, the Commission must explain why it considered it appropriate to announce winners and allocate seats based on seemingly tampered documents without conducting some kind of cross-checking first.

It must also organise an immediate, independent audit of the election results that have been contested, which all important stakeholders should be invited to witness. It will prove extremely difficult for the nation to move forward unless these disputes are resolved.

Published in Dawn, March 8th, 2024

Modi in Kashmir

NEARLY five years after his government scuppered India-held Kashmir's limited autonomy, Narendra Modi descended upon the disputed territory to tell Kashmiris how 'fortunate' they were to be living under New Delhi's rule. To thwart protests, Srinagar was put under a security blanket, while rent-a-crowds were bussed in to hear Modi hold forth at a stadium, with government employees reportedly ordered to attend. The Indian PM told the crowd that he had come "to win your hearts", though his government's brutal methods have managed to alienate even some of its staunchest loyalists in the occupied region, particularly after the scrapping of Article 370 in 2019. As a former chief minister of J&K noted on social media, the visit was likely designed to remind BJP supporters ahead of India's general elections that the Hindu nationalist government had 'solved' the decades-old Kashmir question — in India's favour. The reality of the matter is, of course, quite different.

The BJP may have managed to pull off an act of constitutional subterfuge — endorsed by India’s supreme court last year — by tinkering with held Kashmir’s special status. But to think that ‘all is well’ in the disputed region is a delusion. As Pakistan’s Foreign Office noted, “efforts to project normalcy are a facade”. If Mr Modi was so convinced that Kashmiris would fill the streets to welcome him, why was Srinagar put under virtual lockdown? Clearly, Kashmiris want justice, and to decide their future through the democratic process, not sops about development and tourism that India has to offer. Once the dust clears post elections, it remains to be seen how serious the new Indian government is about resolving the Kashmir question. While hawks in New Delhi would insist the Kashmir file is closed, Pakistan, the UN and the Kashmiris themselves beg to differ. If the BJP and other members of the Indian political class are serious about bringing peace to Kashmir, then only a tripartite solution — involving Pakistan, India and the Kashmiris — can pave the way for stability, and, indeed, lower the temperature in the rest of the subcontinent. Will the new dispensation in India take a bold decision and handle the Kashmir file with statesmanship? Or will the same stubborn attitude, and the associated repression and violence, continue to haunt this tortured land? The picture should be clearer in a few months.

Published in Dawn, March 9th, 2024

Civilian dreams

IT is the misfortune of Pakistan’s more than 240m citizens that their political leadership simply refuses to learn. The country again stands at a crossroads — but for once, the overwhelming majority seems to be in agreement on what the source of its political instability really is.

Even the parties which have been co-opted by the establishment today are uneasy, knowing well they may find themselves on the receiving end before long. One would expect that this realisation would compel popular politicians — those whose fortunes’ rise and fall are tied to the health of Pakistan’s democracy — to work together and find a path forward that guarantees their preservation.

Instead, what we see is the heads of ‘democratic’ parties quibbling over who ought to be more favoured by those who have for long sought to go beyond their

mandate. Therein lies the tragedy of Pakistan's dream of 'civilian supremacy' — its biggest champions are usually the first to betray it.

The recent general election has greatly complicated the situation. It would have been much easier for our political stakeholders had they heeded what this publication and many others had repeatedly urged them to do well before the polls: sit down, find common grounds, and talk.

Instead, our political parties collectively failed to make any sincere effort to that end. Those who were in the state's 'good books' thought they would get their legitimacy from the polls, while the PTI believed the democratic system, which it had helped weaken with its own hands, would ultimately save it. Neither got what they had depended on.

Though the people of Pakistan managed to deny the powerful what they wanted, the powerful also managed to deny the people the outcome they wanted. We are, therefore, once again at a stalemate. It would be delusional to call it anything else.

Where do we go now? There is talk of reconciliation, but how can it be achieved when one side believes it has the right to power but not the means to exercise it, and the other has the power but knows it has not earned the right to exercise it?

This conflict cannot be easily reconciled, especially with those supposed to act as arbiters uninterested in getting involved. However, what other choices do our leaders have? Revolutions are unpredictable; politics is the art of the possible.

Without compromise, our politicians cannot achieve what they want. It is time they realised that the problem is not their rivalry but the fact that none of them is free as long as they continue to depend on non-political forces to get involved. The country has been bitterly divided by their refusal to acknowledge this simple truth: they owe it one sincere effort to get along.

Published in Dawn, March 9th, 2024

New president

HE was the country's first civilian president to complete his tenure; now, Asif Ali Zardari's election as president will make him the first Pakistani to hold that office twice. It is evident that his style of politics has kept currency in the corridors of power despite the many sociopolitical changes this country has seen since the last time he occupied the presidency. It is, undoubtedly, a remarkable comeback orchestrated by a sharp political mind.

According to the public opinion polls conducted in the run-up to the general election and publicised through national media, the PPP was always a distant laggard compared to the PML-N and PTI. With the fortunes of Messrs Asif Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari looking modest outside their traditional bastion, most attention had remained on their bigger rivals. Yet, it was the PPP which somehow emerged as the strongest party after the ECP announced its results of the general election, which ensured a split mandate.

Mr Zardari had quietly gained immense leverage over the political configuration due to the bitter acrimony between his rivals. His party offered both the bigger parties an opportunity to form the government, while making it clear its support would require several important constitutional posts in return. When the PTI refused to bargain, the PML-N — whether under compulsion or considering it politically expedient — eventually made the deal.

As a result, the next regime will have a PML-N-led government overseen by the PPP from its constitutional posts. It will be interesting to see how the arrangement will pan out. Though a national unity government had long been presented as a solution to Pakistan's poly-crisis, those calculations likely did not factor in a large, vocal opposition buoyed by a strong narrative around its victimhood. Such an arrangement also needed a garb of legitimacy, which the recent election was unable to confer.

Mr Zardari is a keen player of the power game and the most successful at it by a fair degree. He had made his way into the presidency for the first time by using a complex strategy that involved using the then army chief to oust Gen Pervez Musharraf from office. He had then kept that office for the full five-year term,

despite facing immense pressure from powerful quarters to abdicate. All of his faculties will be required by the new set-up if it hopes to succeed in achieving its goals.

Of course, there are some who believe that the PPP has merely positioned itself to keep its traditional rival on a leash and that it will always put its own interests above anyone else's. The two have previously worked together, but the PPP also seeks an independent identity under Mr Bhutto-Zardari. It will, therefore, be interesting to see what arrangement the two parties eventually reach.

Published in Dawn, March 10th, 2024

Handing over Discos

PRIME MINISTER Shehbaz Sharif's plan to transfer the 10 public-sector Discos from the centre to the provinces was ostensibly aimed at offloading their significant losses to the latter. Another reason could be the belief that the provinces are better placed to manage and fix these cash-guzzlers due to their close proximity to the power distributors and consumers. However, the idea, which comes as a surprise given the earlier decision of the Special Investment Facilitation Council to turn over these companies to the private sector through 'long-term concessions', may well prove a non-starter and thus a waste of time. No province is likely to want them as it would put a very heavy burden on their budgets. Balochistan and KP neither have the financial muscle nor the capacity to manage them. Then, there are other issues such as the application of a countrywide uniform consumer tariff and subsidies, in addition to legal complexities that would have to be tackled before any progress on this idea can be made. It was for these reasons that the previous three attempts to transfer the Discos to the provinces failed.

There are no two opinions about the financial burden the Discos are putting on the deficit-ridden federal budget and the capacity constraints of the centre in properly managing these mammoth organisations. It would be a big mistake to expect the provinces to transform them into functional, profitable businesses, even if they are able to reduce power theft and improve bill recoveries. Also, the authorities need to eliminate the annual losses of nearly \$1bn that these

companies cause to the exchequer rather than shift the liability to the provinces. Given the long history of resistance by vested interests to the privatisation of these companies, it is not surprising that many look at this move with suspicion. It may not be a derailment of the power sector reforms agenda needed to fix the electricity distribution system, but repeating the mistake is a sheer waste of time. With the country in need of quick decisions to stabilise the economy, the new government has little time at its disposal to indulge in such futile experiments. It is time Mr Sharif decided to stick to the power-sector privatisation plan rather than spend his energy on ideas that are likely to fail.

Published in Dawn, March 10th, 2024

Bitter honey-traps

THE repeated failure of state-sponsored operations to capture gangs presiding over swathes of riverine katcha areas, particularly in upper Sindh and lower Punjab, says more about the half-hearted approach of law enforcers than their determination. Ahead of the game with better equipment and crafty strategies, gangs of bandits make the rules in these parts and hit the headlines with troubling regularity. Recently, their honey-traps have resurfaced, and despite warnings from the police, men are becoming easy prey — an employee of Rescue 1122 in Bahawalpur was abducted for ransom recently, as were others in Kashmore and Ghotki. Baits in the form of women or rewarding business deals keep the criminals safe in their hideouts as targets are brought to them. When victims arrive at a pre-set location, they are kidnapped. Such ensnarement has been frequent: in 2023, some 250 people from KP, Sindh and Punjab were taken hostage.

Although law-enforcement agencies assert that outlaws were weeded out from 58,500 acres last year, the fact is that several actions did not uproot their brutal foothold. Why has their brazen defiance not seen a decline even after numerous operations? Moreover, the irony of a police force sans modern arms or an adequate number of armoured personnel carriers facing criminals who brandish weapons fit for battle, including rocket launchers, should not be lost on the government and the LEAs. The hour has come for public resources to be used for the security of the vulnerable through effective action — trained law enforcers

with sophisticated weapons, bulletproof gear and transport and drone surveillance should patrol the troubled areas; security agencies need to present a suitable picture of their prowess with a strategy that wins wars. The region's socioeconomic realities must be addressed with education and employment so that the poor shun crime. Decades-old problems such as the katcha ganglands cannot thrive without patronage.

Published in Dawn, March 10th, 2024

Biden's Gaza 'port'

AS the humanitarian plight of Gaza's people grows grimmer by the day, Israel's foreign backers, principally the US, continue to offer farcical solutions to the crisis that are akin to pouring salt on the Palestinians' wounds. Amongst these doubtful 'solutions' is Joe Biden's plan to construct a temporary port on Gaza's Mediterranean coast to enable humanitarian aid to enter the blockaded Strip. Mr Biden unveiled his plan during his recent State of the Union address. He also mentioned that no American boots would be on the ground in Gaza to work on this scheme. Experts have cast doubt on the feasibility of the American president's project, particularly its effectiveness in alleviating the Palestinians' dire plight. Moreover, a Pentagon spokesman has said the scheme will take at least two months to complete, whereas Gaza's people need immediate access to food, water and medical help.

Instead of dreaming up dubious projects to 'help' the devastated Gazans, Mr Biden can achieve much more by telling his Israeli friends to lift the blockade and allow aid trucks waiting in Egypt unhindered access to Gaza. What is equally important is for Mr Biden to ask Tel Aviv to immediately stop the slaughter of Palestinians. But he will most likely refrain from making these demands, as Israel continues its campaign of mass starvation and genocidal violence. As some observers have put it, the US policy of offering aid to Palestinians while simultaneously supplying Israel the weapons to butcher them reflects a 'bombs and bread' approach. Meanwhile, the situation in Gaza is dire, with nearly 700,000 people on the brink of famine. Images of famished Palestinian children have shaken people around the world, though leaders in Western capitals seem to be unmoved. Instead of coming up with theatrical schemes, what the US and

other Western states need to do is to unambiguously back calls for Israel to end the slaughter forthwith.

Published in Dawn, March 11th, 2024

Climate poverty

IN a chilling manifestation of climate change, Pakistan — already reeling from the 2022 floods — has again been beset by extreme weather events since the end of February.

The recent unexpected deluge and snowfall have claimed the lives of at least 45 people, including 27 children, exposing Pakistan's acute climate vulnerability and lack of preparedness. Not only have these unexpected events resulted in a tragic loss of life, they have also decimated homes, livestock, crops and infrastructure, particularly in KP and Balochistan.

Amid this calamitous backdrop, Amnesty International has highlighted the need to make the Loss and Damage Fund operational for Pakistan. Established at COP27 in 2022, this fund represents hope for climate-vulnerable countries like ours, offering a means to pick up the pieces and rebuild following large-scale devastation.

At COP28 last year, several countries pledged \$420m. To date, commitments have amounted to \$661m, according to UNDP. It falls short of the billions of dollars of finance needed to adequately capitalise the fund. According to UNEP, the UN's leading environmental authority, developing countries require an estimated annual financial commitment of between \$215bn to \$387bn throughout this decade. Even so, it is a start.

Yet, as Amnesty International notes, there are delays in appointing the 26-member board to manage the fund. Its inaugural board meeting, initially scheduled for January, has been postponed, which, in turn, also calls into question a crucial June deadline for the World Bank to confirm its willingness to host the fund under conditions decided at COP28.

These delays threaten to derail the operationalisation of the fund within the 2024 timeline. The situation is unacceptable, given the scale of the crisis at hand and the immediate need for financing to not only rebuild post-catastrophe but also to invest in climate-resilient infrastructure.

Pakistan's struggle against the forces of nature highlights a global imperative: the need for rapid, decisive action to support those at the forefront of climate change's impacts. High-income states, particularly those responsible for historical greenhouse gas emissions, must honour their commitments to adequately bankroll the fund.

This is not just a matter of financial assistance but a moral obligation to support nations in dire need, ensuring they have the means to protect their most vulnerable populations and safeguard their futures against the increasing wrath of climate change.

Published in Dawn, March 11th, 2024

Caretaker debate

AS the dust settles on the post-election process, there is increasing public discussion about the concept of caretaker governments, and their utility in Pakistan's political milieu.

Much of this talk has been sparked by the problematic performance of the interim set-up that oversaw last month's general elections. In a recent Senate debate, there were calls to do away with the system of caretakers, with lawmakers saying that it had no place in a parliamentary democracy.

Furthermore, according to some media reports, the PML-N and PPP have decided to jettison the caretaker system. It should be remembered that in the 2006 Charter of Democracy, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif had endorsed the idea of a "neutral caretaker government" to hold free and fair polls. Apparently, events in Pakistan's political history in the years since the Charter was signed have made both parties reconsider their positions.

There was no concept of a caretaker set-up conducting polls in the 1973 Constitution. The idea emerged after the debacle following the 1977 polls, which were widely seen as manipulated. Yet most caretaker governments in the country — with the exception of a few — have failed in their basic task of conducting fair polls accepted by all stakeholders.

Criticism of the last caretaker government has been particularly acute, centring on the fact that the administration overstepped its bounds, and did not provide a level playing field.

Elsewhere, few established democracies bring in caretaker set-ups; the incumbents go into 'caretaker mode', with certain restrictions imposed on them to ensure transparency.

In our region, two examples stand out: Bangladesh had introduced the caretaker system, but later scrapped it. However, elections under the incumbents have hardly been free. On the other hand, India has held regular general elections, largely free of controversy, without an interim set-up, mainly because the Indian election commission is suitably empowered.

The new parliament should extensively debate the proposal of eliminating the caretaker set-up before making a decision. While the system in vogue is clearly not delivering, perhaps the reason for this is the weakness of the ECP and its inability to hold polls that all parties consider above board.

While the ECP has been empowered on paper, on the ground its performance, particularly in last month's polls, has been disappointing.

The key to meaningful election reform lies with the politicians. They must build trust amongst each other and empower the ECP so that there are no major complaints about the polls' process. If they are able to pull this off in the current legislature's term, the next general elections may no longer require a caretaker set-up.

While there should be no constant constitutional flip-flopping, laws can certainly be amended to fix the major bugs in Pakistan's electoral system.

Crushing protests

PUNJAB has a new government, with a new chief minister at the helm. And yet, the same old tactics are being employed against the opposition PTI, with the provincial police's heavy-handed dispersal of the party's demonstrators. Sunday's crackdown, according to party leader Omar Ayub, involved the beating and detention of what he said were 100 protesters. This aggression by the police, for months now, seems to be part of a broader strategy which the party claims is aimed at "crushing" it. Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz has been pinpointed by the party for this latest transgression, with her vows of "ruthlessness" against any "violence" by the opposition now manifesting in the said action. The use of serious charges, including terrorism clauses, in criminal complaints against PTI members further illustrates what seems to be a misuse of the legal system to intimidate the opposition. A particularly distressing video, showing stick-wielding policemen surrounding a vehicle with children seated in the back, has ignited condemnation, exposing the need for a recalibrated approach to law enforcement and addressing public frustrations.

