

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of May 2020

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Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

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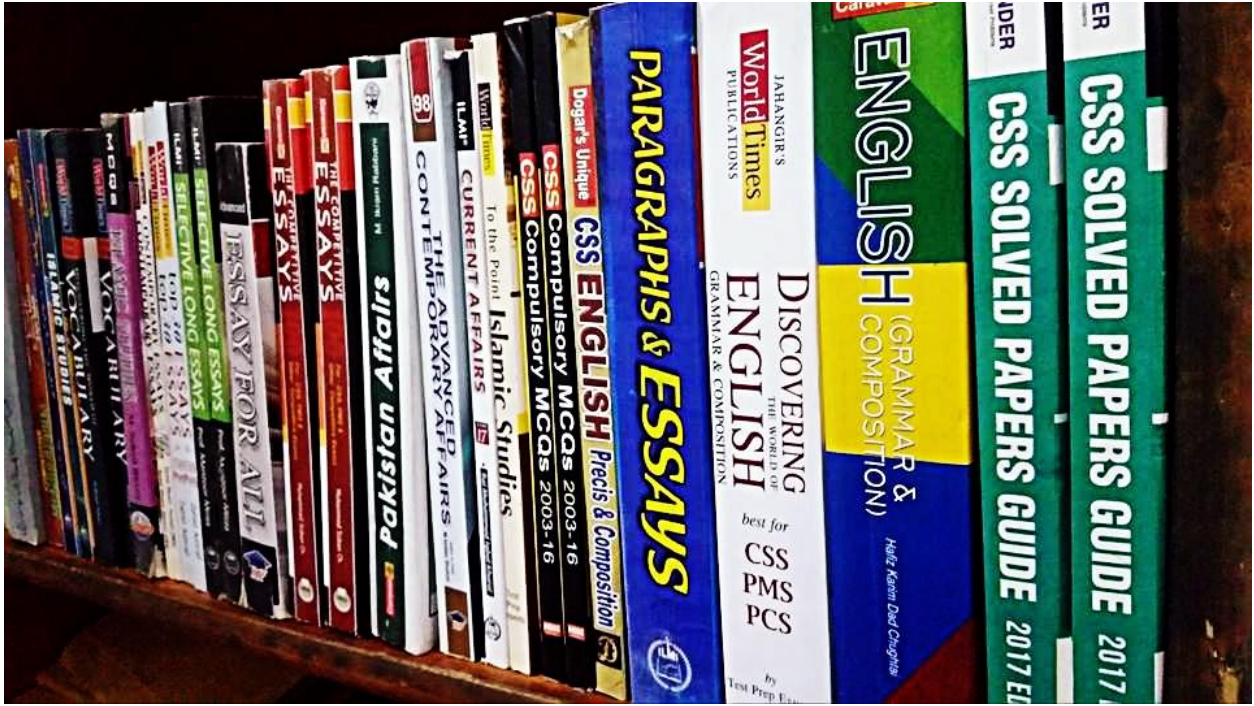
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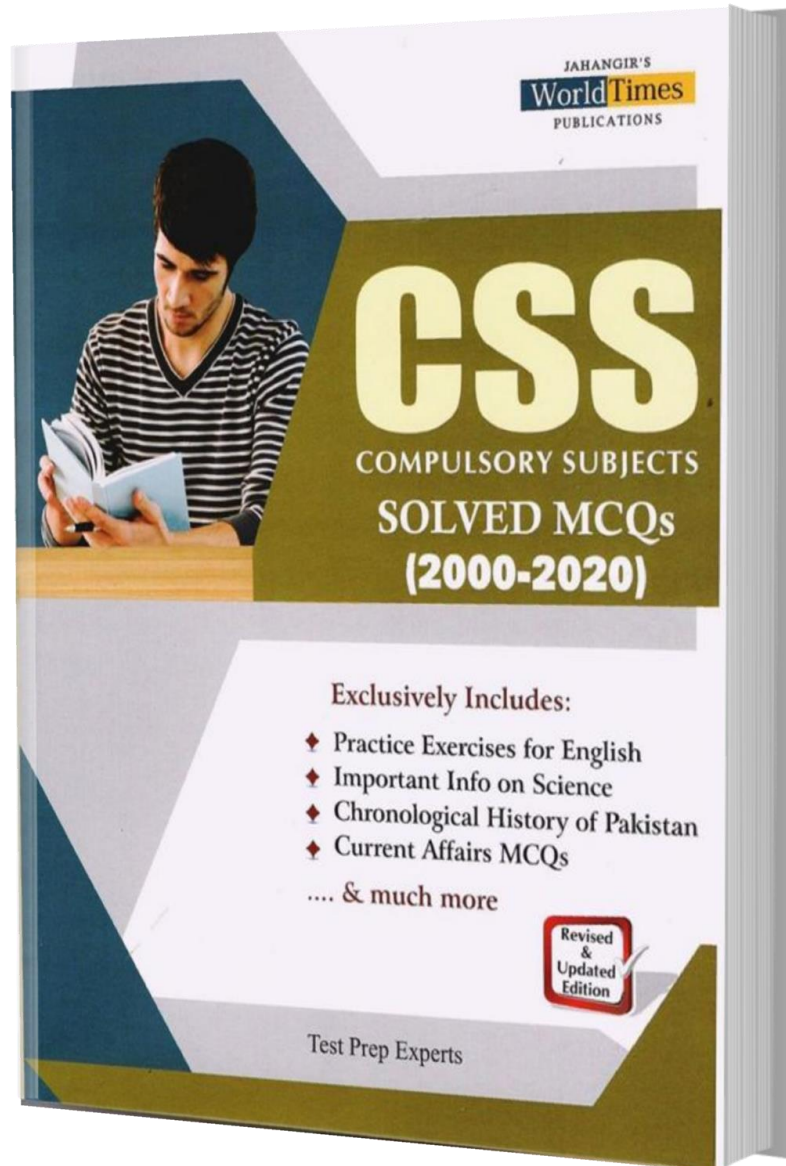
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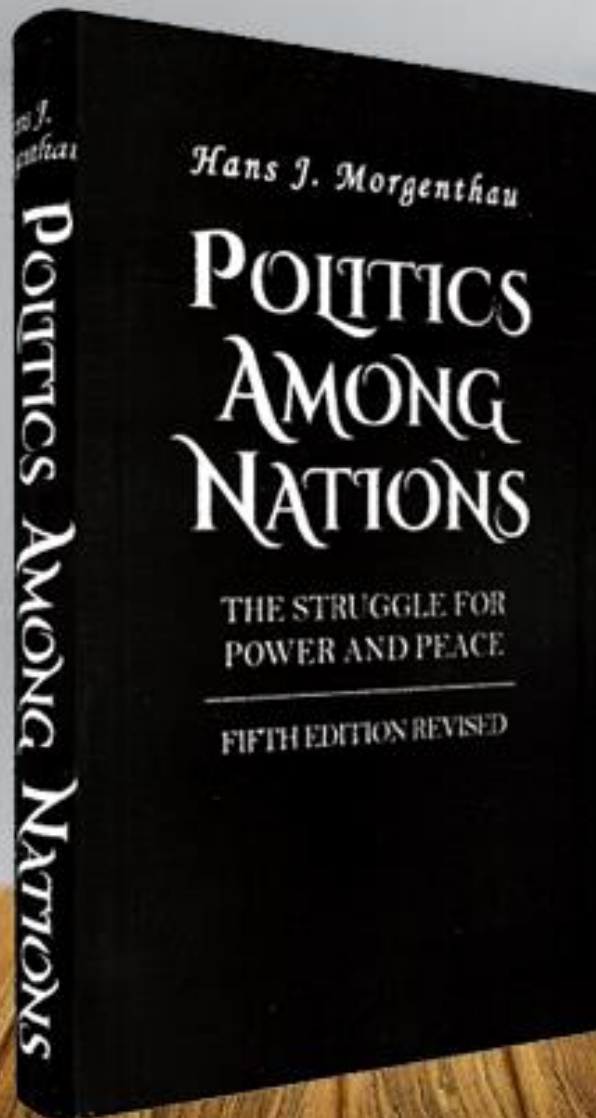
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Labour's crisis

THE international Labour Day is being celebrated this year at a time when tens of millions of workers across the world have lost their jobs in the wake of the recession caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Covid-19 has thrown up one of the biggest challenges for labour across the world, with joblessness growing as governments have shut down economies as part of social-distancing measures to stop the spread of the contagion. Economic experts say the world economy will take a few years to get back on its feet. Yet not all the jobs lost so far will be revived, leaving massive numbers unemployed and over 100m more people slipping below the poverty line.

The situation in Pakistan is no different. With most factories closed and economic growth projected to contract by 1.5pc for the first time in 68 years, the next few years offer little hope to the working classes. The federal planning and development ministry has already estimated job losses resulting from the Covid-19 lockdown at 18m or so, mostly daily-wage earners employed in informal services or industrial sectors. A third of these jobs will not be available when the lockdown is lifted and the wheels of the economy are allowed to move at full steam, which is unlikely to happen for at least a year. Most people left jobless were already living on the margins. Sadly, there is no one to raise a voice for workers owing to a fragmented labour rights movement, which has been emaciated further by successive governments' bias towards powerful business lobbies and investors, and weak implementation of whatever labour laws exist. Millions of our workers in the informal sector or hired on contract by businesses are not allowed to unionise. The workers do not have collective bargaining rights in many sectors. In other sectors, legal requirements make it impossible to unionise labour. And labour unions in most public-sector organisations have lost their edge owing to the weakened financial position of their employers. The worst thing is that collective bargaining rights for labour are not on the agenda of any political party. It is obvious that when politicians talk about the economy they are actually thinking about maximising the profits of business owners rather than improving the working and living conditions of labour in the country.

May Day is a celebration of human dignity. It reminds us of what Martin Luther King once said about no work being insignificant. Indeed, the economic hardships caused by the pandemic will continue to plague our working classes

for a long time. However, our decision-makers can use this time to mitigate the pain now and in the future by strengthening workers' rights to unionise for collective bargaining with their employers to protect their economic interests. Employers need to realise that their businesses will prosper quickly if they keep their employees happy.

Doomed peace pact?

WHEN the peace pact was signed between the Americans and the Afghan Taliban in Doha in February, few believed it would magically usher in an era of harmony and prosperity in the war-torn nation. There were too many spoilers at work, and a wide gulf of mistrust between all involved — the Taliban, the Afghan government and the Americans. While optimists believed that the deal was the groundwork for a broader intra-Afghan reconciliation process, the unfortunate fact is that chances of peace are unravelling fast as violence has not abated. The Taliban may not be targeting American troops, but deadly exchanges between the militia and Afghan soldiers are a regular feature. This goes to prove that any foreign-sponsored peace process in Afghanistan is bound to fail unless all parties inside the country own and honour it.

The options for Afghanistan are grim. If the foreign forces stay, the status quo will continue, as the Taliban continue to hammer the weak dispensation in Kabul. Moreover, nearly two decades of foreign intervention have failed to give the Afghans a functioning state that can deliver the basics. If the foreign forces leave and there is no agreement between Afghan factions, the country is likely to implode and return to the chaos of the post-Soviet Mujahideen era. Neither of these is an attractive option for the Afghan people. Aside from the various Afghan ethno-political factions and the Taliban there are the Islamic State terrorists, who play by a different set of rules altogether. Therefore, from these unpalatable options, the Afghan factions will have to choose the least unattractive: learn to tolerate each other and fight their battles through the ballot box. This is easier said than done, as efforts to 'implant' democracy by the Americas have met with less than stellar results. Meanwhile, an ugly power struggle is playing out in Kabul, as Ashraf Ghani's presidential victory — validated by the Afghan election commission — has not been recognised by Abdullah Abdullah, the erstwhile 'CEO' of Afghanistan and Mr Ghani's chief rival. Perhaps the traditional Afghan jirga can be used as a platform to bring all tribes and ethnic groups together to

discuss the way forward. The Taliban should be part of such a process and any agreement must pledge to protect the rights of Afghan women, all sects and tribes. Such an effort may bear more fruit than foreign efforts.

Prisoners with disabilities

AS noted in a recent webinar by Justice Project Pakistan and NOWPDP, the disruption of life as we know it caused by the global pandemic offers us a rare opportunity to re-examine many a broken system. Shining a spotlight on the intersection between prisoner rights and disability rights, the two organisations discussed the current plight of at-risk inmates in Pakistan's overcrowded and underserviced jails, as well as the more chronic issues plaguing our criminal justice system. According to JPP, Pakistan has at least 2,100 prisoners with physical ailments, about as many with chronic communicable diseases and around 600 with mental illness, all of them particularly vulnerable to contracting Covid-19 and transferring it to overworked wardens who also double as their caregivers. Consider the case of Abdul Basit, a death-row inmate whose execution was stayed in 2016 on a technicality requiring that a prisoner stand on the gallows, which he — paralysed from the neck down — could not. He remains imprisoned, entirely dependent on prison staff to feed and clean him.

How we treat the most vulnerable among us, in times of plenty and of hardship, speaks volumes for us as a society. Human tragedies such as that of Abdul Basit's unfold every day in unsafe and unsanitary prisons across Pakistan, out of sight and mind of the inhabitants of the pristine halls of power. Efforts to revamp the country's prison systems have gone nowhere, as the utility of inflicting cruel and unusual punishment in the form of denial of basic rights to prisoners with disabilities continues unabated, even under the current extraordinary circumstances. Punjab minister Abdul Aleem Khan recently announced his intent to upgrade and reform the province's prisons, such as setting up 'model' jails to ensure humane conditions for prisoners and prison staff alike. It is hoped that this time round some substantive progress is made, and that in the process we learn to recognise and better uphold the right to life and dignity of all incarcerated persons.

Lockdown misgivings

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan is visibly unhappy about the lockdown measures in place to control the spread of Covid-19 in the country. He expressed his reservations at a recent event when he said that the decision to impose the lockdown was taken by the “elite without thinking of the poor”.

During a speech that largely targeted the ruling elite of the past for its apathy towards development, he turned his attention to the present lockdown and its adverse impact on daily wagers. In an attempt to illustrate his earlier point that selfish rulers have brought misery to the common person, he railed against ‘rich people’ for being responsible for the lockdown. The remarks are baffling. Who exactly is the unidentified elite he is referring to and why is the prime minister undermining a decision ostensibly made by the very administration he heads?

It is no secret that Mr Khan along with some prominent voices in his party harbour a disdain for the ‘elite’. The word has become a common political epithet invoked by the PTI to deride political opponents from dynastic political parties and also the rich in the country who ‘take but don’t give’.

Yet what is ironic about the refrain is that Mr Khan and many members of his party — which includes private jet owners and more than one affluent businessman — don’t see themselves as part of this elite. Given the premier’s past and present privileges and that he is the head of the government of the day, such posturing is misplaced.

The fact is that Mr Khan’s party is in power and not just a cog in the wheel of the government machinery — he is in the driving seat. Even if he feels the lockdown was ‘imposed’ on him when Sindh took the lead, the fact remains that it was also adopted by the other provinces and eventually backed by the government — which made the right decision, albeit belatedly. Ironically, Mr Khan on multiple occasions in the past month has even taken credit for the government’s lockdown resulting in lower than projected infection and death rates.