It is crucial to recognise that protests indicate underlying grievances that require attention, not suppression. The widespread demonstrations across Punjab reflect deep-seated discontent that should prompt dialogue and reform, rather than punishment. The essence of democracy lies in the ability to express dissent and engage in peaceful assembly. Pakistan's sociopolitical fabric is already delicate, with economic challenges and internal strife posing threats to its stability. The country cannot afford to exacerbate these issues through heavy-handed measures against its citizens. The Punjab government and, by extension, the national leadership, must acknowledge that stifling peaceful protests only deepens societal divides and fosters resentment. The authorities must reassess their approach to handling protests. On becoming chief minister, Ms Nawaz promised that she would be a representative of 120m people — across political divides. She should realise that those 120m also include the protesters.

Published in Dawn, March 12th, 2024

Amnesty plan

AS the new political set-up prepares its agenda, the recently elected Balochistan chief minister has spoken about the central issue affecting peace in Pakistan's biggest province: the Baloch insurgency. In an interview aired on a local channel on Sunday, Sarfraz Bugti said that a "general amnesty" was on the cards in order to convince insurgents to lay down their weapons and join the mainstream political process. While holding out the olive branch, he also observed that in case the separatists spurned the offer and refused to abandon the gun, "the writ of the state" would be enforced. When questioned, Mr Bugti did not clearly address the issue of enforced disappearances, saying that while there is no justification for this blatantly illegal practice, the number of missing persons cited is "dicey".

While the offer to end the insurgency through dialogue is welcome, Mr Bugti must realise that such proposals are not made in a vacuum, and that unless the root causes of the violence in Balochistan are addressed, such plans will have little meaning. Moreover, several such attempts to engage the 'angry' Baloch have been made by past administrations, backed by the security establishment. Development packages have been announced, while press conferences have been held where Baloch insurgents have bid farewell to arms, announcing that henceforth they would work for the supreme national interest. Yet all these efforts have failed to pacify Balochistan, as violent separatist campaigns as well as the counter-measures of the security forces continue. Perhaps the reason for this is that the state has preferred cosmetic efforts over substantive steps to address the poverty and deprivation that afflict Balochistan. While separatism cannot be defended, and security men as well as innocent civilians have been targeted by the insurgents, the state has, over the decades, done little to uplift the lives of Balochistan's people. Health and education figures are abysmal, while the considerable mineral wealth the province possesses does not trickle down to the masses. Moreover, the practice of enforced disappearances — picking up people while dispensing with due process — has further fuelled alienation in Balochistan, as its people feel they are not entitled to the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. If there is to be sincere reconciliation in Balochistan, the state must accept the mistakes it has made, and create an atmosphere of goodwill.

PDM redux

THE new prime minister has stuck to a safe formula by inducting familiar faces in his cabinet and giving them their usual portfolios, and accommodating allies and benefactors where more deserving people could have been given a chance. The only big change seems to be the inclusion of Muhammad Aurangzeb, the erstwhile president of one of Pakistan's largest banks, to do the finance minister's job. He replaces the candidate the PML-N has usually favoured for the portfolio, Ishaq Dar.

Mr Aurangzeb is among three as-yet-unelected members of the cabinet inducted yesterday, with the two others being the former caretaker chief minister of Punjab, Mohsin Naqvi, and a former adviser to the caretaker prime minister, Ahad Cheema. It seems the latter two had to be accommodated for their 'services to Pakistan'. Meanwhile, Mr Dar, despite his disastrous performance as finance minister during the PDM-led government, has still managed to be shortlisted for another ministry in the new regime.

A big positive is that the cabinet is not as bloated this time as it was during the PDM government. The new government would be well-advised to keep itself lean and focus on dealing with Pakistan's many crises.

At the same time, it is disappointing that Shehbaz Sharif's federal cabinet has shaped up to be a men's club. There was just one exception among the 19 individuals sworn in by President Asif Ali Zardari yesterday — Shaza Fatima Khawaja. She took oath as the only minister of state, while 18 others — including her uncle, Khawaja Asif — were inducted as federal ministers of the new government.

It is difficult to understand why the PML-N would so casually disregard half the population when assigning important portfolios. The omission seemed particularly jarring given the PR campaign around women's empowerment the party has been running ever since Maryam Nawaz got herself elected as the first woman chief minister of Punjab.

Is the PML-N really so short of capable women leaders, or does the new prime minister find them all unworthy of being given a seat at his table? It is hoped that neither is the case, and more women will eventually be nominated for top jobs.

Meanwhile, Mr Sharif has, knowingly or unknowingly, thrown his old guard a huge challenge. It has become clear over the past two years that Pakistan cannot continue to be run in the manner it has been in the past, and a lot must be done very differently this time around.

Will the PML-N's old hands prove themselves able to adapt and capable of catering to Pakistan's much-changed needs, or will we see them replaying their past policies? It does not need to be pointed out that a lot is riding on their success, and the path forward is beset with difficulties.

Published in Dawn, March 12th, 2024

Exclusionary law

ANY illusions that India remains a secular state that treats all its people equally should be put to rest, particularly as the BJP has waged 'lawfare' against Indian Muslims during its decade in power. One of the most blatant examples of using the law to disenfranchise communities has been the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, passed in 2019. The law calls for granting Indian citizenship to 'persecuted' minorities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Members of all faiths, except Islam, are welcome to apply for Indian citizenship under the law. On Monday, over four years after the CAA was passed, the BJP-led government notified the law. Critics of the ruling party are terming the move a cynical ploy to grab votes ahead of general elections that are due to begin next month. On one hand, the BJP, out of its apparent 'benevolence' towards South Asia's non-Muslim communities, is inviting them to settle in India. On the other, it is championing schemes such as the National Register of Citizens, widely seen as a ruse to disenfranchise Indian Muslims if they cannot provide documents to prove their citizenship. This case of demographic gerrymandering seems to be in line with the BJP's goal of rebranding India as an exclusively Hindu rashtra, while pushing its Muslims to the margins.

While the BJP seems overly concerned about the plight of non-Muslims in South Asia, under its rule, it has subjected India's own Muslims to blatant injustice and stood by as Hindu zealots, as well as state institutions, have unleashed violence upon the community. Under the Sangh Parivar's watch, Indian Muslims have faced discriminatory citizenship laws — such as the CAA and NRC — seen their homes and mosques bulldozed on flimsy grounds, and watched state functionaries publicly attack their religious and cultural practices. In other words, Muslims are the new untermensch of India. The notification of the CAA weeks ahead of polls is clearly an election ploy, though the BJP's efforts to demonise Muslims in order to please its core constituency risks creating permanent communal fault lines. If the Sangh thinks it can bully minorities into submission, it is mistaken. This campaign of vilification will only expand social fissures, not heal them. Opposition groups and civil society organisations in India need to speak out and challenge the BJP's politics of hate and division.

Published in Dawn, March 13th, 2024

Online darkness

THE digital age is not without a grave demerit — a child's screen-time has replaced much of regular life. This concern is amplified by the presence of online child pornography rings always on the lookout for vulnerable minors to exploit. On Monday, the National Commission on the Rights of Child released a report, Situational analysis of child online protection in Pakistan, which asserts that “children may be exposed to inappropriate content for their age or inappropriate contacts, which makes them highly vulnerable to violence including sexual abuse and exploitation — a risk that is growing exponentially with the rapidly increasing use of technology”, and alerts the judiciary, lawmakers and civil society to mounting incidents of online harassment of children through audio and video features.

In a scenario where past advice — in 2021, NCRC recommended that the FIA and police be fortified with scientific, financial and human resources to identify and probe sexually violent content for children — has fallen on deaf ears, the authorities must heed this warning. According to Unicef, the impact of any form of online abuse on a child is multilayered— mental, emotional and physical —

ranging from fear and shame to loss of appetite and sleep. Unaddressed remorse, blame and anger trigger a bullying-victim cycle for revenge, thereby creating more perpetrators. The answer is not turned-off devices, which are vital for information and communication. Instead, cybersecurity requires an investment in training the police for appropriate and prompt response systems, a cyber-patrolling force that hunts down virtual offenders and combs through their records for other victims and encouraging families to come forward to lodge FIRs so a child is guilt-free. The state must clear the cyber environment with stringent implementation of laws and the transparent use of funds to ensure safe navigation for our children. While an ever-transforming web space is not easy to guard, it cannot grow into a death trap for children's mental and social health.

Published in Dawn, March 13th, 2024

Deadly devices

THE RECENT spate of deadly incidents involving gas cylinders must bring the authorities' attention to a daily hazard many across the country have been forced to live with. So far this week, 12 people, including five from a single family, have been killed and several others injured in two separate gas cylinder explosion incidents. Both occurred in residential buildings: one in Multan, the other in Quetta. Unsafe gas storage cylinders seem to be becoming a major cause for the mounting toll from domestic accidents, yet the issue has not received as much attention from the authorities as it deserves. Women and children are most at risk because they are frequently in close proximity to spaces where gas cylinders are used in households. Tragically, children accounted for most of the dead in the blasts reported this week.

The onset of Ramazan has increased the risk of deadly blasts, mainly because unreliable gas supply around seher and iftar times often pushes even more households to opt for cylinders. Purchasing gas in pressurised containers helps households ensure that cooking activities can continue unhindered during peak times, when line gas often becomes unavailable. Given that it is primarily a governmental failure that a large number of citizens have no access to piped gas, those responsible must at least take measures to ensure that citizens forced to opt for cylinders do not expose themselves to avoidable risks. In this regard, a

nationwide education campaign regarding cylinder safety can be launched, and the various Ramazan transmissions hosted by TV channels can be requested to include warnings for their viewers about the potential risks of using pressurised gas and what one may do to ensure their loved ones avoid harm. The unregulated cylinder-refilling industry also needs tighter monitoring and control, as smaller vendors operate without regard to any safety protocols. Gas cylinders are turning into a major health and safety issue, and the authorities must respond proactively.

Published in Dawn, March 14th, 2024

Border protests

THE border town of Chaman has been protesting — for nearly five months now — against the government’s imposition of a passport and visa mandate for movement between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Deep-seated discontent prevails in the local populace — traders, political parties, and civil society members — casting a spotlight on not just this issue but also the region’s overall economic hardships. The transition from a relatively open to a regulated crossing with stringent document requirements, understandably aimed at enhancing security in an area notorious for smuggling, has inadvertently impacted the community’s way of life. The local economy, which relies heavily on small-scale trade, has been hit particularly hard. While trucks have recently been allowed through, thousands of daily wage workers, who walk across, have been marginalised. A recent report by the HRCP highlights not just the immediate economic repercussions but also the long-term social and humanitarian implications of the border restrictions. It rightly calls for a nuanced approach, suggesting engagement with all stakeholders, including Afghan representatives, to find a balanced resolution that considers both security needs and the local populace’s welfare.

The protesters’ demands, ranging from the abolition of the visa policy to the restoration of small traders’ welfare packages, represent a broader plea for recognition, respect, and understanding. The proposal to facilitate visas on arrival and establish border markets is a constructive step towards mitigating the economic impact of the new regulations. These measures, coupled with

investments in local industries and job-creation initiatives as suggested by the HRCP, could serve as a foundation for sustainable development in Chaman, and the wider Balochistan. The new government must balance the imperative of national security with the legitimate needs and rights of its border communities. It must engage with the protesters, understand their grievances, and explore interim solutions while working towards long-term development goals. Dialogue and diplomacy with the protesters, alongside working with a recalcitrant Kabul, are key to navigating this complex issue. As mentioned previously in these pages, ensuring that the security measures are not perceived as punitive, but as part of a broader strategy to enhance the well-being of all Pakistanis, including those in Chaman, is essential. The path forward should be marked by empathy, engagement, and concerted efforts towards economic empowerment, laying the groundwork for peace and prosperity in the region.

Published in Dawn, March 14th, 2024

Economic agenda

ON Tuesday, at his first formal interaction with reporters after assuming control of Q Block, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb dropped some clear hints about the kind of financial policies he intends to pursue, at least in the short to medium term.

Signalling the continuation of IMF-mandated stabilisation policies under the \$3bn Stand-by Arrangement, the former banker said that Pakistan, a sovereign, nuclear state, could no longer afford to continue with a 'patchwork' approach to deep-rooted economic woes if it wanted to address the challenge posed by low economic growth and inflation.

He was also clear about the Sharif government's plan to kick-start discussions for a new, larger and longer IMF loan during the international lender's visit for the second and final review of the current nine-month facility that ends soon.

"We would at least kick-start the process and get this going. Let us see how they respond," he said. Further negotiations on the fresh programme would be taken

forward on the sidelines of the spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank in April in Washington, it was mentioned.

The finance minister's message was unmistakable: the government is aiming for permanent macroeconomic stabilisation even if it comes at the cost of growth. He said that the country should not expect cash deposits and debt rollovers from friendly countries, and that it was necessary to achieve the structural benchmarks laid out in IMF programmes signed by Pakistan's previous finance ministers, as turning to patchwork measures was no solution. Inflation, he stressed, could only be addressed by achieving macroeconomic stability.

Faced with a daunting challenge, the minister's prescription for the interlinked issues of low growth, balance-of-payment troubles, inflation and fiscal deficit afflicting the economy indicate a plan for a consequential overhaul of the government as well as its budget over the next several years. His plan also represents a significant departure from the PML-N's signature economic and financial policies.

The question is: will he get enough room to execute the stabilisation policies for as long as it is required? What is the guarantee that the ruling party will support his attempts to effectively tax its core political constituency of retailers or the powerful real estate mafia? Last but not the least, how long will the government resist the temptation of spurring growth without executing the long-standing structural reforms once forex reserves rise to a comfortable level, as it panders to its vote bank?

Indeed, the new army-backed SIFC created last year to attract investment from the Gulf nations is widely expected to help him. Still, the success of the finance minister's stabilisation agenda will hinge largely on his ability to manage the desires and demands of the party in power, without digressing from the path of reform.

Published in Dawn, March 14th, 2024

Irsa controversy

ON Thursday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif avoided a public showdown with the PPP — a key ally whose support he must retain to keep the minority PML-N government in power — by rescinding the contentious appointment of retired bureaucrat Zafar Mahmood as the new Irsa chairman. However, it remains unclear if he moved with such speed just to appease the PPP, or whether his advisers had realised the ‘illegality’ of one of his administration’s first major acts.

It appears that the appointment was made under a controversial ordinance seeking to restructure Irsa. The ordinance became infructuous as former president Arif Alvi had refused to sign it, as it could have caused friction between the centre and provinces.

The ordinance, prepared by the caretaker government towards the end of its tenure, in breach of its mandate and without consulting the provinces or the CCI, had suggested substantive changes in the ‘federal structure’ of the water regulator, which monitors the distribution of Indus waters among the provinces in accordance with the Water Apportionment Accord, 1991.

The ordinance aimed to revise Irsa’s composition, vest its chairman with vast powers, and cut the provinces’ role in its decision-making functions. The chairman was empowered to also review and settle provincial grievances, rendering Irsa members ineffective. Currently, the Irsa chairmanship rotates among the four provincial members, and the authority’s decisions on water issues are made based on majority votes.

Since these proposals allow the PM to exercise a lot of power on Irsa through its chairman and the federal government and effectively have complete control on the authority’s decision-making functions, the ordinance had drawn wide opposition from the Sindh caretaker cabinet and experts.

At a time when certain centralist forces are touting the reversal of the landmark 18th Amendment and curtailment of the provincial share of federal taxes under the NFC award as the solution to Pakistan’s economic and political problems, the

attempt to 'centralise' Irsa and reduce the provincial role in decision-making could exacerbate centre-province and interprovincial disharmony.

Besides, the message Islamabad tried to send to the smaller provinces by appointing a strong proponent of Kalabagh as Irsa's head was unmistakable.

In this context, nobody can fault PPP's Naveed Qamar for calling out the PM for his "very serious, illegal and unconstitutional" order to, intentionally or unintentionally, attempt to use the infructuous ordinance to "usurp" the rights of the provinces through the appointment of the Irsa chief. "On the very first day, if we start encroaching upon the rights of the provinces, how do we function as a federation?" he asked.

While making consequential decisions like this, Mr Sharif should not forget that ill-advised actions can have very serious ramifications for the federation, even if these suit his own party's politics.

Published in Dawn, March 15th, 2024

An open door

EVEN if it is too early to be optimistic, the development has come as a pleasant surprise. On Wednesday, despite all their differences, the chief minister of KP and the prime minister of Pakistan managed to have "good talks" regarding the future of their relationship.

"It was very positive," KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur told reporters after his tête-à-tête with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on public and provincial issues, law and order and other matters.

"He [the PM] gave full support and reassurances," Mr Gandapur added, speaking about the need for the federal and provincial governments to solve public issues together.

Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal, who represented Mr Sharif in the media briefing, also appeared satisfied, noting that the prime minister had promised that the

province's dues would be looked into and other issues addressed via a joint team comprising representatives of the federal and KP governments.

"The summary of today's meeting is ... [that] we all have our own politics, but the state is together," he said.

Even the new information minister, who started his day by accusing the PTI of conspiring to sabotage the GSP-Plus trade arrangement with the EU, later agreed that the meeting was a welcome development.

Speaking during an evening interview on a private TV channel, he commented that if such interactions continued, Pakistan could move towards a resolution of its economic problems.

Though PTI leader Hammad Azhar later felt compelled to state that the meeting shouldn't be seen as a compromise by his party on the alleged theft of its mandate and the incarceration of its workers and leaders, the two matters need not be conflated.

The federation cannot stop functioning while election disputes and the fate of arrested individuals are negotiated, and it makes good sense, therefore, for the PTI government in KP and the PML-N government in Islamabad to maintain a stable working relationship.

It is a mature way of dealing with political conflict. Moreover, it provides an opportunity to build some confidence on both sides.

Given that the balance of power is currently in his favour, perhaps Mr Sharif can also consider other options to bring down temperatures, including pushing for the quick release of political prisoners.

If politicians can agree to resolve their grievances between themselves, half of the crises will be over.

Published in Dawn, March 15th, 2024

HDI decline

THE latest Human Development Report from the UNDP presents a bleak global outlook, characterised by deepening inequalities and political polarisation. The report underscores the urgent need for collective action to navigate through these tumultuous times. Pakistan's position in this global scenario is particularly concerning. Its descent from the 161st to the 164th position in the Human Development Index should serve as cause for deep introspection. This setback is a reflection of not just local but also global gridlocks that hinder the advancement towards equitable development. In the face of increasing inequalities, the report reveals a concerning trend of reversing progress in bridging the gap between wealthy and poorer nations. For Pakistan, the decline in the HDI ranking is attributed to a combination of social, economic, and political pressures, including macroeconomic challenges and the after-effects of the devastating floods of 2022.

Pakistan's unchanged ranks in the Gender Inequality Index and the Multidimensional Poverty Index highlight enduring social disparities, necessitating focused and sustainable interventions. The report underscores the critical need for global cooperation in addressing these inequalities, with an emphasis on climate stability and fair technology access as key areas for action. For Pakistan, this means prioritising climate and Sustainable Development Goals financing and enhancing governance to provide global public goods efficiently. The challenges ahead demand innovative solutions and a commitment to overcoming not only local but also global hurdles to development. The report's call for new financial mechanisms and governance approaches offers a pathway for Pakistan to not only improve its HDI ranking but also contribute to a more equitable world. As Pakistan embarks on this journey, it is imperative that the new government focus on systemic change, leveraging global cooperation to address the root causes of inequality and polarisation. By aligning with global efforts and prioritising sustainable development and equity, Pakistan can make significant strides towards a brighter, more equitable future for all.

Published in Dawn, March 15th, 2024

Moving away

PAKISTAN'S politicians and policymakers must evaluate economic models that yield better results than the old five-year plans. Instead, just like its predecessor, the Shehbaz Sharif government is drafting a five-year roadmap outlining the way to economic resurgence and stability. The ultimate aim is to curb inflation, alleviate poverty and create jobs. A committee has been formed to consult the relevant ministries to set targets for the next five years in different sectors. Once the required information is gathered, the economics planners intend to roll out a "consolidated document" that includes five-year targets for a number of sectors such as energy, agriculture, SMEs, exports, taxation, IT, investment and privatisation.

A key component of economic strategy in the 1960s and 1970s in many countries, five-year plans lost their utility in the free market system that consolidated its global hold following the fall of the Soviet Union.

Countries are drifting away from such planning models. In recent years, for example, this model has made way for a three-year action plan as part of India's 15-year vision document. Other economies have also replaced this document with similar rolling, strategic economic models, which are flexible and in sync with today's realities. Five-year plans are a legacy of highly centralised economic systems where governments used to shape their growth by controlling economic activities through permits, licences, voucher schemes, nationalisation, credit allocations, etc.

In the modern world, where the private sector is considered the engine of economic growth and development, such government intervention in the economy creates distortions and impedes growth. Pakistan is a major example of why a government should not be involved in economic activities.

In the light of past experience, it is advisable that the government evolve a well thought-out strategy to reduce its footprint on the economy, encourage market forces, and help the private sector realise its full potential. The sole objective of the government's development vision should be to evolve sound policies for private investors for a period of, say, 20 years, decentralise the power structure

for quick decision-making, and regulate the markets justly to protect consumers. This paradigm shift in planning is not only needed to fix the economy but is also in keeping with the sociopolitical changes in Pakistan.

Centralised planning hasn't worked here beyond a certain point. It is hard to recall if any five-year plan has achieved its goals. Even the much-touted early plans implemented under the Ayub regime in the 1960s produced only business monopolies, and an oligarchy that thrived on the state's largesse.

It would be much better for the new government to focus on real reforms and formulation of policies needed to pull the country out of poverty rather than waste its energy and resources on antiquated ideas.

Published in Dawn, March 16th, 2024

Privacy in danger

DURING a recent Islamabad High Court hearing, revelations about the ease of mobile phone hacking in Pakistan have brought into focus the egregious manner in which citizens' privacy rights are violated. The PTA chairman told the court a person's phone could be compromised "within a minute", laying bare a troubling reality: the sanctity of our personal communication is under threat, and the existing legal framework is insufficient to protect it. The Telegraph Act, 1885, and the Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganisation) Act, 1996, grant broad surveillance powers to the state. The Investigation for Fair Trial Act, 2013, further allows intelligence and LEAs to intercept communications with authorisation from the federal government and a warrant from a high court judge. These same laws — in addition to Article 14 of the Constitution — are designed to safeguard privacy, but are regularly flouted, revealing a gap between legislative intent and enforcement. The case brought to light by the IHC, involving allegations of illegal phone tapping, is emblematic of a broader issue: the unchecked surveillance regime that operates in the shadows, beyond the reach of accountability mechanisms. Not only does this regime work against the spirit of existing laws, it also erodes the principles of democracy and justice.

To counter such brazen surveillance, several things must occur. First, there must be a stringent enforcement of existing laws, with clear mechanisms for accountability. Any interception of communications should require judicial oversight, with warrants issued only upon demonstration of a compelling national security interest. Further, there must be a paper trail, documenting the authorisation and execution of surveillance activities. While this need not be public, there should be an audit trail accessible to oversight bodies. Additionally, the legal framework must be updated. The vague and broad powers currently afforded to the state should be narrowed, specifying the circumstances under which surveillance is permissible and establishing a transparent process for its authorisation and execution. This includes revising laws like the Telegraph Act and the Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganisation) Act to align with contemporary standards of privacy and human rights. Finally, an independent oversight body should monitor surveillance, handle complaints, and report to parliament, balancing security with accountability. Safeguarding privacy rights necessitates legal and institutional reforms to prevent rights infringements and reinforce the rule of law.

Published in Dawn, March 16th, 2024

The polio problem

IT is a tragedy that could have been prevented. Six months after researchers at the National Institute of Health's Pakistan Polio Laboratory flagged the presence of wild poliovirus type 1 (WPV-1) in sewage samples collected from Dera Bugti in Balochistan, a 30-month-old child has been paralysed by the virus. The child had been suffering weakness in his lower limbs, which worsened progressively. Doctors recently diagnosed it as poliomyelitis, after discovering the poliovirus in biological samples collected from the patient. The particular strain of poliovirus that affected the child is said to be part of the YB3A cluster, which, experts say, has been 'imported' from Afghanistan. Health officials last year blamed it for 90pc of all cases reported in Pakistan recently. The Dera Bugti case is Pakistan's first reported polio case for 2024, and the first in the district in 13 years, underlining the severe risk that the movement of at-risk populations poses to Pakistan's health systems.

Given that the rising incidence of polio in Pakistan has been a matter of major concern for the country's authorities for quite some time now, it is inexcusable that identified risks are still not being mitigated as proactively as they ought to be. For example, given the forewarning of the presence of WPV-1 in Dera Bugti, one would have expected the health administration to have had more success in preventing infections in the area. On a similar note, a polio prevention plan should have by now been made a central part of Pakistan's agenda for diplomatic interactions with the Afghan leadership, considering that the two countries are the only two in the world where the disease is endemic. However, it appears that Islamabad has yet to formulate a position on the matter. Our dedicated health workers are risking their lives to ensure a polio-free Pakistan; they must also get all the support they need from the state's administrative machinery.

Published in Dawn, March 16th, 2024

Stateless humanity

THE endless hostility between India and Pakistan has reduced prisoners to mere statistics. Although the two countries swap inmate lists twice a year, whether Abdul Mughni's name made it to Pakistan's inventory last January — 231 Indian prisoners, including 184 fisher-folk — is a mystery. On Friday, the Sindh High Court took issue with the conduct of the interior ministry as the latter had failed to deport a “detained Indian national despite a lapse of around seven years”; it observed that the appellant was an Indian national but the ministry did not put in enough effort to confirm his nationality. Mughni, arrested in 2013 under different provisions of the Foreigners Act, was sentenced to a prison term of six months in 2017. He has, in total, lost an extra 10 and a half years of his life to jail.

Since 2019, Pak-India ties have been at their frostiest, and the rigid positions taken by the two countries have proved detrimental for prisoners and their families on both sides. Detainees such as Mughni and poor fisher people end up spending years more than the term stipulated on account of lethargic trials and denial of consular access and legal aid. Both Pakistan and India would be well advised to reconsider the Agreement on Consular Access, which was first signed in 2008 as a confidence-building measure, for the sake of their people. Moreover,

India and Pakistan are also required to follow the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, enforced in 1976. It states that "no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the right to enter his own country". It is time for a no-arrest policy for fishermen and to have a department dedicated to ensuring translators for prisoners, nationality verification, legal aid, consular access, speedy trials, etc. Lastly, Pak-India ties must thaw at least to a point where their helpless citizens are not denied the right to rely on political treaties.

Published in Dawn, March 17th, 2024

X-communication

IT has now been a month since Pakistani authorities decided that the country must be cut off from one of the world's most popular means of exchanging information. We still do not know who pulled the trigger, and the newly inducted government seems to believe, like the caretaker set-up, that it can get away with quietly banning X, formerly known as Twitter, as long as it continues to publicly deny the fact that a restriction on its access is in place. While important government officials and offices continue to use the service — the speculation is that they may be using VPNs to access it — ordinary citizens remain out of the loop and unable to access the information that their own representatives are sharing on the platform. The 'Twitter ban', as it is being referred to, is just the latest in a series of measures adopted by the state to silence critical voices before and after the highly controversial Feb 8 elections, which themselves had been marred by a day-long blackout of cellular phone and internet services. Indeed, it seems that the ban on X has been sustained because the state's previous transgressions were left unchecked.

In this context, it is encouraging to note that more than two dozen civil society and human rights groups have now joined forces to protest the state's heavy-handed attempts to silence dissent. Criticising the state in a public statement on network shutdowns and platform blocking, the organisations have pointed out that such actions "infringe upon the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and access to information" and have "set a troubling precedent of throttling genuine political discourse". Among their demands are the immediate restoration of X, repeal of laws that enable censorship, more transparency on "decisions that

impact the free use of the internet”, a legal clarification for the blocking of X, and abiding by Pakistan’s commitments to upholding freedom of expression and right to information. These are principled demands, and it is hoped that the judiciary, which has lately seemed troublingly lax on the growing restrictions being placed on citizens’ rights, will also take note of the matter and move to check the state. Blocking public expression and access to information is a slippery slope that opens the door to much more sinister means of repression. It must, therefore, be resisted.

Published in Dawn, March 17th, 2024

Provincial share

THE PPP has aptly advised the central government to worry about improving its tax collection rather than eyeing the provinces’ share of tax revenues.

Reacting to recent reports that the IMF wants Pakistan to restart discussions on the 2009 NFC award to correct the ‘imbalance’ in the centre-provinces distribution of tax resources, PPP Senator Sherry Rehman rejected suggestions that the global lender was interfering in the constitutional framework of resource allocation.

“Why would the IMF want to put itself in the middle of changing the NFC formula of Pakistan?” she asked. Her reading of the situation is accurate.

Even if the lender wants the provinces to reduce their expenditure to produce a fiscal surplus and share more financial responsibilities with the federation to narrow the nation’s burgeoning consolidated fiscal deficit, it would not want to be seen getting caught up in constitutional issues.

She also correctly blamed the consistently lower than 9pc federal tax collection — as a ratio of GDP — for the country’s fiscal dilemma and the accumulation of a mountain of debt to the tune of \$271bn.

The fact of the matter is that some forces favouring a strong centre and weaker federating units have been actively campaigning against, and are demanding an

immediate rollback of, the landmark 18th Amendment to the Constitution and the current NFC award, which have accorded the provinces unprecedented administrative, political, and fiscal powers.

The campaign appeared to pick up momentum over the past several years as the country's fiscal predicament worsened. Nevertheless, robust resistance from the smaller provinces and certain political parties, particularly the PPP, and constitutional protection for the existing resource-sharing formula have kept such forces from undoing the changes.

The argument that increased provincial autonomy and an enhanced provincial share from the federal tax pool is dangerous for federalism must not be entertained, as the issue touches upon matters related to the future of the country.

Any attempt to roll back provincial autonomy and financial powers would lead to greater friction between the centre and provinces, as well as among the federating units, which would harm the state's federal complexion.

Pakistan was envisaged as a federation by its founding fathers, who had promised an autonomous and sovereign status to the constituent units in the Lahore Resolution.

However, the dominance of the bureaucracy and successive military rulers favouring a highly centralised state structure prevented the country from becoming a proper federation until the 2008 parliament rectified the situation.

It is true that the federal government and provinces still have many unresolved constitutional, administrative and fiscal issues, but the rollback of the existing political and fiscal powers enjoyed by the latter should not be among them. Pakistan's future lies in more democracy and more federalism and not in a centralised state structure.

Published in Dawn, March 17th, 2024

Defining extremism

THE British government's recent decision to redefine extremism has stirred up debate about the motives behind the move, and the greater ramifications it may have for those who disagree with state policy. There are genuine fears that the British decision could prompt other Western states — pandering to populist constituencies — to take similar steps.

Much like the global debate regarding the elusive definition of terrorism, overly broad interpretations of extremism could be used to haul up those critical of the state in the name of making the world safe from extremists. There is reason to be wary as leading members of the UK's ruling Conservative Party, including the prime minister, have termed pro-Palestine marches in the country 'extremist'. Some Muslim groups have already been named by British officials as falling under this new definition, and others may be next.

Redefining extremism may well be the first step to clamping down on advocacy for Palestine. Ironically, many Western governments are rattled by the pro-Palestine 'from the river to the sea' chant, deeming it extremist, yet fail to see the monstrous, genocidal extremism of the Israeli state.

While states need to act against radicalised actors that preach violence against non-combatants, it must be ensured that national liberation movements, such as the Palestinian struggle, are not tarred as 'extremist', and that governments don't use broad powers to lock up those who criticise the official line. This grand crusade against 'extremism' could meet the same fate as the 'global war on terror', an endless campaign which, while claiming to fight terrorism, ended up destroying countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

The new anti-extremism campaign could disproportionately target Muslims and others in Western societies simply for speaking up for Palestine, or criticising the war-mongering of Western governments. It could also influence right-wing actors, such as India's BJP, to tighten the screws on their own Muslim populations in the name of fighting 'extremism'.