The premier’s criticism betrays an inner conflict and confusion as regards the coronavirus strategy. Mr Khan must be clear about the government’s approach to tackling Covid-19 as it is far from over.

Infection and death rates for Pakistan may not be as dire as they are in other countries, but they are certainly not good and continue to climb. Health ministry data suggests that over 150,000 people will be infected with the virus by May 30. In this situation, the prime minister would be well advised to focus on how targeted relief can be provided to those worst affected by lockdowns if a further extension is needed after May 9. Mixed signals will unnecessarily befuddle the nation as it confronts an unprecedented healthcare crisis.

Lawmakers' dilemma

IN SPITE of all its efforts, the government appears to have failed to convince the opposition to back its proposal for holding a 'virtual parliamentary session' as it is not safe to meet in person for a routine sitting because of the clear and present danger of Covid-19. The opposition is insisting on holding a session where members are physically present; it argues that the Constitution does not provide for virtual sessions, and wants the government to make arrangements in the house to ensure social distancing instead of insisting on videoconferencing. With the National Assembly yet to meet for another 58 days to complete the mandated 130 days sitting for the current year, and with the budget session just around the corner, both sides need to take a step back from their stated positions and find a middle ground soon.

Pakistan would not be the first country to organise a virtual parliamentary session through a video link. Canada has recently experimented with the idea quite successfully despite some glitches. If our parliamentarians are not inclined to follow the Canadian example, they may have something to learn from the UK where the House of Commons held a 'hybrid session' recently. For the first time in its 700-year history, 120 members of the House of Commons participated in the session via videoconferencing, restricting the number of MPs present in the chamber at any time to 50. The remaining 480 MPs were given access to the live session through parliament's website. It should not be difficult for Pakistani politicians to agree to hold a similar hybrid sitting. Each party could ask a third of their members to be present in the house with the remaining politicians participating in the proceedings remotely through videoconferencing. Indeed, this arrangement will not be flawless and many who would want to speak their mind may not be able to express their views on issues to be debated, or intervene as they do during routine sittings. Yet this kind of arrangement should help organise

future sittings for some time to come, without fear of anyone catching the infection. With the Speaker of the National Assembly already quarantined along with his family after contracting Covid-19, it is advisable for opposition parliamentarians to realise the seriousness of the situation and agree to this kind of hybrid arrangement in the larger interest of all lawmakers.

Two unscripted exits

POPULAR movie actors Irrfan Khan and Rishi Kapoor made unscripted exits this week in Mumbai, each succumbing to a stoic battle with cancer. The outpouring of grief from across the seas marked a catharsis not only for the loss on two consecutive days of the much-loved men, but also for the quickened waning of the idea of inclusion and diversity they symbolised and enacted in a range of roles. Kapoor (67) and Khan (53) cultivated different approaches to the cinema and both were capable of producing a surprise trick in their repertoire with disarming ease. Ideologically, they defied the narrow prism of cultural nationalism and struck an easy rapport with picky audiences in Pakistan.

Kapoor expressed this perspective early on in *Henna*, a cross-border love story he did with Zeba Bakhtiyar. Khan played one of his more memorable roles with Saba Qamar in *Hindi Medium*, a sharp comment on class snobbery injected into unsuspecting schoolchildren, a scourge that thrives in both India and Pakistan. Kapoor was a flamboyant hero, mostly, singing amazing songs and wooing young hearts. Khan hardly ever needed to sing in his movies. His expressive eyes, cultured voice and body language did the work for him. Khan benefited greatly from rigorous training at Delhi's National School of Drama, the iconic theatre institution that has produced actors of the calibre of Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri. Kapoor was born into a clan of movie legends, beginning with his grandfather Prithviraj Kapoor who started his career in the silent-era movies of the 1920s. Khan worked his way through a hard struggle, toggling between theatre and TV before embracing the tinsel town. His grooming in theatre spurred his cross-over with ease into Hollywood, where he was applauded for all-round acting abilities in well-regarded movies, including *Life of Pi*. Rishi Kapoor and Irrfan Khan have left a void at a time when the dreams and reveries they helped conjure for millions of fans were more needed than ever before.

Press freedom

TODAY, on World Press Freedom Day, an ugly reality confronts us: never before has Pakistan's media been in such deep peril.

Recently, the Freedom Network — a local media and development sector watchdog — released the State of Press Freedom in Pakistan 2020 report. According to its findings, there were at least 91 instances of attacks against the media and its practitioners during the last 12 months.

The threat has evolved from actual physical harm, particularly common during the war against terrorism in the country, towards a more insidious form of persecution where plausible deniability enables the perpetrators to oppress the media without any consequences for themselves.

Thereby is the fiction of a 'free and independent media' sustained. Consider that no less than 25pc of the violations documented in the Freedom Network report comprise written or verbal threats of dire consequences, with offline and online harassment making up 14pc.

The third category included 11 cases of murder or attempted murder (12pc). The perpetrators most often were state authorities (42pc) while 16pc of the incidents were attributed to political parties.

As always, the objective of these attacks is to browbeat the media into becoming an extension of the state, rather than functioning as an independent entity holding the latter accountable. Certainly, there are bad eggs in the media fraternity, just as there are in any segment of society, but the vast majority desires to simply do its job honestly and without unlawful interference.

However, a creeping authoritarianism in governance overall has been accompanied by increasingly brazen tactics targeting journalists, including fabricated or untenable court cases filed against them. In December, an anti-terrorism court sentenced veteran journalist Nasrullah Chaudhry to five years in jail for alleged possession of banned literature. Last month, the Sindh High Court acquitted him of the charge, a ludicrous one given that media persons can have in their possession all manner of documents for purely professional reasons. In March, NAB arrested the owner of the Jang media group, Mir Shakilur Rahman, in a land case that dates back 34 years.

There are some in the PTI government, however, who recognise that a free and independent media strengthens democracy, and that such independence is contingent upon ensuring the safety of its practitioners. The Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill drafted by the human rights ministry is a promising piece of proposed legislation. Among its several commendable features, it gives wide-ranging powers to a seven-member commission of inquiry — led by a former Supreme Court judge — to investigate and prosecute within 14 days all forms of harassment, coercion and violence against media professionals.

However, with the bill to be clubbed with an earlier one drafted by the information ministry, the end result could be a far weaker piece of legislation. There must be unambiguous support for a truly free and independent media, not further equivocation.

Civil servants rules

THE government has introduced the Civil Servants Rules, 2020, aimed at retiring superseded officials even before they reach the age of 60. The rules include a list of conditions that may enable the competent authorities within the government to send ‘deadwood’ among the bureaucrats home so that civil servants as a whole become more responsive to the requirements of service delivery and focus on their performance. The rules say that officials who may become eligible for early retirement will include those who receive three or more average performance evaluation reports; who have been twice recommended for supersession; found guilty of corruption; or have entered into a plea bargain with NAB or any investigating agency — and a few other such conditions. The government argues the rules will ensure better performance and a more efficient bureaucracy.

However, there is a genuine concern that these rules may end up weakening the bureaucracy and making it vulnerable to political manipulation. One of the key strengths of the bureaucratic structure — the so-called steel frame of governance — is the security of tenure which cannot be tampered with by the government of the day. It is this security that enables the bureaucracy to resist political pressures and uphold the rules and regulations upon which rests the edifice of governance. If this is weakened, or made dependent on individuals — whomsoever they may be — then we run a very real risk of officials scurrying to

be in the good books of those who have the power to decide who stays in service and who is sent packing. The intention behind the formation of these rules may appear to be fair. But operationalising the rules is bound to create problems. In a highly politicised environment like ours, it would be particularly unwise to give governments the power to make decisions about the career fates of bureaucrats. What is to stop the government of the day from making such decisions on the basis of likes and dislikes? The committees and forums that have been given the responsibility to make such judgements as per the new rules also work under the political set-up and are therefore dependent on the leadership. There is no reason why the careers of thousands of bureaucrats should be put in the hands of committees which report to the political leadership. It would be advisable for the PTI government to review this decision and strengthen the bureaucracy instead of further weakening it.