Instead of coming up with narrow definitions, the international community should deliberate on what exactly qualifies as hate speech and extremism. Certainly, violence and threats of violence and intimidation against religious groups, sects, or ethno-linguistic communities are unacceptable, and most states already have laws to address these threats. Moreover, antiterrorism legislation has to be accompanied by sufficient legal safeguards so that individuals accused of committing or promoting violence can defend themselves.

Bypassing fundamental rights in the name of defending them is inexcusable. Arguably, 'extremism' is an even more subjective term than 'terrorism', which is why it is essential that there is maximum global consensus on what constitutes extremism.

If the aim is to stop the demonisation of certain communities, then global consensus should be easy to reach. Otherwise, moves to redefine extremism will remain suspect.

Published in Dawn, March 18th, 2024

Climate in focus

IN a welcome order by the Supreme Court, the new government has been tasked with providing a report on actions taken against climate challenges. The development merits a critical examination of Pakistan's climate policy and preparedness for unforeseen climate events. The catastrophic floods of 2022, which inflicted damage upwards of Rs3.2tr, are a stark reminder of our precarious position as the world's fifth most climate-vulnerable country. Our situation was exacerbated by recent extreme weather claiming dozens of lives. The unimplemented mandates of the Pakistan Climate Change Act, 2017, such as the establishment of the Pakistan Climate Change Authority and the Climate Change Fund, point to a critical gap in our climate governance. These entities are not mere bureaucratic additions but essential frameworks for climate action and resilience building. Their absence signifies a systemic failure to address climate concerns proactively. Equally important is the court's emphasis on securing the Loss and Damage Fund, which offers hope to rebuild after large-scale climate devastation. While global financial support is crucial, it is essential

for Pakistan to get its house in order. Dependency on external aid without robust internal mechanisms and planning is a precarious position. The fund, though significant, is a piece of the larger puzzle of climate resilience and adaptation that requires domestic readiness and foresight.

The government must respond to the SC's request with a comprehensive report that not only outlines past initiatives but also charts a clear, actionable path forward. This report should detail steps towards establishing the Climate Change Authority, operationalising the Climate Change Fund, and enhancing local capacities for disaster risk management and climate adaptation. It should also articulate strategies for leveraging international climate finance, including the Loss and Damage Fund, effectively and transparently. Establishing the mandated climate bodies would be a significant step in aligning national efforts with global climate goals, ensuring that Pakistan is not only a beneficiary of international support but also a proactive participant in global climate governance. The court's order is a call to action for the government to prioritise climate change not just as an environmental issue but also as a critical determinant of the nation's security and prosperity. The report must not only satisfy judicial inquiry but also serve as a blueprint for a resilient, sustainable future for Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, March 18th, 2024

Growing rabies concern

DOG-BITE is an old problem in Pakistan. Amid a surfeit of public health challenges, rabies now seems poised to become an epidemic. Incidents of dog attacks have shot up recently, claiming 10 lives in two months at two Karachi hospitals, with "over 230 cases of injuries by undomesticated dogs reported on two consecutive days at the Civil Hospital this week". The hospital receives more than 1,000 dog-bite cases per month, the JPMC logged some 2,400 patients in recent times and the Indus Hospital's Rabies Prevention and Training Centre saw over 3,000 new cases this year. Last year, 35,000 cases were recorded by the National Institute of Health. These numbers should set alarm bells ringing, as the scourge extends beyond Sindh. According to media reports, Peshawar recorded 15,574 dog-bite cases in the first quarter of 2023 and inoculated 1,500

stray dogs, whereas Punjab's pye-dog population exceeds 460,000. And official figures show 1,480 cases in Azad Kashmir, 3,138 in Balochistan, 12,257 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, nine in Gilgit-Baltistan and three in Islamabad.

Despite a Special Branch report released in 2019, which exposed the acute dearth of anti-rabies vaccines in Punjab, preventive action has been insignificant. A more tragic aspect is that a majority of victims make the journey from rural recesses to cities for treatment; often their lack of awareness turns fatal with the prolonged use of traditional potions, and by the time they make it to hospital, the damage is too far gone. Therefore, authorities must swing into action with awareness drives, ramp up vaccination and sterilisation and strengthen the Trap Neuter Vaccinate and Return programme for feral dogs. Rabies spread is a 'mammal to mammal' phenomenon and health officials are clear that the immunisation of 70pc of street dogs can avert an impending crisis. But none of these measures will come to pass if basic health units remain devoid of emergency apparatus.

Published in Dawn, March 18th, 2024

Afghan turbulence

RELATIONS between the newly formed government and Afghanistan's de facto Taliban rulers have begun on an inauspicious note. After seven security personnel were martyred in a terrorist attack in North Waziristan on Saturday, Pakistan hit targets in Paktika and Khost provinces early on Monday targeting "terrorists belonging to [the] Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group", according to an FO statement released yesterday.

Afghan officials, on the other hand, claimed "civilian homes" had been struck. Moreover, there were reports of cross-border exchanges of fire in Kurram district on Monday. Militants had also staged attacks in Mohmand, Nowshera and Bannu over the weekend.

What is important at this juncture is that matters do not escalate with Kabul. While terrorist attacks targeting civilians as well as security personnel are a red line and cannot go unanswered, and the frontiers must be defended, unilateral

action should not become the norm. This will only cause further deterioration of ties with the Afghan Taliban, and Pakistan may lose whatever leverage it has with Kabul, adding to our security concerns.

Soon after the new government took over, there was a routine exchange of pleasantries between the foreign minister and his Afghan counterpart, as both vowed to expand cooperation in various sectors, including security. The North Waziristan attack and its fallout, however, have come as a painful reality check, and are the government's first test on the Afghan front of its management of relations with Kabul.

Both sides must verify where the attacks targeting Pakistan originated from. While Afghan Taliban officials insist their territory is not being used by terrorists, there is a lot of evidence suggesting otherwise. Pakistan has raised the issue of militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan at the UN whose officials have similarly highlighted the presence of numerous militant groups in Afghanistan.

Instead of feigning ignorance, the Afghan Taliban should take action to stop anti-Pakistan fighters from launching attacks inside this country, especially if they are serious in their quest to be accepted as Afghanistan's legitimate government. While clear threats to national security must be immediately neutralised, Pakistan has to use carrots and sticks with the Taliban to permanently solve the militancy problem.

The FO has hinted at a similar line of action and of working "towards finding joint solutions in countering terrorism". Communication channels should remain open, and Pakistan should ask Afghanistan to take action against verified terrorist sanctuaries across the border. Moreover, China, which offers a financial lifeline to the Kabul regime, can also be asked to take punitive measures if the Taliban refuse to crack down on militants on their soil.

The terrorist threat from Afghanistan-based groups can destabilise the entire region, which is why all regional states should work on a common counterterrorism agenda with Kabul, along with using bilateral channels.

Published in Dawn, March 19th, 2024

In disarray

IT is clear that there is some bad blood within the PTI's ranks. Ever since the PTI lost a key battle over reserved seats in the Peshawar High Court — seats which it believes should have accrued to it, but were handed to its rivals by the ECP — several PTI leaders have been blaming their leadership's decision to merge with the Sunni Ittehad Council for complicating its legal position. The sudden heat seems to have greatly upset SIC chief Sahibzada Hamid Raza, who has warned that disunity within the ranks will only increase Imran Khan's suffering. "Party discipline will also be compromised, and our attention will be diverted from Imran Khan's cases," he warned during a recent TV interview, reminding the PTI that the decision to merge was necessary to keep the party's lawmakers together. It is unlikely, however, that his 'warning' will be enough to sober up the PTI support base, enamoured as it is of conspiracy theories. Some camps on social media are already accusing this leader or that of being an 'establishment plant' who has infiltrated the PTI ranks to wreak chaos from within.

Where party discipline is concerned, the PTI does not seem to have learnt much from the past. Of course, much of its current predicament is due to Mr Khan's incarceration and the state's continuous efforts to keep him as inaccessible to his party's leadership as possible. However, the party, given its circumstances, should have by now devised a means to keep discipline and maintain order within its ranks. Instead, its leaders have continued to issue conflicting statements, in the process confusing PTI supporters on where the party stands on key issues and creating doubts in their heads about their true intentions. If the PTI wishes to function smoothly while its top leadership is incapacitated, it needs a tiered governance structure that can ensure unity in the face of adversity. Otherwise, it will continue to lose ground to forces that wish to weaken it and neutralise the gains it made following the Feb 8 election. The PTI also needs to consider how long it can afford to let its supporters act like an unruly mob. Indiscipline has always been the PTI's Achilles heel, and it appears that its detractors are now trying to capitalise on it to keep it contained.

Published in Dawn, March 19th, 2024

Festering wound

PROTESTS unfolded once more in Gwadar, this time against the alleged enforced disappearances of two young men, who reportedly went missing three months ago. Relatives blocked the vital road link between Gwadar and Karachi, causing essential commodities to run short in Gwadar and Turbat. While the demonstrators were persuaded to end their protest yesterday, the situation once again highlights the deep-seated mistrust between the Baloch populace and the state machinery. It calls for immediate and sincere state engagement with the Baloch people, beyond rhetoric or temporary measures. The judiciary finds its orders for the recovery of missing persons continually flouted. The (now former) caretaker PM's initial defiance of court summons in cases of missing persons showed a worrisome trend of executive evasion of legal scrutiny. Such actions erode the people's trust in the institutions meant to protect and serve them. Meanwhile, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, tasked with addressing this grave issue, seems overwhelmed, with a staggering number of unimplemented production orders. With only 7pc of cases leading to the recovery of missing persons, and the commission bogged down by procedural delays and a lack of enforcement mechanisms, its role needs urgent reassessment. It must do more to fulfil its mandate effectively.

It is time for a paradigm shift in how the state perceives and interacts with Balochistan. This situation is not just about defying court orders; it is a festering wound in the relationship of the state and its citizens, especially in Balochistan. The region's long-standing grievances, stemming from neglect, underdevelopment, and political disenfranchisement, cannot be ignored. Engagement must replace estrangement, and development go hand in hand with dialogue. Court directives to recover missing persons must be respected and enforced, reflecting the state's commitment to the rule of law and human rights. Only through sincere engagement and a concerted effort to address the underlying issues can we hope to heal the wounds of Balochistan.

Published in Dawn, March 19th, 2024

Thrilling finish

IN an enthralling climax, one which went down to the very last ball of the season, Islamabad United became Pakistan Super League champions for a record third time, with a two-wicket victory over Multan Sultans on Monday. With United needing a run to win, Hunain Shah finished the 2024 edition with a four through the offside; sparking delirium among his team-mates and fans who had, finally, packed Karachi's National Stadium. But while Hunain played the winning shot, it was the man at the other end who carried United to victory. Imad Wasim had earlier become the first bowler to pick up five wickets in the PSL final, casting a spell on the Sultans with his spin. Arriving at the crease with his side in a spot of bother in their chase, the left-hander dropped the anchor and, with Naseem Shah, took United close before Hunain finished it off. Thirty-five-year-old Imad delivered at the business end of the season, winning three knockout matches in a row for his side. After the final, Imad, who retired from international cricket last year, said he still had four to five years of cricket left in him. With the T20 World Cup set to be held in the West Indies and the US in June, calls are getting louder for him to return to the national side, most notably from United skipper and PSL player of the tournament Shadab Khan. There have also been calls for a return to the national team for pacer Mohammad Amir, who like Imad has retired from international cricket. The 31-year-old showed his nous in a season where pacers Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf, both of Lahore Qalandars, struggled to make an impact.

The PSL has previously provided a platform for players to elevate themselves in the national reckoning, and it should be no different this time. While Imad and Amir have made a case for their return, the likes of Saim Ayub, Azam Khan and Usama Mir have shown they need to be given an extended run in the team. The upcoming series against New Zealand and then England offer Pakistan a chance to test the combinations. And while the likes of Shadab, Babar Azam, Mohammad Rizwan and Iftikhar Ahmed have confirmed their places in the team through the PSL, other spots are still up for grabs.

Published in Dawn, March 20th, 2024

Treading cautiously

THE State Bank's latest monetary policy decision, which maintains the status quo on interest rates, shows that the central bank is unlikely to reverse its present tight monetary policy stance anytime soon, and that it will continue to pursue a cautious approach for the foreseeable future. The decision is driven not just by near- to medium-term risks to the inflation outlook, but also the bank's implicit concerns pertaining to fiscal imbalances and delays in realising planned external inflows. The policy decision notes inflation had started to come down in January, in line with its projections, but that, despite a significant deceleration last month, the "level of inflation remains high and its outlook is susceptible to risks amidst elevated inflation expectations". This, in the bank's view, "warrants a cautious approach and requires continuity of the current [tight] monetary stance to bring inflation down to the target range [revised upwards in the last policy statement] of 5-7pc by September 2025". However, it also adds, "this assessment is contingent upon continued fiscal consolidation and timely realisation of planned external inflows".

That the SBP did not emphasise, as it previously did, that "the real interest rate remained significantly positive on a 12-month forward-looking basis as inflation is expected to remain on a downward path" appears to be another indicator of the potential continuation of a tighter monetary policy, at least in the near term. With global oil prices depicting an upward trend, the promised investment flows from friendly countries slow to come, and further potential adjustments in the administered prices of fuel and electricity that may push prices up — thus continuing to pose risks to the inflation outlook, at least in the short to medium term — it is advisable for the central bank to resist the temptation to reverse its tight policy stance because of the recent albeit fragile economic stability. Any misstep here would cost the economy and the inflation-stricken people hugely.

Published in Dawn, March 20th, 2024

Anti-Muslim India

THERE is a systematic campaign of hate against the Muslims of India, where the ruling BJP has made no attempt to rein in Hindutva's militants, and has, in fact, fanned the flames of communal violence. On Saturday, some 25 people yelling "Jai Shri Ram" attacked 75 foreign Muslim students offering taraweeh prayers in Gujarat University. The mob lobbed stones and launched an attack that left many injured and destroyed personal property. Only a handful of the vandals were arrested. Interestingly, just a day before, the UN had observed the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. A resolution was adopted, calling for "the appointment of a Special UN Envoy for combating Islamophobia". Independent UN experts stated, "We stand in solidarity with those who have suffered intolerance, discrimination, violations, and violence, purely on account of being Muslims."

As polls approach in India, the times will turn several shades darker for Muslims in the country. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is vying for a third term in office on his patent Hindutva pitch. Once blended traditions have given way to violence, Hindu religious chants are war cries and state apathy is the new normal. Mr Modi's rule has created a set pattern of polarisation in society. Incidents of atrocities are escalating to alarming levels as the BJP enters the electoral battlefield. Meanwhile, the socioeconomic situation of Muslims continues to deteriorate, leading to mass dehumanisation and exclusion of the country's largest minority. But Mr Modi's past credentials and present policy of suppression and indifference betray his mission of absolute minority isolation. As smug as the BJP government is about its majoritarian vote bank, every incident of communal cruelty will essentially be seen as a failure of the state until mechanisms to curb injustice through institutional participation are put in place. Indians need to reflect on the adverse impact of their threatened diversity. Bravado packaged in slogans of 'Hindu rashtra' is poison for social justice.

Published in Dawn, March 21st, 2024

X-cuses aplenty

THE government finally seems to have acknowledged, albeit indirectly, that social media platform 'X' is indeed inaccessible in Pakistan. It has taken the authorities a little over a month to progress from plain denial to sheepish obfuscation.

Questioned on the matter this Tuesday, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi simply responded with an airy "we need to make better laws". As justification, he cited a recent move in the US to clamp down on TikTok. It is deeply concerning that he thinks that US authorities penalising a platform, ostensibly for disseminating 'too much' pro-Palestine content, is a suitable example for Pakistan to follow. "Expression is fine, but making false allegations against people is wrong," Mr Naqvi told reporters as he attempted to rationalise the decision.

One wonders if it was a reference to the fact that X was blocked right after videos of the former Rawalpindi commissioner making startling allegations against the chief election commissioner and the country's top judge caused a sensation online. However, the senior bureaucrat's shocking claims regarding the conduct of the Feb 8 general election were never investigated, nor was he prosecuted over his accusations.

Separately, the PTA chairman, who is technically the only person in Pakistan actually authorised to block access to internet services, said on Tuesday he would raise the matter of X's blockage with the interior ministry. He said that the PTA was in a state of 'confusion' on the matter. However, a submission made by the PTA to the Sindh High Court on Wednesday suggested that the 'confusion' may never have existed. According to a document presented to the court, the interior ministry had specifically ordered the suspension of X on Feb 17.

What does one make of the PTA's feigned cluelessness now? It was suspicious that the PTA chief had simply not ordered the restoration of X when nobody was willing to take responsibility for its suspension. Given that several petitions regarding this matter have since landed in the courts, it seems the regulator is now trying to wriggle out of the mess.

It is high time the PTA came clean and explained why it allowed the blockage to continue while initially denying it was even in place, while the interior ministry must answer why it continued to mislead the nation regarding where the orders for suspension had originated from.

Published in Dawn, March 21st, 2024

Gwadar attack

YESTERDAY'S audacious attack on Gwadar's Port Authority Complex is yet another reminder of the grim trajectory of militancy in the country. Within days of a major terrorist attack in North Waziristan, militants targeted a facility which houses government offices, including those of the security agencies.

The Majeed Brigade, affiliated with the banned Balochistan Liberation Army, claimed responsibility. At least eight terrorists were killed by security forces, while two soldiers were martyred. The ambush shows that far from being neutralised, separatist militants in Balochistan very much remain a threat to the province's security.

This is not the first time Gwadar and its environs have been targeted by insurgents. Here, separatism and geopolitics combine in a lethal cocktail, as militants believed to have the support of hostile agencies target Chinese interests in what is supposed to be the jewel in the CPEC crown.

The luxury PC hotel witnessed a similar attack in 2019, also carried out by the BLA, with the terrorist group saying it had targeted the facility as it was hosting "Chinese and other foreign investors". Even a Chinese-language institute inside Karachi University was hit in a deadly attack in 2022. Striking Gwadar has immense geopolitical significance, as such attacks are designed to scare away whatever investment and economic activities are being carried out in the coastal city.

A proper investigation must uncover how the attackers were able to strike such an official facility housing LEAs. Even otherwise, Gwadar is said to be under a security blanket, mainly to protect Chinese nationals and others associated with

CPEC projects in Balochistan. In fact, several observers have pointed to the ‘working relationship’ between religiously inspired militant groups such as the TTP, and Baloch separatist outfits, including the BLA.

This nexus needs to be broken immediately, or else it will compromise the security situation to a dangerous extent in KP and Balochistan, especially if both sets of militants are getting help from beyond our borders. After the Gwadar attack the Balochistan chief minister said that whoever uses violence “will see no mercy from the state”.

While that may be so, along with the security dimension, the sociopolitical and economic aspects of the insurgency must also be examined. This paper has long argued that poverty and deprivation in Balochistan need to be addressed if the issue of separatism is to be tackled successfully.

Foreign investment is direly required but the fruits of these projects — whether CPEC-related, mining schemes, or others — must reach the people of Balochistan. Furthermore, issues such as enforced disappearances, and miserable health and education indicators cannot be ignored and must be given priority.

Unless these contributory factors are addressed in earnest, eradicating separatism will be very difficult, and hostile foreign actors will continue to exploit our internal weaknesses.

Published in Dawn, March 21st, 2024

Reactivating Nacta

CONFRONTED with a complex wave of terrorist violence, the state has little choice but to ‘restructure’ the National Counter Terrorism Authority, as the interior minister stated on Wednesday.

Mohsin Naqvi was attending a meeting at the Nacta headquarters on the day Baloch separatists stormed the Gwadar Port Authority Complex, while only a few days earlier, militants believed to be associated with the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group had staged a deadly attack, martyring security personnel in North Waziristan.

The current terrorist threat is varied both ideologically and geographically, and over the last few years, particularly after the Afghan Taliban's capture of Kabul in 2021, militants have been further emboldened and have staged a large number of attacks in Pakistan.

Formed in 2009 in the midst of an earlier terrorist insurgency, Nacta — though it is supposed to be the state's primary counterterrorism organ — has been largely sidelined by the rulers after initial successes against militancy. Though envisioned as a 'one-window operation' to corral national CT efforts, the agency has not been empowered with the tools necessary to deliver on its mandated goals.

Instead, the CT effort has been dominated by the military and its intelligence apparatus. While the military undoubtedly has a central role to play in rooting out terrorism, the militarised CT approach has its limits, particularly in urban areas, where civilian law-enforcement bodies, and related long-term CT strategies, are required to complement kinetic efforts.

It is also essential that while Nacta provides the operational framework, the ideological element of the CT effort is guided by the National Action Plan. NAP, formulated after the 2014 APS massacre, was updated in 2021; the interior minister also reiterated the state's resolve to implement the plan "at any cost".

NAP specifically mentions the reconciliation process in Balochistan, as well as reforms in KP's merged districts, in its latest iteration. These ideas must not remain on paper, and need to be implemented with full vigour if the state is to uproot militancy permanently. In both instances — Baloch separatism as well as religiously inspired militancy in KP — poverty, deprivation and the state's apparent disinterest in the welfare of the populations of these affected areas, have contributed to swelling the militants' ranks.

Therefore, to address the considerable CT challenges, Nacta must be fully empowered to coordinate the state's fight against terrorism. Moreover, civilian LEAs, particularly the provincial counterterrorism departments, should be provided with funds, equipment and training to pre-empt terrorist violence and

break militant networks. Along with kinetic measures, NAP should be implemented in letter and spirit.

In particular, sectarian and extremist actors that remain active in society must be put out of business. These malignant forces provide the ideological background that produces the violent foot soldiers powering terrorist insurgencies.

Published in Dawn, March 22nd, 2024

No real reform

CALL it a tragedy or a farce, the reality is that both Pakistan's ruling elites and the IMF refuse to learn anything from the past, even after 23 unsuccessful loan programmes and failing the people time and again. As the country seeks a longer and larger bailout, it is no secret that IMF programmes have hardly delivered on their objectives, because neither the authorities nor the Fund have shown enough interest in actively pursuing the needed reforms. If Pakistani rulers have been more concerned about accessing money and accreditation to continue their import-based consumption policies to show economic growth, the IMF has been focused on short-term stabilisation measures, despite the costs imposed on the people and economy. For example, at the beginning of a programme, there is much talk of forcing the rich to pay their due share. And yet, the lender agrees to shift a bigger load of harsh fiscal adjustments on the poor and salaried classes through indirect taxes or higher tax rates for captive taxpayers. So, it is not surprising to hear people blame the IMF for the recurrent crises this country faces.

In its staff report on the recently concluded review of the nine-month Stand-by Arrangement, the Fund has praised what it calls "strong programme implementation", with the mission chief claiming that "Pakistan's economic and financial position in the months since the first review has improved, with growth and confidence continuing to recover on the back of prudent policy management and the resumption of inflows from multilateral and bilateral partners". But it doesn't mention the impact of the unprecedented increase in energy prices on the lives of most citizens or how higher indirect taxes have squeezed them financially. Poverty levels in the country are increasing and even middle-income

households are struggling in the face of soaring inflation, job losses and wage cuts in the vain hope of surviving this crisis. The rich continue to live a life of opulence, spending holidays abroad and buying luxury imported cars with borrowed dollars. With Pakistan seeking yet another bailout, which the prime minister yesterday described as imperative for economic stability, the lender has made it clear that the broader goals will remain the same as laid out in previous agreements. Will the outcome be any different this time? Ordinary Pakistanis can only hope for better days.

Published in Dawn, March 22nd, 2024

Death traps

In the pitch-black depths of Pakistan's coal mines, the claustrophobia-inducing tunnels envelop miners like a constricting shroud — a world beneath from the sunlit lives we lead above. It is in this backdrop that tragedy unfolded in a private mine in Balochistan's Khost region. On Tuesday night, as workers toiled some 300 metres underground, a deadly methane gas explosion occurred. It claimed 12 lives, while eight colliers were rescued from the rubble. This is but one of countless such incidents that occur, representing the state's continuing disregard for miner safety and apathy towards enforcing stringent regulations. In the first 10 days of 2024 alone, at least eight miner deaths were reported in Pakistan. These individuals often start work at the tender age of 13. By the time they reach 30, many are compelled to leave the occupation, their bodies ravaged by years of exposure to hazardous conditions. They then find themselves without any support or safety net.

Pakistan's coal mines, a mix of registered and an overwhelming number of unregulated pits, operate under conditions that can only be termed as death traps. The miners, bereft of even basic protective gear such as masks and even shoes, face a range of hazards, from methane blasts to cave-ins, not to mention the long-term effects on the lungs and eyes. Collusion between the mine owners, contractors, and inspectors, ensures the continuation of these deplorable conditions. The HRCP's demand for the ratification of ILO Convention 176 should prick the conscience of the higher-ups, especially following this latest incident. Currently, the archaic Mines Act of 1923 governs the sector, blatantly

disregarding miners' health and safety. It is high time the government cut through this Gordian knot of neglect, corruption, and ineptitude. Implementing ILO safety rules and ensuring strict compliance is not just an obligation but a moral imperative. The apathy towards those who work in the darkness should end.

Published in Dawn, March 22nd, 2024

Pipeline under fire

WHILE US Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu's recent testimony before a Congressional panel contained no bombshells about the cipher saga, the American diplomat's replies to questions from lawmakers about the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline should certainly be cause for concern.

American reservations over the gas project clearly infringe on Pakistan's sovereign right to take independent foreign policy decisions. Mr Lu told lawmakers that it was an American "goal" to ensure the pipeline is not completed. Using highly undiplomatic language, he observed that if "they [Pakistan] get in bed with Iran, it will be very serious for our relationship".

The Foreign Office reaction to these comments was measured, as the spokesperson told the media that there was no room for discussion on a third-party [US] waiver, while the pipeline plays an important role in Pakistan's energy security.

It is hoped that the state remains steadfast in upholding its commitments to the project, and rejects unwarranted foreign pressure. Until the caretaker government gave the go-ahead for revitalising the pipeline last month, the scheme had been in the doldrums for over a decade, mainly out of concern over attracting America's wrath.

Pakistan should be the best judge of its energy requirements, and unsolicited advice such as that offered by Mr Lu should be rejected with thanks. The American official also questioned how Pakistan would procure the financing to complete the scheme. Again, that should be Pakistan's headache, not anyone else's.

The fact is that the Iran pipeline appears to be a viable energy project, as the other major regional scheme — the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline — is in deep freeze particularly after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Moreover, if Pakistan reneges on the deal with Iran, it risks entering a messy litigation process, and paying a hefty \$18bn in penalty.

Mr Lu's comments should also serve as a warning to our policymakers of the demands some of our friends may make of us in future as geopolitical turbulence increases. For instance, today, Washington has issues with CPEC and the Iran pipeline; tomorrow it could let its displeasure be known regarding our relations with Moscow or other American foes.

Pakistan should be ready to face such criticism, and take decisions that are in the national interest. Pakistan values its ties with the US and other Western states. But this does not mean relations with other states/ blocs should be held hostage to the whims of its Western partners.

However, it is also true that Pakistan can only take truly independent decisions when it does not have to depend on others to keep its economy afloat. India and China can ignore US strictures about not trading with Russia because of their economic heft. Pakistan must heal itself if it wants to achieve true sovereignty.

Published in Dawn, March 23rd, 2024

Bandit raj

MURDER, kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery have become facts of life for the unfortunate souls residing in the riverine areas of upper Sindh and neighbouring districts of Punjab. Here, bandits have established a reign of terror: armed with heavy weaponry and knowledge of the terrain, they operate with ruthless brutality — looting, abducting and killing as they please. No one is safe: even the police forces of the two provinces — so agile and fearsome when facing down unarmed protesters in the cities — seem helpless when it comes to challenging these violent criminals. Meanwhile, policymakers in Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi continue to dither over how best to deal with the

nuisance, even though countless millions have already been poured into efforts to contain them. This week, these armed criminals crossed an unforgivable line. They killed a teacher in the Kandhkot-Kashmore area simply for refusing to quit his duty. Allah Rakhyo Nandwani, who taught at a primary school in the Nasrullah Khan Bijarani village, would have been a national hero had his story been better known. He had repeatedly defied the bandits in his determination to travel to 'no-go' areas to educate the children residing there.

Citizens like Allah Rakhyo are an asset to the societies they serve, and it is a matter of shame for those tasked with protecting the citizenry that a dutiful, conscientious citizen lost his life to miscreants and troublemakers. The authorities must be asked: how long will these meaningless 'clean-up operations' continue to be rinsed and recycled? Why is it that the 'progress' against armed gangs often seems like the state taking one step forward and two steps back? We have been hearing since last year that significant resources and personnel have been allocated to combating the bandit problem. Were these claims just a smokescreen, or did the efforts to establish the state's writ fail? How long will the people living in the affected areas be left to their fate? Clearly, those tasked with the nation's internal security are doing an abysmal job in this respect. They must realise that they paint a sorry picture considering that ragtag gangs of goons are so easily outsmarting them. The problem must be dealt with at its source. Those who back, finance, and supply these gangs must be traced and eliminated. This malaise must not spread.

Published in Dawn, March 23rd, 2024

Energy theft

BY involving the FIA in the exercise, the government has admitted that the ongoing crackdown against power and gas theft in the country has so far failed to produce the desired results since its launch last September. The anti-theft drive led by the utilities, with support from the provincial administrations, seems to have already lost its initial momentum. The decision to bring in the FIA to energise the campaign seems to be driven by an IMF statement that restoring the "energy sector's viability" would be one of the four key areas of reforms under

the Fund's next medium-term loan that Pakistan is seeking for reducing its external sector vulnerabilities and shoring up international reserves. Even at the peak of the campaign between September and December, the effort had resulted in power theft reduction of just Rs14bn, and arrear and detection bill recoveries of Rs58bn. That compares with a total electricity theft of Rs237bn in 2022. In September 2023, the caretaker set-up had put power sector losses at Rs589bn. In 2020, the Prime Minister's Inspection Commission had found almost \$2bn worth of annual losses in the gas supply chain due to theft and other factors.

That power and gas theft is a major contributor to the combined energy sector circular debt, which has shot up to over Rs5tr, is no secret. Over the next several weeks, we may be fed 'success stories' until the euphoria fades away. Complete elimination of energy theft, the cost of which is being paid by honest consumers in the shape of higher tariffs or through budget subsidies, is imperative to stop the growth of the circular debt and reduce electricity and gas prices, a major reason why people steal power and gas. However, the government cannot control the situation with administrative measures alone. It will have to invest in distribution infrastructure and quickly move towards smart metering if it wants to achieve lasting results.

Published in Dawn, March 23rd, 2024

Moscow carnage

THE monstrous terrorist attack targeting a concert hall near Moscow on Friday night should alert the international community to the threat the self-styled Islamic State's Khorasan chapter poses to global security.

While the 'original' IS may have been largely defeated in the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, IS-K is proving itself to be a 'worthy' successor to its parent outfit's blood-soaked legacy.

Over 140 people were mowed down in the Moscow attack, which IS-K has claimed, while Russian authorities say several suspects, including some of the attackers, have been apprehended. While Russian intelligence agencies claim the perpetrators have links to Ukraine, Kyiv has denied this.

IS-K, believed to be operating out of Afghanistan, has been slowly building its profile. It has staged several attacks in Afghanistan as well as Pakistan. In January, it bombed the commemoration ceremony of Iranian Gen Qassem Soleimani in Kerman, causing a high number of fatalities.

With the Moscow attack, the terrorist group seems to be expanding its geographical scope. Russia had in decades past dealt with religiously inspired militancy, including in Chechnya and Dagestan. In more recent times, Vladimir Putin's forces intervened to turn the tide in favour of Syrian forces fighting both their political opponents and jihadists.

Moreover, thousands of Russian — Chechens and others — jihadists had fought against Bashar al-Assad's regime during the Syrian civil war. Now that the Syrian front is largely quiet, these militants, under the IS-K flag, may have decided to take their fight to Russia proper to avenge their defeat.

Just as it took a multinational effort to defeat IS, a similar endeavour will be needed to destroy IS-K before it spreads its deadly wings any further. This will require the international community to closely coordinate with the Afghan Taliban, whom IS-K opposes. Afghanistan, and those states that border it, particularly Pakistan, need to be in the forefront of the fight against the Khorasan faction, as these countries are the most vulnerable to IS-K's bloody forays. Iran, the Central Asian states, China and Russia should also be on board to contain the regional threat, and neutralise it.