Desperate poverty

A WEEK ago, Mirpurkhas-native Ahsan Jarwar was found hanging from a ceiling inside his home. According to residents, the deceased father of six had been facing extreme pressure to make ends meet and provide for his family. Under the weight of his circumstances, coupled with hopelessness, Jarwar took his own life. While we cannot say with certainty what was going through his mind in his last hours, this is a familiar tragedy that we hear about over and over again: desperate poverty ruthlessly seizes the lives, livelihoods and mental well-being of countless citizens. Nearly a quarter of Pakistan's population lives below the poverty line, while millions of others stand perilously on the brink. For decades, successive governments have failed to build better health infrastructures or ensure greater social protection measures for the most vulnerable groups. Now, in the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic, economic slowdown and extended lockdowns —which are deeply hurting the poorest sections of society ie those who have no choice but to live hand to mouth — it is likely that similar tragedies will be on the rise.

In March, a UN Conference on Trade and Development report stated that the economies of developing countries such as Pakistan will suffer the heaviest blows during the pandemic. Another UN report warned that the health crisis will further widen inequality gaps. Then, more recently, the World Food Programme predicted multiple famines in the near future, threatening much of the global

population with hunger and starvation, which could go on to create deep social fissures and political discord. Already, food riots have been witnessed in some parts of the world, revealing the fragility of the systems in place, which perhaps seemed sturdy only a few months ago. There is no good reason for some to sleep so comfortably at night, while others lie awake, worrying about how they will feed their children the next day, or the day after.

Risk to medics

CORONAVIRUS infections among hospital staff in the country have risen at an alarming rate.

According to data shared by the National Emergency Operation Centre on Thursday, almost 191 more healthcare providers tested positive for Covid-19 within a week — a 75pc jump from the previous week, taking the number of confirmed healthcare worker cases to almost 450.

Nearly a quarter of this staff was working in critical care units, whereas the majority was attending to patients in other wards of the hospital.

With the highest confirmed cases of health workers reported in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, Balochistan and Sindh are not too far behind.

While there is some relief that one-fifth of those infected have recovered, the situation remains serious as, since the end of February, at least nine medical professionals have succumbed to the virus.

The figures paint a grim picture. Each statistic for active cases of healthcare workers represents a doctor, nurse or other hospital staff member who is now in isolation, at home or quarantined in hospital.

Not only does this mean that there are less medical workers attending to patients, it is also a huge blow to the morale and mental health of the medical community.

These individuals, at great personal risk, don their masks and gloves every day to engage with confirmed Covid-19 patients and, at times, have to watch their patients die.

Though living through dread and fear, these heroes continue to show up and be the backbone of our healthcare system even as they face an epidemic of stress.

The government must do everything in its power to protect our healthcare workers. Priority must be given to manufacturing or procuring personal protective equipment; ramping up daily testing — which is still less than half of the targeted 25,000 — and training healthcare staff on how to limit the spread of the virus inside the hospital through strict protocols.

Unfortunately, doctors in almost all the provinces have either taken to the streets to protest the lack of PPE or shared their fears with journalists. Last month's scenes of doctors protesting the lack of equipment in Quetta, and being baton-charged by police were ghastly.

The federal and provincial governments must plan ahead and ensure that such savage episodes are never repeated. Doctors' pleas to authorities for better protection and restricted public movement must not go unnoticed.

Top officials should engage with the healthcare community to understand and address their concerns. Finally, if the rate of infections among medical workers continues to grow, the government must not be defensive about an extension in the lockdown.

The prime minister is right to note that Pakistan's cases are not as bad as those of Italy and the UK. But he should not forget that our healthcare system is also far less sophisticated and developed than the one in those countries.

HRCP report

FOR far too many, life is a series of insurmountable challenges that prevent a full realisation of individual potential. In its latest annual flagship report, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has again shone an unflinching light on the slew of injustices visited upon society's most vulnerable citizens. The fact is, Pakistan continues to fall short in protecting women, children, members of religious minorities, etc. Instead of strengthening institutions and implementing rights-based legislation, the state tends to respond reactively to isolated incidents, that is, if they provoke a certain level of public outrage. Such an approach does not facilitate systemic change. Sadly, human rights do not figure at the top of the state's priorities. Consider that the National Commission for Human Rights is

lying dysfunctional since last May. That said, in a departure from the past, the government has not rejected its contents out of hand. While listing some of its achievements in the human rights arena, it has candidly acknowledged that rights violations in several respects remain unacceptably high.

Archaic notions of honour continue to fuel all manner of violence against women, and prevent their unfettered access to health, education and employment. Pro-women legislation has been on the statute books for years now, but the centre and provinces have shown unforgivable laxity in putting those laws into practice. Sexual abuse of minors is coming to light in ever more horrific forms, such as child labourers being victimised in mines in Balochistan. The newly enacted Zainab Alert law will hopefully to some extent serve its purpose in tracing abducted minors, if it is properly implemented. Child labour laws are flouted with impunity, and cases of horribly abused minor domestic workers create only a temporary stir. Forced conversions of members of religious minorities continue unabated, and for one community in particular, the freedom to worship exists in name alone. Access to justice remains elusive for the people, with close to 1.8m cases pending before the court. While model criminal trial courts introduced in 2019 disposed of many cases swiftly, long-term criminal justice reforms are still awaited. Resolution of enforced disappearances moves at a glacial pace, if at all. Civil society must be steadfast in pushing back against regressive and anti-democratic elements. Curbs on freedom of opinion and expression only serve those who want a fragmented society closed to reason, unwilling to debate — and all the more easy to control.

PIA: living in denial

THE PIA management's decision to annul working agreements with various employees' associations may have been sudden but not unexpected. The present PIA management, which chose Labour Day to derecognise these associations with immediate effect, was showing signs of impatience with some of these groups, especially the one representing the airline's pilots, for some time. Indeed, almost all these associations were without legal bargaining rights and operated as pressure groups to protect the interests of the company's officers and other staffers including pilots, cabin crew, engineers, etc who were not represented as such by the Collective Bargaining Agent. So for the time

being these groups no longer enjoy quasi-legal, collective representation unless a court grants them relief against their employer's decision.

The airline made the decision a day after the government placed it under the Pakistan Essential Services (Maintenance) Act, 1952, for six months to allow it to rescue, evacuate and repatriate thousands of Pakistanis still stranded in different countries. The government and the PIA management evidently felt that the persistent demands of pilots and cabin crew for better safety measures in accordance with the requirements of social distancing for the security of both staff and passengers had been hampering efforts to bring back stranded Pakistanis. Once it was declared an essential service, it became easier for the airline to revoke agreements and derecognise these associations. The presence of these groups is often cited by policymakers and successive airline administrations as a major reason for the decline of the national flag carrier into a bankrupt organisation. That is true, but only partly. Blaming trade unions and other such groups in public-sector organisations for their ruin is to live in denial. If public-sector enterprises such as PIA are in a mess today it is because of years of incompetent management, faulty policies, lack of investment and so on. Overstaffing and uncooperative employees have played only a small role in their downturn. The suppression of trade unions and banishment of such associations will only add to the woes of these enterprises.

Lockdown answers

THE government is mulling a relaxation of lockdown restrictions as it is confronted with alarming repercussions. Figures shared by Planning and Development Minister Asad Umar are indeed startling, as they suggest the closure of up to a million institutions, unemployment of 18m people and forcing 70m people below the poverty line. The picture painted by these numbers is one of sheer hopelessness — a scenario the government wants to understandably avoid. To further build a case to ease restrictions, Mr Umar said that Pakistan's death rate is lower than other countries, and that the hot weather, BCG vaccine or anti-malaria drugs may be underlying factors. "We are living in a region which is blessed for an unknown reason," he said, adding that many more people die in road accidents each month in Pakistan than they do to Covid-19. There is no doubt that a continued lockdown for an indefinite period will unleash crippling economic hardships on vast segments of the country's already stressed

population. The question now is whether Pakistan is ready to relax restrictions, and what these relaxations will look like.

The answer will come from the data. Pakistan's confirmed coronavirus cases have crossed the 20,500 mark with over 450 recorded deaths. These figures have been calculated after a total of 212,000 tests, with maximum daily testing at 9,500. At this rate, and with some lockdown restrictions still in place, nearly 10pc of those being tested are confirmed positive and 2pc of them are dying. If restrictions are lifted, these figures will worsen, because unlike traffic accidents, the number of coronavirus cases can expand exponentially. An individual with the virus can infect two to three others, and those infected can in turn transmit it to many more. If we are looking at a confirmed death rate of two out of every 100 right now, a situation in which millions are confirmed as having infections may result in a high number of deaths in a population where diabetes, heart disease and cancer are not uncommon. Our hospitals are simply not equipped to handle such a high volume of critical cases.

The practical way forward is mass testing and interim targeted relief for the worst-hit sectors. The government is still too far from its goal of 25,000 daily tests and therefore unaware of the true spread of infection. As it ramps up testing, it must also focus on developing strict, enforceable guidelines and affordable solutions to problems the common person faces when dealing with this unprecedented crisis. Even when the lockdown is lifted, the affluent can afford to stay home whereas low-income workers cannot, so they will unfairly face a higher risk. There are no easy solutions, but the government must be prudent as it walks the tightrope between limiting the loss of lives and loss of livelihoods.

India's belligerence

PAKISTAN has done the right thing by approaching the UN to ask India to provide proof, if any, of its incessant propaganda about 'terror launch pads' on this country's soil. After all, the UN already has a military observer group — UNMOGIP — to monitor the situation in the area, and it would not be too difficult for a neutral third party to evaluate the facts on the ground, should India be interested in determining the facts, that is.

Unfortunately, New Delhi has been using the ruse of 'terror launch pads' to step up LoC violations, with deadly results. According to the Foreign Office, there

have been close to 940 LoC violations this year alone, most of which have targeted populated areas. A number of civilians in AJK have lost their lives since the start of the year due to India's belligerence.

India has been whipping up a frenzy over alleged infiltration from Pakistan, with its civil and military leaders both using the 'launch pads' mantra to justify LoC violations. In such a scenario, a fact-finding probe overseen by the UN can help clear the air, as bilateral efforts have up till now not yielded much.

Moreover, in the current situation, it is imperative that both states assume a less threatening and more cooperative posture, as the Covid-19 pandemic knows no borders. The energies — financial, military and political — of both Pakistan and India at this point in time should be focused on battling the coronavirus, a common foe.

If India keeps on beating the drums of war and violating the LoC, Pakistan will respond as this country's civil and military leaders have made clear. Such a scenario is sure to take away governmental focus from the pandemic.

It can only be described as a small mercy that up till now the death toll in both countries has been minimal compared to the horrific body counts coming out of Europe and the US. It should be remembered that far more advanced health systems in the West have been stretched to the limit due to Covid-19. If the contagion spreads further in South Asia and both governments are busy trading fire instead of fighting the pandemic, health systems in Pakistan, as well as India, may well collapse.

To avoid such a nightmare scenario, sabre-rattling must be eschewed, and India must pursue the path of dialogue instead of hurling unsubstantiated allegations.

PCB's online initiative

THE Pakistan Cricket Board's recent move to arrange online lectures by eight legendary cricketers for the benefit of younger players is a fine initiative. Great players including Javed Miandad, Wasim Akram, Mohammad Yousuf, Moin Khan, Mushtaq Ahmed, Rashid Latif, Shoaib Akhtar and Younis Khan are holding interactive online sessions with current and emerging Pakistani cricketers to help them remain motivated and keep their focus on the game during the lockdown period. With all major sporting events and tours either being postponed or

cancelled owing to the unprecedented situation created by the coronavirus pandemic, experts and parent bodies of various sports are apprehensive that depression will set in among the athletes due to inaction. Cricketers, of course, are no exception, and the PCB deserves a lot of credit for coming up with an innovative programme thanks to which iconic players have started sharing their experiences, besides passing on useful tips to young bowlers, batsmen and wicket keepers to ensure that they remain connected to the game.

Lack of mental toughness has been a major challenge for Pakistani players during the past decade or so, especially during overseas tours, and has all too often resulted in brittle performances and defeats. It is unfortunate that previous PCB regimes have not done much to address this problem. Ideally, the team coaches should look into their problems but the players have often felt the need for a mentor to guide them or to share their concerns in moments of crisis. The impact of the online sessions is already evident from the recent statement made by the country's newest pace sensation, 17-year-old Naseem Shah, who said that listening to inspiring stories from his role models is exciting and a rare opportunity to learn how tougher opponents should be tackled. If Pakistan's three-Test tour of England, which is set to commence by the end of July, is on schedule, the online sessions by veteran cricketers will surely hold the current team in good stead.

Sindh-centre tension

THE centre-Sindh spat refuses to ebb away.

It has now been more than nine weeks since the first Covid-19 patient was diagnosed, but Pakistan is still struggling to find a national direction in its fight against the virus.

The reason, unfortunately, is rather clear: politics has trumped prudence.

The Sindh government was the fastest in its response to the deadly virus, and this triggered a strange political dynamic whereby the PTI leadership started looking at the threat through a partisan lens.

For its part, the PPP government in Sindh became even more aggressive in its efforts, buoyed no doubt by the welcome praise it started to garner from the media and public at large.

By March, the concept of lockdown had become a divisive issue whereas it needed to be dealt with purely as a public health strategy requiring coordination between the centre and all the provinces.

Since then, it has been downhill in terms of Pakistan's effort against the scourge of the coronavirus.

The result has been a needless controversy that has soiled the national atmosphere at a time when what we really needed was solidarity and cohesion.

Every day brings forth a new slanging match between ministers of the PTI and PPP, with mutual accusations flying back and forth and diluting focus on the real threat.

Both governments admit this acrimony isn't serving anyone's purpose and yet such is the zero-sum nature of our politics that no one can knock heads together and make them see sense.

The downward spiral appears unstoppable.

The cost of this avoidable bickering is a steep one.

Confused messaging on the lockdown — mainly because the federal and Sindh governments disagreed on the need for it — has led to a weakened impact of the lockdown itself.

The endless quarrel on whether a lockdown is good or bad led to many stakeholders and lobbies jumping into the debate for their vested interests, thereby further complicating matters and sowing the seeds of doubt in people's minds.

Worse, this debate became a PTI vs PPP binary whereas it should have been all about the impact on suppressing the spread of the infection.

Yet no lessons seem to have been learnt.

This bitter partisan wrangling at the time of a national crisis is now infecting other areas of governance.

The threat of a locust attack and our response to it is also falling victim to such wrangling.

It is very unfortunate that the top leadership of the parties is unable to put a stop to this bitter duelling and close ranks against a common threat.

As we enter a crucial phase in the struggle against the virus, it is still not too late for Islamabad and Sindh to rise above their partisan interests and form a united front against Covid-19.

The stakes could not be higher.