Moreover, the Taliban need to understand that letting militants operate on their soil — including TTP terrorists — will jeopardise the security of their own country, as well as that of the greater region. Counterterrorism assistance should be extended by foreign states to the de facto Afghan regime in the fight against IS-K, TTP and others.

Pakistan has reiterated the need for collective efforts. Also, further investigation is needed to probe Moscow's claims of state support for IS-K. Needless to say, supporting such bloodthirsty actors would be a folly of monumental proportions.

Some foreign actors made similar mistakes in Syria by financing and arming anti-Assad extremists. Such dubious manoeuvres should not be repeated.

Published in Dawn, March 24th, 2024

Wily throw of dice

THE arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in an excise policy case appears to have recoiled on the BJP. It was timed to shift the narrative from the electoral bonds scam. Now, the impugned secret funding law introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his first government is being described as an extortion racket run by the Indian government. Apparently, the can of worms opened by the supreme court's order to reveal the links and volume of funds between political beneficiaries and their corporate donors has put Mr Modi in its crosshairs. That the court took six needlessly long years to identify the donors and recipients of their funds allowed Mr Modi access to the largesse for the 2019 elections and for politically crucial state polls. The money may have also helped finance the defection of MLAs to bring down opposition governments in key states like Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka. Early revelations showed that the BJP pocketed electoral bonds worth Indian Rs60.6 billion (around \$725m) between April 2019 and February 2024. That's more than 60pc of the total amount so far computed, the rest going to opposition parties running state governments. The cash-strapped Congress for its part says its funds, already dried up by the BJP's monopoly on corporate resources, have been further depleted by a freeze on its bank accounts imposed by the income tax commissioner just before elections were announced.

To the surprise of the BJP, the arrest of Mr Kejriwal has cemented the 27-party opposition alliance, instead of striking terror in their ranks as is thought to have been the intention. Details from the electoral bonds have also threatened to boomerang on the excise graft case against Mr Kejriwal and two of his top colleagues. An alleged accomplice-turned-approver against Mr Kejriwal is found to have paid the BJP thousands of crores in bonds after his arrest in the same excise case and a bigger amount after his bail, which was, strangely, not opposed by the Enforcement Directorate. Mr Modi's corporate friends would be pleased by the targeting of opposition leaders like Mahua Moitra, Rahul Gandhi,

Mr Kejriwal and the farmers, all trenchant critics of crony capitalism. If Mr Modi's throw of the dice is not challenged, the coming elections will be a punishing steeplechase for the opposition against a 100-metre dash for the BJP.

Published in Dawn, March 24th, 2024

Rocketing TB

PAKISTAN's National TB Strategic Plan 2024-26 is a turning point in the country's battle with tuberculosis. And as we mark World TB Day today with 'Yes! We can end TB', Pakistan cannot slip up on the targets set in January: the treatment of 528,600 cases per year by 2026. The disease, despite being preventable and curable, has hit more than 600,000 people in the country over the last two years. A sad fact is that Pakistan has the fifth highest burden of the communicable infection in the world. Earlier this month, the federal health secretary stated that 2.2m people, including children, suffer from the illness and according to WHO, the country "accounts for 61pc of the TB burden in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region". Multidrug-resistant TB, caused by late diagnosis, incomplete treatment and the absence of health support in congested, poorly ventilated areas, afflicts some 15,000 on a yearly basis. Moreover, TB has a disproportionate impact on women, especially those living in rural environs, as social mores hamper their access to health services. It, therefore, becomes essential to form coherent programmes and policies aligned with gender rights.

Our people will continue to fall through the cracks until sustained political commitment to the cause ensures more funds and the targeted use of resources such as of the \$285m grant approved by the Global Fund to help fight HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria under the new grant cycle of 2024-26. This scourge impairs a nation's growth, and damages its health system and socioeconomic situation. Hence, an effective route to wiping out TB comprises awareness campaigns centred on treatment completion through mandatory visits to health units, improving and expanding diagnostic facilities and conveying information about problems that raise the chances of contracting TB, such as carriers, diabetes, malnourishment and poor immunity. Lastly, we will breathe easy if there is greater investment in researching the growing challenge and bolstering superior healthcare delivery.

IHK political curbs

THE Indian state continues to use draconian measures to throttle political activity in held Kashmir. The latest example of these tactics came recently, as New Delhi clamped bans on several Kashmiri political outfits, while extending restrictions on Yasin Malik's faction of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front.

According to the Indian home ministry, the Kashmir Peoples Freedom League, as well as four factions of the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples League, has been banned. Mr Malik's faction of the JKLF had already been proscribed in 2019; the latest move only extends the ban. Mr Malik has been given a life sentence on a dubious terror charge, while prosecutors are pushing for the death penalty for the veteran Kashmiri leader. The reasons given for the latest clampdown on Kashmiri parties are familiar.

According to a tweet by the Indian home minister, the JKLF continues to "foment terror and secessionism". Similar charges have been levelled against the other proscribed parties. According to Pakistan's Foreign Office, 14 political parties in held Kashmir have been outlawed by India. Meanwhile, even those Kashmiri politicians close to New Delhi, such as Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah, have received the rough end of the stick, with Indian authorities often putting them under house arrest.

If India's aim is to crush the Kashmiri freedom struggle by neutralising all those political forces which raise a voice for the disputed territory's rights, these moves are likely to backfire. In fact, when mainstream parties are banned, many of those unhappy with India's brutal rule over the region will gravitate towards armed groups. The only way to justly solve the Kashmir question is through a sustained political process involving the region's genuine popular representatives.

For now at least, India, under BJP rule, has slammed the door shut on this option. It remains to be seen what the contours of the new Indian government's Kashmir policy will be after the general elections.

Published in Dawn, March 25th, 2024

Taxing traders

PAKISTAN is once again making an attempt to get the slippery trade sector into the tax net. Will it finally succeed? That really is the only question worth asking at the moment. With the country already massively indebted and sources of funding beginning to run dry, it is clear that it cannot continue to borrow blindly to finance its expenditures. Those already in the tax net, especially the salaried class, have mostly been squeezed dry, and there is growing pressure on the government to now go after those who have traditionally not contributed their fair share to the kitty. The imbalance is staggering — some would say criminal. According to figures reported in local media, compared to the Rs217bn extracted from the salaried class in taxes over the eight months since July, retail contributed only Rs11.2bn. The status quo cannot be sustained: despite the myriad economic challenges faced by the country for the past two years now, the trade sector has gotten away with paying almost nothing. Meanwhile, the salaried class has been forced to endure the double whammy of being taxed at source on income and having their purchasing power eroded by runaway inflation.

Successive governments have had an inexcusably lax attitude when it comes to taxing traders and shopkeepers. This would likely have continued unchanged had the country been experiencing slightly better economic conditions. However, the government now has few options other than to finally start making the tax system more equitable for all. It has been reported that the SIFC will be monitoring the progress of the announced compulsory registration scheme for traders. Let us see whether its oversight is enough to cow the trade sector into getting in line. It is unlikely to be an easy transition. The economy is tight for everyone, including traders. Even in better times, they managed to cause considerable trouble every time such measures were implemented and invariably managed to have them overturned. The resistance will be tougher now, given how difficult the conditions are. However, the government must persist. The already taxed are at a breaking point. The unfair burden placed on them is a major reason why the deterioration of Pakistan's economic conditions has been so rapid. More sources of revenue need to be unlocked, or the dystopia in the economic order will continue to wreak havoc.

Published in Dawn, March 25th, 2024

Smog country

AS if all of Pakistan's other troubles were not enough, the country has now been named the second most polluted in the world — trailing only behind Bangladesh — in the 2023 World Air Quality Report published by IQAir. We are smack-dab in the middle of a huge environmental crisis. Pakistan has average PM2.5 concentrations at 73.7 micrograms per cubic metre ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) — a staggering 14 times higher than the World Health Organisation's guideline of no more than 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.

It is critical to comprehend the gravity of these statistics. PM2.5, or particulate matter 2.5, refers to tiny particles or droplets in the air that are two and a half microns or less in width. These particles are so small that they can penetrate deep into the lungs and even enter the bloodstream, causing severe health issues, including respiratory infections, heart disease, and strokes.

Moreover, it makes other non-communicable diseases such as mental health issues, diabetes and infertility more likely, besides affecting the cognitive development of children. The fact that all Pakistani cities included in the study had PM2.5 concentrations at least six times above the WHO's recommended levels is a glaring indictment of the country's air quality and demands immediate intervention at the highest levels.

The causes of such severe air pollution are manifold, with agriculture practices, industrial emissions, vehicular pollution, and geographical and climate conditions playing significant roles. Specifically, winter temperature inversions in Punjab, combined with emissions from crop burning and industry, as well as activity from brick kilns, have created a smoggy, health-damaging environment.

Despite measures such as banning crop burning and initiating public transportation projects, the air quality continues to deteriorate, signalling that current efforts are not enough. And time — quite literally — is running out. Based on data from the Pakistan Air Quality Initiative, hazardous air quality is shaving off an estimated 4.4 years from the life expectancy of Pakistan's inhabitants.

The new government needs to rise to the occasion and take bold steps. It must urgently overhaul environmental regulations, aggressively invest in renewables, and champion public transportation. It is not just regulations that are needed: enforcement is paramount. There is an urgent need to enhance the capacity for monitoring and managing air quality. Public awareness campaigns are crucial to educate citizens about the sources of pollution and the steps they can take to reduce their personal contributions to air quality degradation. Vehicles must undergo mandated smoke checks, as is done in developed countries. Moreover, collaboration with neighbouring countries is essential, given the transboundary nature of air pollution.

We face a stark choice: enact decisive, immediate measures or suffer irreversible damage to our health and environment. Pakistanis' life expectancy isn't stellar as it is; it needn't be cut any shorter.

Published in Dawn, March 25th, 2024

Planes and plans

FOR the past many years, PIA has been getting little by way of good press, mostly on account of internal mismanagement and a poor in-flight experience. Saddled with debt and raking in losses worth billions every year, the flag carrier's privatisation is imminent, with the prime minister calling for a timeline for PIA's privatisation. Yet as the airline is prepared for privatisation, there may be some good news on the horizon. The foreign minister, while on a recent trip to the UK, said that PIA flights to Britain would resume "in weeks, not months". The aviation minister similarly said in a press release last week that the flag carrier could return to British skies after European regulators gave the all-clear by May. He added that the ability to fly to Europe would make PIA more attractive to private investors. PIA was banned from flying to Europe after the crash of PK-8303 in 2020. The comments by the then aviation minister claiming that a number of PIA pilots had dubious flying credentials did not help the airline's reputation as a safe carrier.

Once great people to fly with, PIA's list of woes is a long one, and has been well-documented. Therefore, privatisation may be the only antidote as several

attempts to restructure the airline have failed. From this perspective, a leaner, more professionally run carrier in private hands could provide better flying options to Pakistanis travelling to Europe, North America and elsewhere. If the UK and EU bans are lifted, Pakistani passengers can fly direct, instead of transiting through Gulf hubs, thus saving themselves time and the hassle of changing planes. Along with stemming the airline's losses, privatisation must focus on safety, timely departures and arrivals, and a comfortable in-flight experience. Perhaps if placed in professional hands, the carrier can regain its lost glory, become a profitable concern, and offer Pakistani travellers attractive flying options.

Published in Dawn, March 26th, 2024

Afghan return

FOLLOWING a controversial first repatriation phase involving 'illegal' Afghan refugees last November, the government has initiated a second phase, this time aimed at 880,000 documented Afghans in Pakistan. While there is no official word on how many Afghans have willingly or unwillingly made their way back to Afghanistan thus far, officials privy to the information have indicated the figure to be around 500,000. The current initiative — also part of the prime minister's 100-day working plan — involves the meticulous mapping and data collection of Afghan Citizen Card holders by authorities across the country. This preparatory work, for a repatriation campaign anticipated to begin in early to mid-summer, is critical for an orderly and humane return process for these documented refugees. The first repatriation drive was marred by abruptness and a lack of sensitivity towards the plight of the Afghan people, who were compelled to return to a homeland grappling with instability and economic challenges — and matters haven't changed since. The urgency with which these repatriations were carried out not only put immense pressure on the returnees but also strained the already delicate Pak-Afghan ties. Furthermore, the approach raised serious humanitarian concerns, including the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of refugees to places where they face serious threats to their life or freedom.

It is imperative that this time around, the government show more compassion. The repatriation should be voluntary, and the dignity of individuals seeking refuge

here respected. The government must engage directly with the Afghan community, ensuring that their concerns are adequately addressed. Moreover, this new process should not be rushed. The documented Afghans, many of whom have lived in Pakistan for years, if not decades, have lives and communities here. Forcing them to leave without consideration for their well-being would not only be a disservice to them but could also have destabilising effects on both sides of the border. The Afghan Taliban's recent call for leniency towards refugees from Pakistan signals a potential for dialogue, which Islamabad should leverage to ensure repatriation is conducted in a manner that respects human rights and international law. This collaborative approach, coupled with support from international bodies such as UNHCR, can facilitate a process that is dignified and orderly. Pakistan's effort to manage its refugee population must balance security concerns with humanity.

Published in Dawn, March 26th, 2024

Ceasefire, finally

OVER five months since the Gazan slaughter began, the UN Security Council finally approved on Monday a resolution calling for a ceasefire in the occupied Palestinian territory. Several such attempts had been made since the conflict between Israel and Hamas began on Oct 7, yet the US had vetoed three ceasefire resolutions.

This time, probably because of the international backlash against Israeli barbarism, as well as domestic criticism of the Biden administration's 'iron-clad' support for Tel Aviv's murderous campaign in an election year, Washington decided to abstain. This may indicate the American government's moral ambiguity over the mass murder of over 32,000 Palestinian civilians — the US ambassador to the UN said they "did not agree" with everything in the resolution — but perhaps such a position is preferable to stonewalling every attempt to stop the butchery.

While there is little to celebrate, as the level of suffering in Gaza is staggering, at least the people of the besieged Strip will be given a break from the daily dose of death and destruction to mourn their loved ones, and start the long, painful

process of healing. The UN secretary general was recently at the Rafah crossing and called for removing the obstacles that are blocking aid from reaching Gaza. Israel is the biggest obstacle, and it is hoped the ceasefire will allow food, water and medical aid to reach hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in distress. Famine — most of it manufactured by Israel — now stalks Gaza, with the WHO saying children in the Strip are on the “brink of death”. Moreover, thousands of children have been orphaned in this unholy war, and are in particular need of medical and psychological attention to help them deal with the trauma of watching genocidal violence unfold before their eyes. These must be the immediate goals of the international community.

Apart from extending prompt humanitarian assistance to Gaza’s population, all sides must work towards a more permanent cessation of violence. It should be remembered that an almost weeklong truce was agreed to in November, but broke down soon after.

The current arrangement should be more durable. While talk of ‘solutions’ may be unrealistic right now, once the dust has settled, Israel should be made to pay for the murder of thousands of innocents. Palestinian lives matter, and a generation of orphaned Gazan children will be looking to the world community to secure justice for them.

All eyes will now be on Israel and the US, its chief patron. Will Tel Aviv abide by the UNSC resolution? Or will it live up to its reputation of being a rogue state by dismissing this binding call, and continuing with its criminal campaign in Gaza? The days ahead will be critical for the entire region.

Published in Dawn, March 26th, 2024

Development costs

A HEFTY escalation of 30pc in the cost of ongoing federal development schemes is one of the many decisions where the caretaker government overstepped its authority. It is unclear as to what factors led the administration to make a hasty decision with significant financial implications for the budget on the eve of national elections. It is also not known how the quantum of cost increase was

determined, and if it would apply to all schemes or vary from project to project. Indeed, soaring inflation over the past two years has led to a rapid rise in the price of practically everything, and overruns in the capital costs of infrastructural projects were widely anticipated. However, the apparent lack of a clear mechanism or formula to make such assessments separately for individual schemes, as well as the absence of transparency in the process, raises suspicions regarding the intentions of the decision-makers. After all, the government's development spending has always been a major source of leakage of public funds and corruption. It is, therefore, hoped that the new government will review the decision — at least for the sake of transparency, if nothing else.

The 'politicisation of development' has created a massive backlog of incomplete infrastructure schemes both at the federal and provincial level over the past several decades, resulting in time and cost overruns. An IMF report reveals that the federal development portfolio added 244 new projects worth Rs2.26tr in FY23 to a backlog of 909 projects costing Rs10.32tr. This contrasts sharply with the budgeted allocation of just Rs727.5bn for all the schemes. That means, according to the IMF, each project will take more than 14 years to complete, and that too if no new scheme gets underway during this period. The provincial development backlog is estimated to be even bigger. No wonder many economists refer to Pakistan as a 'graveyard of development projects'. It is incumbent upon the PML-N-led government to reform the annual Public Sector Development Programme. The reform of capital development spending is as crucial as the privatisation of SOEs or improvements in tax collection to bridge the fiscal deficit. Thus, it is advisable that all federal and provincial schemes are audited and those not needed are discarded. In this way, our meagre resources will be allocated for only those projects that have economic value.

Published in Dawn, March 27th, 2024

New terror wave

A STRING of deadly terrorist attacks over the past few days — with the bombing in KP's Bisham area on Tuesday being the latest atrocity — drives home the grim point that Pakistan is in the midst of a multidimensional terrorist insurgency.

From the coast and interior of Balochistan to the rugged mountains of the north, violence is occurring with alarming frequency. While most of the victims thus far have been civil and military security personnel, the Bisham attack targeted Chinese nationals. According to officials, at least six people were killed in what has been termed a suicide bombing — five of them Chinese. The foreigners were en route to the Dasu power project from Islamabad when an explosives-laden car smashed into their vehicle.

Meanwhile in Turbat, Baloch separatist militants attacked the PNS Siddique naval base on Monday night. An FC trooper was martyred in the incident. Last week, security forces had thwarted a terrorist attack, also carried out by Baloch militants, on the Gwadar Port Authority Complex.

At the time of writing, no group had claimed responsibility for the Bisham bombing. In the past, both Baloch militants and religiously inspired fighters have targeted Chinese interests in the country. An ISPR statement has identified “certain foreign elements” as being responsible for the latest wave of terrorism, while the Foreign Office has said “enemies of Pakistan-China friendship” are behind the violence. Certainly, both the Bisham and Gwadar attacks appear to be aimed at derailing the Pakistan-China relationship, specifically the economic aspect of it. The fact that Chinese blood has been spilt makes matters more serious. Several past incidents have also resulted in the death of Chinese nationals, such as the 2021 attack in Kohistan, which is close to Bisham, and the 2022 assault on Karachi University’s Confucius Institute.

Beijing’s reaction has been firm, with the Chinese embassy demanding the Pakistani state take “practical and effective measures” to protect its nationals here. China has come to this country’s aid at difficult times, and invested in Pakistan when few others were willing to. Moreover, at a time when Pakistan is trying to woo foreign investors to bring their dollars here in order to breathe some life into a moribund economy, the country cannot afford terrorists attacking foreign workers.

Security must immediately be beefed up for all foreigners working in the country, particular Chinese nationals. The civilian and military leadership must work closely together to uproot the terrorist infrastructure without delay.

If malign foreign actors are involved in subterfuge, diplomatic channels need to be used to communicate to them that their facilitation of terrorist violence will be exposed before the international community. For the government, the honeymoon is over, and the time has come for decisive action against militancy.

Published in Dawn, March 27th, 2024

Selling humans

HUMAN traders feed off economic distress; they peddle promises of a better life to the impoverished who, mired in monetary discontent and absence of opportunities, are forced into scenarios that put their safety in peril. The recent horror show of trafficking saw smugglers cash in on Pakistani immigrants, desperate to reach Europe via Iran, with an extra layer of cruelty — kidnapping for ransom. Some 10 citizens were abducted and brutalised, one was released after a payment of Rs10m and the Iranian police rescued two others. During the past months, three episodes of gangs assaulting and imprisoning Pakistanis have come to light. While a few victims have paid their way out, others have been saved by Iranian law enforcers and the Pakistani embassy. The FIA, which is tasked to tighten the screws on smugglers, also acknowledged that the vicious trend, perpetrated by local groups and their foreign collaborators, has gathered steam in recent months. The US State Department's 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Pakistan noted that the Pakistan government "reported identifying 35,309 trafficking victims, compared with 21,253 trafficking victims in 2021".

While human trafficking should stir the public's ire, the state's lackadaisical approach to evolving a comprehensive plan that takes aim at the root causes of this ghastly crime has raised concerns of institutional corruption and political patronage. Equally appalling is our inability to cultivate an environment that prioritises socioeconomic rehabilitation, shelter and mental help for survivors. We cannot be saved from rampant depravity unless security agencies synchronise their efforts to deracinate such syndicates. Moreover, the enabling tool of education assures individual and community safety. But, enforcement attempts can only succeed with greater awareness about the hotline to report trafficking cases, vigilant monitoring at all air, sea and land routes and witness protection

programmes as those who are cognisant of the torture tactics, stay away from lodging complaints. Pakistan should work with its neighbours to choke this curse.

Published in Dawn, March 28th, 2024

Data protection

WHAT do we want? Data protection laws. When do we want them? Immediately. Without delay, if we are to prevent another disaster. A JIT formed last year to probe a Nadra data breach, affecting approximately 2.7m citizens between 2019 and 2023, has shared its findings with the interior ministry. The findings reveal that data was compromised in Nadra's Karachi, Multan, and Peshawar offices. The incident — not the first of its kind — has exposed the vulnerability of our personal data and the crucial need for stringent laws that mandate safeguarding against such breaches. The JIT's recommendations, including technological upgrades and disciplinary actions against responsible officials, are necessary steps towards addressing the immediate aftermath of this breach. However, piecemeal responses alone are inadequate to prevent future incidents. The root of the problem lies not only in technological shortcomings but also in the absence of comprehensive legislation to hold accountable those entrusted with safeguarding citizens' data.

While upgrading the technology employed by Nadra, the government must consider the use of stronger encryption and limiting unnecessary access to data. Moreover, restricting database access solely to the office premises can mitigate risks associated with remote breaches. However, these technical solutions must be complemented by legislation that treats the citizens' private data as sacred and entails severe consequences for negligence. That Pakistanis' data had surfaced in countries like Argentina and Romania is particularly alarming. Considering the state of identity theft globally, it is imperative that data protection laws are implemented forthwith and encompass both public and private entities, recognising that public bodies often hold the most extensive troves of personal data. Moreover, given the extensive centralisation of data within Nadra, many services such as telephony, transportation, courier, banking and hospitality rely on its database for biometric verification. This centralised approach, seemingly aimed at surveillance, introduces significant vulnerabilities with multiple parties

accessing and utilising this database. This data leak must serve as a wake-up call for policymakers to enact and enforce the relevant laws. Bills have been drafted, but there have been no earnest efforts to advance them. A digitised world leaves no room for such massive security gaps. Pakistan must prioritise the protection of its citizens' privacy and ensure that their data remains secure. Failure to do so would not only undermine individual rights but also hinder socioeconomic progress and security.

Published in Dawn, March 28th, 2024

Judiciary's SOS

SOME clearly thought that senior judges would prove just as easily 'manageable' as our seasoned politicians usually are. They must have received a shock this Monday when almost the entire Islamabad High Court formally decided to take a stand and push back against what many of its judges describe as repeated interference and meddling in their court and the cases before them.

A day later, the public learnt that six of the IHC's eight sitting judges had forwarded a complaint to the chief justice of Pakistan to seek the Supreme Judicial Council's guidance on what judges ought to do when they are subjected to blackmail, harassment and coercion by "members of the executive, including operatives of intelligence agencies". The judges made it clear that they expected some action from the judiciary to reclaim its independence and improve their institution's deteriorating image in the eyes of the public.

The judges who co-signed the letter framed their demand for a judicial convention to look into the matter by referencing a recent judgement from the Supreme Court, in which it reinstated former IHC judge Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui's status as a duly retired judge. It may be recalled that retired justice Siddiqui had been unceremoniously ejected from the judiciary in October 2018 over a complaint he had made regarding interference by Pakistan's apex intelligence agency in cases tied to the PML-N chief, Nawaz Sharif.

It appears that because the SC endorsed retired justice Siddiqui's position, the judges of the IHC also want it to consider what serving judges are being forced to

endure and, at the least, issue an advisory on what judges are supposed to do when faced with such situations. The ball is now in Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa's court, and, as head of the judiciary, he will feel pressure to take action.

A judge's bedroom was reportedly spied on with a concealed camera; another's relative was picked up and tortured into giving a statement against them. Two judges felt pressured to reconsider their position on the maintainability of a high-profile case because intelligence operatives began harassing their friends and family. A district and sessions judge reported that a 'cracker' was thrown into their home in a bid to intimidate them. When out-of-favour politicians complain about the threats, intimidation and even torture they face, they are often tuned out; however, six sitting judges detailing brazen abuses of power are quite difficult to ignore.

Though he seems to have been aware of these issues for almost a year, Justice Isa must now pay heed to them and address them to the satisfaction of his subordinate judges. The die was cast the moment this letter appeared in the public domain; all eyes are on the SJC to see how it proceeds.

Published in Dawn, March 28th, 2024

Toxic emitters

It is concerning to note that dozens of industries have been violating environmental laws in and around Islamabad. While the Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency deserves appreciation for its survey of 270 industries across I-9, I-10, GT Road Sang Jani, and Kahuta Triangle Industrial State that brought the issue to light, there is a pressing need for more robust measures to curb such violations. It is unacceptable that so many industrial units are operating without proper air and wastewater abatement technologies, jeopardising the health of Islamabad's water channels and the quality of air its residents breathe. The agency's categorisation of industries based on pollution levels is a positive step. However, mere categorisation is insufficient without stringent enforcement mechanisms in place.

The government must ensure that regular monitoring and strict penalties are imposed under the Pakistan Environmental Protection Act, 1997, on non-compliant industries to deter violators. Additionally, a strategy must be fleshed out to get to the bottom of why these industries are non-compliant and how they can be persuaded to institute environment-friendly practices, including enhanced awareness about environmental rules and boosting the capacity of regulatory agencies to enforce laws effectively. It is also important to streamline the process of obtaining environmental approvals for industries and establish a transparent mechanism for monitoring and reporting violations. Collaboration between government agencies, industry stakeholders, and environmental experts is essential to develop solutions that balance development with environmental protection. Furthermore, the climate change ministry must be more proactive in coordinating efforts to combat environmental degradation. Concerted action is needed to hold accountable those industries that continue to pollute with impunity, endangering public health and the environment. With this survey shedding light on the extent of environmental violations by industries in the capital alone, it is crucial that the government address this issue countrywide. We absolutely must strive towards a cleaner, more sustainable future for Pakistan.

Published in Dawn, March 29th, 2024

Chipping in

FEDERAL infrastructure development schemes are located in the provinces. Most such projects — for instance, motorways and highways — cut across provincial boundaries. Likewise, more than one federating unit shares the socioeconomic benefits accruing from establishing projects, such as those for hydropower generation. Thus, it appears logical for the provinces to also start funding these schemes, along with the centre. That is how it is being done in India. In Pakistan, however, until recently, the centre was bearing the expenditure of federal schemes as well as partly sponsoring provincial development from its own resources or with borrowed money. But the continuing financial crunch has led Islamabad to stop funding provincial development from this fiscal year. It has now drawn up a National Development Framework to establish 'strategic' infrastructure development projects, with financial support or contribution from the provinces. Besides helping to reduce the financial burden of

infrastructure development borne by the cash-strapped centre, the idea is to encourage the provinces to share their experience and expertise with one another so that they can establish similar projects, while ensuring optimal use of resources and increased efficiency of their investments.

The government is expected to discuss the draft framework at the next Ecnec meeting, as well as with the provinces whose consent is necessary if it wishes to work out a mechanism for sharing the costs and other related matters. The plan can indeed cut the financial burden on the centre, and perhaps dilute the misplaced criticism of the seventh NFC award, which allocates a bigger share to the federating units from the federal divisible tax pool — an arrangement that should not be disturbed. It may also give the provinces some impetus to boost their own revenues. Nevertheless, such a transition will not be seamless. The provinces will justifiably demand greater administrative control over the projects that they will be asked to finance, as well as a share of the profits and royalties, in keeping with their contributions. A bigger issue, though, will pertain to the ability of Balochistan and KP to chip in. The underdeveloped economies of these two provinces are already in a state of disarray due to terrorism, and they lack the required cash to meet even their most urgent needs. A lot of work will have to be done before the new proposal is ready to be implemented.

Published in Dawn, March 29th, 2024

‘Source of terror’

ALTHOUGH dealing with the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan is a major political, security and strategic challenge for Pakistan, leaving the problem unattended is not advisable, as terrorist outfits will continue their bloody campaign in this country unless they are firmly confronted.

It is clear that going after militant groups inside Afghanistan unilaterally presents its own set of difficulties and risks a further deterioration in ties with the ruling Afghan Taliban, and the loss of whatever leverage Pakistan may have with them. In this regard, the defence minister’s recent comments reflect the state’s frustration with the Afghan Taliban. Taking to X, Khawaja Asif termed

Afghanistan “the source of terrorism” in Pakistan, adding that counterterrorism “cooperation from Kabul ... is not available”.

Pakistan has few good options at the moment. However, the use of diplomatic channels with Afghanistan should not be abandoned, while the state should make it plain that all militant groups wreaking havoc inside this country will be dealt with decisively. Though the Afghan Taliban consistently deny their soil is being used by terrorists, the international community is quite clear that militants are active inside Afghanistan.

At a briefing of the UN Security Council earlier this month, the secretary general’s special representative for Afghanistan observed that the country “has long been the source of instability and terrorism”, and noted that “there are well-founded concerns over the presence of terrorist groups” inside Afghanistan, including IS and TTP.

Pakistan has made these very same arguments before the world. Furthermore, in some media reports Taliban officials have admitted there are “places that might be out of our control” on the border area with Pakistan. If they want global legitimacy, then the Taliban must establish order over these ‘out of control’ areas, and the international community, including Afghanistan’s neighbours, should be willing to help Kabul’s counterterrorism effort.

Yet it is also true that the Afghan Taliban and the TTP are of the same ideological stock, so expecting the former to crush the latter is naïve. What the Taliban can, indeed must, do is to ensure that the TTP does not harm Pakistan. If Kabul’s rulers fail on this count, then there will be genuine reason to believe they are tacitly supporting the TTP’s terrorist activities.

As has been written in these columns earlier, along with bilateral engagement, all of Afghanistan’s neighbours — particularly Pakistan, Iran, China, the Central Asian states and Russia — must coordinate their policies regarding militant groups in Afghanistan.

That way the Taliban will get the same message from all capitals, and hopefully, not repeat the mistakes they made in 2001. China, for example, has emphasised

“patient communication with Afghan authorities”. This may be easier than the other limited options before Pakistan and Afghanistan’s other neighbours.

Published in Dawn, March 29th, 2024

Waste not, want not

AS the world observes the International Day of Zero Waste today, it is faced with a shameful truth: over a billion meals were discarded daily by households in 2022. This is equal to 1.3 meals a day for everyone in the world impacted by hunger. While that sinks in, the UNEP’s latest Food Waste Index Report also says that this wastage is a “very conservative” assessment. The problem is not just a moral dilemma but also an environmental catastrophe. Food loss and waste accounts for 8-10pc of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions, nearly five times greater than the combined emissions from the aviation industry. While families throw away 60pc of food, restaurants, retailers, and food services discard substantial portions often due to overstocking, misjudged portion sizes, or adherence to arbitrary expiration dates. In developing nations, transportation losses and lack of refrigeration exacerbate the issue, underscoring that food wastage is a “global tragedy”, as put by the UN. In Pakistan, the issue of food wastage is acutely felt. Despite the cultural significance of letting not a grain go to waste, significant quantities of food are squandered daily. Lavish wedding receptions and similar events often lead to staggering amounts of wasted food, while eateries contribute to the problem with discarded meals filling bins.

However, there is a glimmer of hope. Countries like Japan and the UK have shown considerable reductions in food wastage through targeted policies and public-private partnerships. By fostering collaboration, from producers to retailers to consumers, we can stem the tide of waste and redirect surplus food to those in need. Let us heed the UNEP call for action. Governments must prioritise food waste reduction in national agendas, integrating it into climate plans and policy frameworks. Businesses must reassess their practices, recognising the true cost of waste to both their bottom line and the planet. And as individuals, we must embrace mindful consumption and minimise waste at every opportunity.