Virus politics

STATES the world over are working overtime to try and develop a vaccine to counter the deadly Covid-19 pandemic. However, even this noble effort has been stymied by politics and nationalistic hubris. For example, the US and China have both traded shocking claims, with the former alleging that the virus was ‘manufactured’ in a Chinese lab. Moreover, efforts to form a joint collective against the virus have been obstructed by some who want to go it alone and perhaps emerge as ‘heroes’ on the global stage. Billions of dollars were pledged at an event on Monday sponsored by the EU to help speed up research on the vaccine. Along with the European states, Japan, Canada and the UN as well as individuals and NGOs also made pledges. However, there was one surprising no-show at the event: the US. Asked why no American representatives participated in the fundraiser, US officials gave ambiguous answers. However, it is more than likely that the American president’s distrust of the WHO, as well his ‘America first’ mantra, had a part to play in America’s absence from the event.

In more normal times, such sulking can be put down to ‘national interest’ and election-year grandstanding. But in the midst of a pandemic it is more than bad form for the world’s leading economy to stay away from a fundraising effort designed to deliver a vaccine against an infection that threatens all humanity. The US is, of course, spearheading its own efforts to develop a vaccine, along with China and Europe’s respective efforts, in a medical version of the space race. But unlike the moonshot, in which the Americans and Soviets competed for matters of national pride, finding an antidote to Covid-19 entails a far more serious goal: saving the lives of millions of people. Such an effort should be above national, political and racial considerations and must be for the welfare of humanity. It can best succeed if nations pool their collective energies — scientific and financial — to develop a vaccine without delay. The French president is

correct when he says that a vaccine should be “global public property” available to “the whole of the planet”. No nation or corporation should hog the limelight and try to play saviour. There will be many other occasions for petty politics and displaying ‘national pride’. In the middle of a deadly pandemic, global unity and humanity are the primary concerns.

Start-up potential

THE amendments to the Companies Act, 2017, will help tackle issues that pertain to the definition of start-ups, protection of the latter’s minority shareholders’ rights, stock options for their employees, etc. The improvement in the start-up regulations should help encourage entrepreneurship and innovation. But the development of a conducive start-up ecosystem is impeded by many other issues. The job market is changing globally, with more and more young graduates preferring to work for themselves. Hence, we see start-ups becoming an integral part of the economy in a growing number of countries all over the world. Start-ups not only promote innovation and the use of technology, they also create jobs and help explore new sectors of the economy.

In Pakistan, the start-up culture is yet to take hold, although we have seen quite a few technology companies grow and create space for themselves in the last few years, helped by 3G/4G and the increasing use of smartphones. There are numerous reasons for the slow development of a vibrant start-up environment, beginning with our education system that discourages independent thinking and entrepreneurship. Then the few who try to put their entrepreneurial skills to use and innovate are severely hampered by access to funds. No start-up can hope to survive and grow without financial support. However, our banks and businessmen are too risk-averse to invest in young entrepreneurs or new ideas. It is always hard to convince foreign venture capitalists to put their faith in a start-up that is unable to attract funding from its own country. This rampant aversion to risk and innovation makes it more difficult for a new business to start and sustain itself. It is generally believed that technology-based start-ups can bring about a big change in the economy if properly nurtured and given a chance to grow. In fact, across the world, these start-ups are helping governments reduce hunger, provide education to underprivileged children and extend healthcare facilities to poorer communities. We could also use them to tackle similar problems at home.

Unequal justice

A MORE bleak assessment of the criminal justice system can scarcely be imagined. On Monday, the Islamabad High Court described the criminal justice system in its jurisdiction as “alarming and abysmal... [It] is definitely not serving its purpose; rather it... appears to have become a source of grave injustice”. These remarks were included in a strongly worded judgement by Chief Justice Athar Minallah at the end of proceedings that saw the accused in seven different murder cases acquitted. Most of the individuals had already spent around 10 years each behind bars for crimes they did not commit. Their ordeal is a stark illustration of how the system fails to protect the fundamental rights to life, liberty and due process. Justice Minallah listed several of its more problematic aspects, among them the fatally flawed police investigations that either result in unsafe convictions or allow perpetrators of even serious crimes to go scot-free. Matters in the rest of the country are no different, and the chief justice correctly observed that this shambolic state of affairs has been a very long time in the making. It is “a reflection of the apathy, neglect and mis-governance of the past seven decades and no organ of the state can absolve itself from being responsible.”

Former Supreme Court chief justice Asif Saeed Khosa had also at the beginning of his tenure last year declared his intention to address the undue delays in judicial determination of cases and tackle the scourge of fake witnesses and false testimonies. Setting up model courts across the country to streamline and expedite trial proceedings was part of Mr Khosa’s reform efforts. In 2019, these courts decided more than 30,000 cases. On Tuesday, the day after its scathing verdict, the IHC proposed a policy whereby criminal appeals would be decided within three months, a process that often takes years to conclude. No wonder the country’s overcrowded jails are heaving with under-trial prisoners. Sometimes, inmates die of natural causes while waiting for the outcome of their appeal. In a particularly macabre incident not long ago, two brothers did not live to see their convictions for murder overturned because they had been executed by the state before their appeals were decided.

However, judges can only rule on the evidence presented before them, and only when there are simultaneous reforms in the functioning of the police can there be any improvement in the dispensation of justice. As matters stand, in the absence of resources and training — and the prevalence of a corrupt ‘thana culture’ —

what often passes for 'investigation' is planted evidence, confessions under torture, etc. In other words, the victim can easily be cast as the perpetrator, and the innocent be thrown behind bars simply on the whims of the powerful. And yet, there seems to be no political will to right this dystopian nightmare.

New locust invasion

A SECOND wave of desert locust swarms is waiting to ravage a swath of farmlands across the country this summer. In a new report, the Food and Agriculture Organisation has warned of "a potentially serious food security crisis" and significant livelihood losses unless urgent action is taken to contain the pests breeding in parts of Balochistan, Sindh and Punjab, covering almost 38pc of the country's total area. The infestation could deepen the economic pain already being felt by people because of the Covid-19 outbreak, which has shuttered the economy, forced massive layoffs and pushed millions into poverty. The FAO says the losses to agriculture in case of a fresh locust invasion could reach anywhere between Rs205bn and Rs353bn for Rabi crops and Rs464bn for Kharif crops as the swarms coming from Iran, Oman and East Africa will join the local infestation. The FAO's call for controlling the influx amid the impact of Covid-19 on health, livelihoods and food security and nutrition of vulnerable communities needs to be heeded without delay.

Pakistan is experiencing its worst locust attack in 30 years. Despite significant crop devastation in parts of Sindh, KP, Balochistan and Punjab, the authorities have done little to contain the resurgence of the plague. Farmers mostly find themselves on their own in tackling the infestation. Although the government declared a national emergency this February, inaction has led the pests to breed fast in the coastal areas of Balochistan, as well as in the deserts of Sindh and Punjab. Helped by a wet winter and the absence of effective control operations such as aerial anti-pesticide spraying in the breeding regions, the second generation of hoppers has formed large swarms. Indeed, the locust invasion has caught the authorities unprepared and without proper equipment to fight the threat. But the sad part is that the government has failed to build the capacity to deal with the extraordinary challenge over the last one year. Even the repeated alarm sounded by Sindh is ignored by the federal government at the peril of national food security and the livelihoods of smallholders. The Department of Plant Protection, for example, has been unable to deploy its two crop dusters

because its pilots are not experienced in flying them. With a new wave threatening to destroy crops in the next few weeks, the government should ramp up pest control operations to eliminate the developing swarms before it is too late.

Doctor's death

THE death of senior medical practitioner Dr Furqanul Haq in Karachi a few days ago has raised serious questions about the state of preparedness of the health system in Sindh, and its ability to handle patients in case of medical emergencies on a mass scale.

Of particular concern was the claim made by an office-bearer of the Pakistan Medical Association that no ventilator was available at any of the hospitals the medic was taken to.

Some of these questions appear to have been answered by a special inquiry committee tasked by the Sindh government to look into the incident.