Published in Dawn, March 30th, 2024

Hike in power rates

SUMMER is fast approaching and bringing with it more hardships for the working classes. Already grappling with a severe cost-of-living crisis, low-to moderate-income households were in for another shock on Thursday when Nepra hiked the price of electricity they had consumed during October-December 2023 by almost Rs2.75 per unit. The latest increase in power prices has been made under the quarterly tariff adjustment mechanism Islamabad had agreed on with the IMF last July to clinch the ongoing \$3bn short-term deal, avert default, and shore up its international reserves. The arrears on account of the tariff adjustment will be recovered from consumers in the next three months. But the story does not end there: Nepra will soon be ruling on a petition from the power distribution companies to allow them to recover Rs7.63 per unit from their customers on account of additional fuel costs for February this year.

Over the last several years, electricity prices have been raised phenomenally to help the power distributors cope with the financial pressure resulting from currency devaluation, interest rates hikes, rising fixed capacity charges, the fallout of transmission and distribution losses and power theft. Thus, not only are consumers forced to pay additional electricity generation and distribution costs but must also bear the burden of system inefficiencies. No wonder then that electricity theft is on the rise and its consumption on the decline as electricity becomes unaffordable for most working people whose purchasing power has almost halved in the past two years amid stagnant incomes and record spikes in inflation. The speed and magnitude of increase in the cost of living since 2022 have been unprecedented, forcing consumers to cut back on spending on groceries, education and healthcare to make ends meet amid an ever-worsening situation. The living conditions of the country's low- to moderate-income households have always been dire. However, the last two years of stubborn inflation, rocketing power and gas bills and new indirect taxes imposed to pay for the imported luxuries of the ruling classes and profits of the business elite have made their situation more desperate than ever. With the economy flat-lining, energy prices spiralling upwards and incomes continuing to fall far behind runaway inflation, ordinary Pakistanis will slide deeper into the social and economic crisis the likes of which they have never experienced before.

Dashed hopes

DISAPPOINTMENT prevails in some quarters of the legal fraternity. Among those who seem particularly disturbed are lawyers who had hailed the change of guard at the Supreme Court last year as the beginning of a new era of judicial independence.

This week, when it emerged that six sitting judges of the Islamabad High Court had addressed a complaint to the chief justice of Pakistan detailing repeated interference by intelligence operatives in the judiciary's workings — including attempts to spy on, threaten and intimidate judges — the expectation was that the Supreme Court would take a firm stand.

Considering that it has been facing criticism for 'ignoring' the executive's growing list of human and civil rights abuses, and for failing to stop the frequent violations of court orders as well as laws and the Constitution, many were expecting that the apex court would put its foot down on interference in the judiciary's inner workings.

Sadly, instead of taking action, the Supreme Court on Thursday passed the buck to the government. With the court's consent, the concerns highlighted by the IHC judges will now be investigated by an inquiry commission — which is to be headed by a retired judge, and whose formation, composition and terms of reference are going to be decided by the federal cabinet.

Since the announcement, many have been wondering whether a retired judge can effectively cross-examine sitting high court justices and, more importantly, serving generals who may, directly or indirectly, be responsible for the serious misconduct their departments are allegedly involved in. Others have pointed out that the current government comprises individuals who either seem to be beneficiaries of the intelligence agencies' alleged interference in judicial matters, or are responsible for these agencies' actions by virtue of their ministries. How, then, can the court expect them to conduct an impartial inquiry? These are valid concerns.

A press release issued by the Supreme Court on Thursday noted that “The CJP clearly stated [in his meeting with the government] that interference by the executive in the affairs and judicial workings of judges will not be tolerated and under no circumstances can the independence of the judiciary be allowed to be compromised”.

Yet, the Supreme Court’s actions seem to belie a more accommodative approach. The IHC judges had merely asked for a judicial convention to discuss their ordeal, as well as directions from the Supreme Judicial Council on what judges ought to do when they face threats and coercion from the executive branch of the state.

Instead, the Supreme Court seems to have washed its hands of the matter by inviting the government to take over the inquiry. This course of action seems to run contrary to what one would expect from an independent judiciary jealously guarding its domain. It must, therefore, be reconsidered.

Published in Dawn, March 30th, 2024

DAWN Vocabulary March 2024

1. **Absolved** - declared free from guilt or blame.
 - Sentence: The inquiry committee absolved the power companies of any wrongdoing.
2. **Mala fide** - in bad faith; with intent to deceive.
 - Sentence: There was no evidence of mala fide intent behind the excessive billing.
3. **Encumbering** - burdening; impeding or hindering.
 - Sentence: The sudden spike in power prices was heavily encumbering the common man's ability to pay.
4. **Apathy** - lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern.
 - Sentence: Apathy towards the victims of power overbilling is concerning.
5. **Disillusionment** - a feeling of disappointment resulting from the discovery that something is not as good as one believed it to be.
 - Sentence: The continuous overbilling led to great disillusionment among consumers.
6. **Unscrupulous** - having or showing no moral principles; not honest or fair.
 - Sentence: Unscrupulous practices in the billing process need to be addressed.
7. **Retrospective** - looking back on or dealing with past events or situations.
 - Sentence: The retrospective increase in power prices caught everyone off guard.
8. **Deprivation** - the damaging lack of material benefits considered to be basic necessities.
 - Sentence: Deprivation in Balochistan has contributed to the rise in militancy.
9. **Substantial** - of considerable importance, size, or worth.
 - Sentence: A substantial increase in the school dropout rate is alarming.
10. **Miscreants** - persons who behave badly or in a way that breaks the law.
 - Sentence: Miscreants often exploit the weak and vulnerable.

11. **Unabated** - without any reduction in intensity or strength.
 - Sentence: The corruption in the utility sector continues unabated.
12. **Impunity** - exemption from punishment or freedom from the injurious consequences of an action.
 - Sentence: Officials who overbill customers seem to act with impunity.
13. **Discrepancies** - an illogical or surprising lack of compatibility or similarity between two or more facts.
 - Sentence: There were several discrepancies in the billing records.
14. **Exacerbate** - make (a problem, bad situation, or negative feeling) worse.
 - Sentence: The lack of clear communication only served to exacerbate the confusion.
15. **Inequities** - lack of fairness or justice.
 - Sentence: Addressing inequities in the distribution of power is essential.
16. **Disenfranchised** - deprived of power; marginalized.
 - Sentence: The disenfranchised communities often bear the brunt of economic instability.
17. **Redress** - remedy or set right (an undesirable or unfair situation).
 - Sentence: The affected consumers sought redress for the inflated bills they received.
18. **Intransigence** - refusal to change one's views or to agree about something.
 - Sentence: The intransigence of the power companies complicated negotiations.
19. **Mandate** - an official order or commission to do something.
 - Sentence: The committee had a clear mandate to investigate the billing issues.
20. **Vilify** - speak or write about in an abusively disparaging manner.
 - Sentence: The media often vilify those believed to be responsible without a fair trial.
21. **Dubious** - hesitating or doubting.
 - Sentence: There were dubious claims regarding the utility company's billing practices.
22. **Conjecture** - an opinion or conclusion formed on the basis of incomplete information.

- Sentence: Much of the public outrage was based on conjecture rather than hard facts.
23. **Rectify** - put right; correct.
- Sentence: Steps were taken to rectify the errors in the billing system.
24. **Inadvertent** - not resulting from or achieved through deliberate planning.
- Sentence: The overcharge was apparently inadvertent, caused by a system error.
25. **Indiscriminate** - done at random or without careful judgment.
- Sentence: Indiscriminate billing practices harm both the utility company's reputation and its customers.
26. **Coercion** - the practice of persuading someone to do something by using force or threats.
- Sentence: There were allegations of coercion in obtaining consent for the new billing rates.
27. **Reconciliation** - the restoration of friendly relations.
- Sentence: The company sought reconciliation with its customers by offering refunds and apologies.
28. **Ombudsman** - an official appointed to investigate individuals' complaints against maladministration, especially that of public authorities.
- Sentence: The ombudsman was approached to address the complaints about power billing.
29. **Arbitration** - the use of an arbitrator to settle a dispute.
- Sentence: The dispute over the billing was eventually settled through arbitration.
30. **Conciliatory** - intended or likely to placate or pacify.
- Sentence: The power company's response was surprisingly conciliatory, offering compensation to affected customers.
31. **Unprecedented** - never done or known before.
- Sentence: The scale of the overbilling issue was unprecedented.
32. **Penalize** - subject to some form of punishment.
- Sentence: The regulatory authority decided to penalize the companies responsible for overbilling.
33. **Recourse** - a source of help in a difficult situation.
- Sentence: Consumers had little recourse against the powerful utility companies.

34. **Repercussions** - unintended consequences occurring some time after an event or action, especially an unwelcome one.
- Sentence: The long-term repercussions of the billing controversy could include regulatory changes.
35. **Integrity** - the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles.
- Sentence: The inquiry raised questions about the integrity of the billing processes.
36. **Transparency** - the condition of being transparent.
- Sentence: The lack of transparency in the power sector is a significant issue.
37. **Escalate** - increase rapidly.
- Sentence: The conflict between the consumers and the power company continued to escalate.
38. **Litigation** - the process of taking legal action.
- Sentence: The matter eventually went to litigation, with consumers seeking damages.
39. **Scrutiny** - critical observation or examination.
- Sentence: The company's billing practices came under intense public scrutiny.
40. **Ameliorate** - make (something bad or unsatisfactory) better.
- Sentence: The new regulations were designed to ameliorate the problems in the power sector.
41. **Accountability** - the fact or condition of being accountable; responsibility.
- Sentence: There is a pressing need for greater accountability in the utilities sector.
42. **Fraudulent** - obtained, done by, or involving deception, especially criminal deception.
- Sentence: The investigation found no evidence of fraudulent billing practices.
43. **Oversight** - an unintentional failure to notice or do something.
- Sentence: The oversight in the billing system was quickly corrected.
44. **Adjudicate** - make a formal judgment or decision about a problem or disputed matter.
- Sentence: The court was asked to adjudicate the dispute between the consumers and the power company.

45. **Imperative** - of vital importance; crucial.
- Sentence: It is imperative that the power sector reform its billing practices.
46. **Compensate** - give (someone) something, typically money, in recognition of loss, suffering, or injury incurred; recompense.
- Sentence: The power company agreed to compensate customers who were overcharged.
47. **Deficiency** - a lack or shortage.
- Sentence: The report highlighted a deficiency in the company's meter reading processes.
48. **Collateral** - additional but subordinate; secondary.
- Sentence: The collateral damage from the dispute included a loss of customer trust.
49. **Reform** - make changes in (something, typically a social, political, or economic institution or practice) in order to improve it.
- Sentence: There was a call for widespread reform in how energy companies handle billing.
50. **Incongruence** - lack of congruence or harmony; inconsistency.
- Sentence: There was an incongruence between what the company claimed and the evidence presented by consumers.
51. **Infructuous** - unprofitable; ineffective.
- The committee's efforts proved infructuous, yielding no tangible results.
52. **Egregious** - outstandingly bad; shocking.
- The egregious errors in the report led to its rejection.
53. **Endemic** - regularly found among particular people or in a certain area.
- Malaria is endemic in many tropical countries.
54. **Conflate** - combine into one.
- It's important not to conflate love and dependency.
55. **Vest** - to confer or bestow (power, authority, property, etc.) on someone.
- The board vested the power to make financial decisions in the CFO.
56. **Disenfranchise** - deprive (someone) of the right to vote.

- Many felons are disenfranchised even after serving their time.
57. **Pernicious** - having a harmful effect, especially in a gradual or subtle way.
- The pernicious weed spread throughout the farmland.
58. **Curtailment** - the action or fact of reducing or restricting something.
- The curtailment of water usage was essential during the drought.
59. **Recalcitrant** - having an obstinately uncooperative attitude towards authority or discipline.
- The recalcitrant student refused to follow the rules.
60. **Demerit** - a feature or fact deserving censure.
- The plan's major demerit was its cost.
61. **Constitutional subterfuge** - deceptive scheme or strategy within the bounds of constitutional law.
- The government's actions were seen as constitutional subterfuge.
62. **Garb** - clothing or dress, especially of a distinctive or special kind.
- He came in the garb of a fisherman.
63. **Constitutional** - relating to an established set of principles governing a state.
- The constitutional amendment was passed by a huge majority.
64. **Implacable** - unable to be placated.
- The implacable enemy refused all offers of peace.
65. **Delimit** - determine the limits or boundaries of.
- The river helps to delimit the border between the two countries.
66. **Substantiate** - provide evidence to support or prove the truth of.
- They had found nothing to substantiate the allegations.
67. **Imperative** - of vital importance; crucial.
- It is imperative that we finish by next week.

68. **Stipulate** - demand or specify (a requirement), typically as part of an agreement.
- The contract stipulates the dates of the payments.
69. **Abysmal** - extremely bad; appalling.
- The service at the restaurant was abysmal.
70. **Catastrophe** - an event causing great and often sudden damage or suffering; a disaster.
- The earthquake was a catastrophe that affected thousands of people.
71. **Incontrovertible** - not able to be denied or disputed.
- The evidence presented was incontrovertible.
72. **Facade** - an outward appearance that is maintained to conceal a less pleasant or creditable reality.
- His calm facade masked his inner turmoil.
73. **Substantive** - having a firm basis in reality and therefore important, meaningful, or considerable.
- There were no substantive reasons to deny her the promotion.
74. **Arbitration** - the use of an arbitrator to settle a dispute.
- The dispute was settled through arbitration.
75. **Demarcate** - set the boundaries or limits of.
- It's difficult to demarcate the line between right and wrong.
76. **Capitulate** - cease to resist an opponent or an unwelcome demand; surrender.
- The army finally capitulated after three days of fighting.
77. **Contiguous** - sharing a common border; touching.
- The two states are contiguous with each other.
78. **Mandate** - an official order or commission to do something.
- The mandate from the director was to improve company efficiency.

79. **Exacerbate** - make (a problem, bad situation, or negative feeling) worse.
- The proposed factory closure would only exacerbate the unemployment situation.
80. **Adjudicate** - make a formal judgment or decision about a problem or disputed matter.
- The committee will adjudicate all complaints.
81. **Omnipotent** - (of a deity) having unlimited power.
- The ancient rulers were considered omnipotent.
82. **Disseminate** - spread or disperse (something, especially information) widely.
- The organization disseminates health information to the public
83. **Claustrophobia**: An abnormal fear of being in enclosed or narrow places. *Example*: After being stuck in the elevator for hours, Jake realized he suffered from claustrophobia.
84. **Ravaged**: Severely damaged; devastated. *Example*: The coastal town was ravaged by the hurricane, leaving many homes in ruins.
85. **Dystopia**: An imagined state or society in which there is great suffering or injustice, typically one that is totalitarian or post-apocalyptic. *Example*: The novel depicts a dystopia where freedom of thought is suppressed by the authoritarian regime.
86. **Apocalyptic**: Describing or prophesying the complete destruction of the world. *Example*: The film portrayed an apocalyptic future where earth was barren and lifeless.
87. **Recalcitrant**: Having an obstinately uncooperative attitude towards authority or discipline. *Example*: The recalcitrant student consistently defied the school rules, leading to several suspensions.
88. **Malaise**: A general feeling of discomfort, illness, or uneasiness whose exact cause is difficult to identify. *Example*: There was a general malaise among the employees after the company announced layoffs.
89. **Cynical**: Believing that people are motivated by self-interest; distrustful of human sincerity or integrity. *Example*: His cynical view of politics made him skeptical of any politician's promises.

90. **Benevolence:** The quality of being well-meaning; kindness.
Example: Her benevolence was evident when she donated her inheritance to charity.
91. **Rhetoric:** The art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the use of figures of speech and other compositional techniques. *Example:* He was known for his powerful rhetoric that could easily sway public opinion.
92. **Monolithic:** Large, powerful, and intractably indivisible and uniform.
Example: The company's monolithic structure made it difficult for any department to innovate independently.
93. **Intransigence:** Refusal to change one's views or to agree about something. *Example:* The negotiations broke down due to the intransigence of both sides on key issues.
94. **Implacable:** Unable to be placated; relentless; unstoppable.
Example: The implacable advance of the enemy forces terrified the villagers.
95. **Incendiary:** Designed to cause fires or conflict. *Example:* His incendiary remarks on social media sparked a heated debate among the community.