The committee released its report on Wednesday.

However, the findings have raised some new concerns, which the authorities in the province would do well to address.

According to the inquiry committee, “misjudgement” on part of a medical officer at Karachi’s Civil Hospital was the cause of Dr Furqan’s death, as the doctor on duty showed “negligence” in not admitting the patient to the facility when beds were available in the ICU.

Sindh government officials had already said there was no shortage of ventilators in the province.

Perhaps the key lesson to be learnt from this tragedy is that the Sindh health authorities — and indeed health officials across the country — need to develop best practices and SOPs to deal with emergency cases in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Doctors and paramedics are on the front line in the battle against the coronavirus, and are under tremendous stress.

To avoid poor judgement on the part of overburdened doctors and nurses, there should be clear-cut SOPs for all first responders and medical professionals to follow in cases of emergency, which should be communicated to all public and private health facilities.

Moreover, despite official claims that there are enough ventilators in the province, now is a good time to take stock of the medical equipment available to private and public-sector hospitals, especially as coronavirus cases are on the rise.

Zakat matters

THE collection and distribution of zakat by the state has once more come under discussion, this time due to the Supreme Court taking up a suo motu case concerning the government's handling of this religious obligation. The mandatory deduction of zakat at source from bank accounts is a holdover from the Ziaul Haq era, when the military dictator introduced various laws to 'Islamicise' the state. During a hearing last month, the apex court questioned transparency in the distribution of zakat funds, with the chief justice commenting that there was no clear information about how zakat funds were deducted and provided to deserving persons. At a follow-up hearing this week, religious scholar Mufti Taqi Usmani — who had been asked by the court to give his observations — said that if a fresh zakat collection and distribution system could not be put in place, perhaps it was time the state let go of the management of this religious tax.

Even when the mandatory deduction of zakat was introduced by Gen Zia, it was not without controversy. For example, in 1980 Shia protesters marched on Islamabad to protest the forced deduction of zakat. The primary reason for this was that the methodology used to calculate zakat differs in the Jafari fiqh as compared to Hanafi law. Zia had to relent. Later, members of all other sects could also opt out. In fact, just before the first of Ramazan, people belonging to these sects file affidavits or empty out their bank accounts to prevent the deduction of zakat. The fact is that there is a wide trust deficit between the state and the people; citizens are right in asking where and how their zakat funds will be spent. As the learned judges of the apex court also questioned, how can an amount collected for the poor be spent on "foreign trips, TA/DA or salaries. ..."

With the matter currently being reviewed, this would be a good time to revisit the mandatory deduction of zakat by the state. As it is, Pakistanis are a generous

nation. According to various figures, people in this country give billions of rupees in charity annually. The fact is that the state — with its various deficiencies — has no business forcibly collecting zakat. This is a matter between man and his Maker, and should remain as such. Moreover, with such controversy surrounding the spending of zakat funds, it is doubtful that the government can reform the system. Let people give zakat and other dues on their own. After all, many organisations working in the health and education sector have done stellar jobs by spending people’s zakat and donations for the uplift of this nation’s poor, sick and hungry in a transparent, responsible manner. It is about time the state stopped forced deduction, and let citizens give zakat to people or organisations of their choice.

A farce called NAB

NAB IS once more in the dock, literally. The PML-Q leadership — the ruling PTI’s ally — has challenged before the Lahore High Court a NAB decision to reopen a 20-year-old inquiry against Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain and Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi. The inquiry pertains to allegations of misuse of authority, assets beyond means and wilful default under the National Accountability Ordinance 1999 against the petitioners. The three probes had been recommended for closure by investigators in 2017 and 2018 but were reopened last year. The Chaudhry duo claim that the NAB chairman doesn’t have a single piece of evidence or material to form an opinion under the ordinance and authorise an investigation. They have also challenged the accountability body’s jurisdiction to invoke the money-laundering law against them. But has the lack of credible evidence ever deterred NAB from (re)opening a probe, arresting a person or overstepping its authority in general?

The petitioners argue that the bureau’s credibility and partiality had been the subject of public debate because of its use for political engineering, and maintain that the order against them was meant to “contain and cage” them and limit their party’s role in politics. They point out that even the superior judiciary had taken notice of NAB’s conduct and the manner in which its officials exercised their powers in the past. This sounds familiar. The Chaudhrys aren’t the first or the last casualty of the accountability body, which allegedly helped the powers that be to engineer the 2018 polls, demoralised bureaucracy and dampened business sentiments long before the Covid-19 contagion struck the economy. It is just that

it has hit closer to the homes of those who thought they were protected against the bureau's high-handedness. NAB's poor track record in solving cases on the basis of solid evidence should be a matter of massive embarrassment for the anti-graft watchdog, which has lost its credibility, if, indeed, it ever had any. Realising the negative impact of its accountability drive on the economy, the government had a few months ago issued an ordinance to selectively clip the bureau's powers to proceed against bureaucrats and businessmen. But that has not solved the problem. The accountability law that provides for NAB's creation is a bad law and no change will ever give it credibility. The law needs to be repealed and the bureau shut down for the sake of ending this farce and creating an atmosphere where people can feel safe regardless of their political affiliations.

Deprived of inheritance

WOE betide a woman who insists on her rights in this patriarchal society. The full spectrum of family and communal pressure, underpinned by hidebound notions of 'honour', is applied to compel her retreat. A report in this paper yesterday told of the ordeal endured by 20-year-old Iqra Perveen in rural Punjab simply because she had the temerity to demand her share in the family inheritance. A series of interdependent family ties complicated the scenario still further, driving her to threaten suicide. An uncle of Iqra's has filed an application with the police, claiming her father and brothers were indeed scheming to deprive her of her share and that she was in danger of being killed by them on the pretext of honour.

The story is sadly typical of a society where women have to navigate a plethora of prejudices and misogynistic traditions on a daily basis. Legislation to protect their rights may have been on the statute books for several years, but many women's lived reality is quite different. Defiance can come at a very high price, and acquiescence in an essentially male-dominated environment seems far more practical than seeking redressal. Last year in Punjab, a woman was rescued after having been held captive in a room for an entire decade by her brothers who did not want her to get her rightful share in the family property. Under the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011, depriving women of inheriting property by "deceitful or illegal means" is punishable with imprisonment of up to 10 years, but no less than five, or with a Rs1m fine, or both. Nevertheless, men's sense of entitlement continues to trample on the rights of female relatives. Sometimes

however, outliers like Iqra Perveen emerge, refusing to be cowed by ‘tradition’, demanding they be given their due. The state must not countenance any attempt to intimidate women into giving up their inheritance; those guilty of trying to do so must be firmly dealt with. Only then can things change.

Disrupted learning

AMONG the many functioning systems that the coronavirus has brought to a grinding halt, schooling and education have been dealt a major blow which will have a long-term impact on millions of students. All over the world, the threat from Covid-19 has forced governments to postpone exams and close down schools, colleges and universities for fear that young people, though generally more resilient to the effects of the infection, can still be asymptomatic carriers of the virus. In the case of younger children attending primary school, the practices of social distancing, avoiding contact and wearing masks would be nearly impossible to enforce, so the case for authorities to close them is even stronger. In developed countries like the UK and US, as well as some institutions in Pakistan, school administrations have tried to adjust to the ‘stay-at-home’ period with online lessons and virtual classes. But for the majority of children in developing countries across Asia and Africa, structural inequalities makes this new normal of digital learning a huge challenge.

In Pakistan, limited access to technology means that millions of students who cannot hop online will be left out. Due to low internet penetration and a lack of hardware and software tools, children attending schools in low-income communities will simply not have remote-learning options. To make matters worse, the lockdown-induced economic meltdown will increase the pressure on low-income households, where parents will be forced to choose between sending children to school or to earn. Pakistan already has many challenges when it comes to keeping children in school. With an already unacceptably high dropout rate, in the post-Covid-19 era, education will be one of the first casualties in families who have limited resources. Tragically, in this grim economic period, women and girl children will be at a greater disadvantage. Studies have predicted that, as a result of the gendered difference in educational attainment, a loss of even six months of education as a result of Covid-19 will have a proportionally greater impact on girls in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

These are compelling reasons for the government to make an all-out effort to limit the damage to students. The centre and the provinces have to come up with a practical plan of enforceable action centred on opening up different channels of learning. The government must look at local citizen-funded start-ups that have successfully piloted educational models in low-income communities. With input from stakeholders and education innovators, these models can be replicated at a provincial and national level. Millions of children in the country are already suffering due to low investment in the education sector, for which we are paying a heavy price. Authorities ought to act fast, as it is not just Covid-19 that has to be battled. Alongside the fight against the spread of the pandemic there are myriad other battles, not least among them education.

Minorities' plight

RELIGION is central to the identity of the vast majority of Pakistanis, regardless of which faith or sect they belong to. But while the principle of freedom of religion is enshrined in the Constitution, contradictions abound, and Pakistan's minorities often live under a cloud of fear and insecurity, particularly if they belong to disadvantaged classes or castes, or are continuously scapegoated and demonised by the powerful. Instead of receiving protection, vulnerable groups are ignored or thrown under the bus, over and over again, as they navigate layers of systemic discrimination and deeply rooted cultural biases, making some feel like lesser citizens in their country of birth. To ensure minorities receive their due rights and protections, the cabinet recently approved the reconstitution of the National Commission for Minorities, but the move has already met with a series of setbacks and controversies. First, the federal government withdrew the decision to include Ahmadis in the list of religious minorities — a decision vociferously defended by the minister for religious affairs — further denying the community any form of representation. In a country where people define themselves (and others) by their religious beliefs, where does this leave an already marginalised community? What exactly is their status?

Then, in a five-page report to the Supreme Court, the one-man commission of Dr Shoaib Suddle detailed further obstacles created by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the setting up of the NMC. The problems surrounding the formation of the body simply reflects how far we are from becoming a truly equitable society in letter and spirit. While we rightfully condemn the cruel treatment that minorities —

particularly Muslim minorities — in many other parts of the world are subjected to, we turn a blind eye to the abuse taking place under our watch or go into denial and get defensive about our own poor track record. The father of this nation said that religion is not the business of the state, but throughout Pakistan's history, the state has made religion its business at every turn. Unfortunately, to distract from their failings and weaknesses, or to fulfil their own strategic and worldly ambitions, the powerful make opportunistic choices, while the 'silent majority' unthinkingly become accomplices to oppression. If nobody stands up for what is right, or wants for others the same freedom and security they seek for themselves, we will keep spiralling down a very dangerous path.

Iran arms embargo

AS the US has begun to intensify its campaign to renew a UNSC arms embargo against Iran that is due to expire in October, the Islamic Republic has started to push back, indicating that there will be far-reaching consequences if the embargo is extended. The US secretary of state has said he is "hopeful" the embargo would be extended, to which the Iranian president has replied that "grave consequences" would follow if that proved to be the case. Moreover, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council has said the multilateral nuclear deal, which the US unilaterally exited in 2018, "will die forever" if the UN sanctions are extended.

Iran's unease at the move is understandable. Despite signing the landmark 2015 nuclear deal that was widely hailed as a triumph of multilateral diplomacy over belligerence, the fruits of this agreement have failed to materialise for Tehran. This is mainly because the US has browbeaten all foreign investors thinking of putting their money in the Islamic Republic. To add to this, Donald Trump's exit from the nuclear deal did away with years of painstaking diplomacy and set Washington on a collision course with Tehran. The American assassination of top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in January sent alarm bells ringing across the world, as the international community braced for a destructive new Middle East war. Thankfully, both sides backed down. It is also a fact that Iran has suffered greatly during the Covid-19 pandemic; Iranian officials say sanctions have impaired their efforts to secure medical supplies. At this time, extending the arms embargo would send the wrong message, and will add to tensions in an already traumatised world. Instead, Iran must be given sanctions relief in the

midst of the pandemic. The Iranian establishment must also proceed with caution and refrain from reacting emotionally to provocations. If the embargo is extended and what remains of the nuclear deal is scuttled, the political and security temperature in the Middle East is bound to rise.

Civil defence force

VOLUNTEER work is not new to Pakistanis. We have seen people of all age groups stepping up in times of natural disasters and helping their countrymen without any expectation of reward or recognition. It was, therefore, no surprise to see many individuals and groups reaching out to those hit hard by the shuttered economy in the wake of the countrywide lockdown enforced to slow down the spread of Covid-19. As part of this effort, thousands of young men and women have joined the Corona Relief Tiger Force, an army of volunteers raised by Prime Minister Imran Khan's government to distribute ration and help out people who have lost their livelihoods. In some parts, these volunteers have also been asked to identify and register families in need of cash support from the Ehsaas Programme. The strategy to raise a new body of volunteers has provoked a reaction from the opposition and civil society activists involved in humanitarian relief work on the political nature of the force. After all, the majority of volunteers are either affiliated with the PTI or support it. Theoretically, political parties do have a right to try and win over voters by taking action they feel is for the public good, but in the acrimonious political atmosphere that exists in the country today, many might argue against this logic. Only time will tell whether or not the initiative was worthy of the resentment it has generated.

What is clear is that the government has missed the opportunity offered by the health crisis to resurrect and reorganise the politically neutral civil defence force, an organisation of volunteers with an institutional infrastructure and a significant presence in all the provinces. The civil defence force organised under the Civil Defence Act, 1952, was formed to mobilise and organise communities to aid the government in times of emergencies. Volunteers were trained to work and help people in different situations as first responders. But the institution has fallen prey to official neglect and fund shortages and is in disarray. There would have been more appreciation for the government had it revived this legal entity, recruited volunteers and trained them to work in hazardous situations such as the present one instead of mobilising volunteers under the party banner.

The government can still use the institution to help the people by persuading Tiger Force volunteers to work within the institutionalised framework of civil defence. If it cannot do that, the government could ask primary school teachers to join civil defence forces for voluntary work at least during the holidays while new volunteers are recruited. In KP, the deployment of civil defence volunteers is helping the administration spread awareness about Covid-19, supply ration to vulnerable communities, enforce lockdown restrictions and so on. If KP can put this force to use why can't the other provinces do the same?

Herd immunity?

BASED on the remarks of two key officials at the helm of pandemic control in the country, it appears that the federal government is pursuing an unannounced policy of 'herd immunity'.

The first indication of this came from SAPM Dr Zafar Mirza, who in an interview with DawnNews earlier this week conceded that "it will be better for the future if coronavirus spreads at a certain level so people can become immune".

Also read: Sweden opted for 'herd immunity' against a total lockdown. Is it paying the price?

The second, albeit less categorical, message came from federal minister and NCOC chair Asad Umar during a talk show. Although he said it is not a policy decision, he justified it by saying that the logical conclusion of the pandemic is either a vaccine or a situation where 70pc of the population contracts the virus and achieves herd immunity. That these remarks have come as the government prepares to ease lockdown restrictions — despite the spike in death and infection curves — is extremely troubling.

In theoretical terms, herd immunity is a concept based on the body's immune resistance to the spread of a contagious disease within a population. It is achieved when a significantly high proportion of individuals are vaccinated against it and therefore develop immunity. When enough people are vaccinated, a virus is unable to spread through the population.

However, the reality is that there is no vaccine for the coronavirus as yet. In the absence of a vaccine, immunity to the virus can likely only be achieved if an individual contracts it and survives, developing antibodies in his or her system.

If, by Mr Umar's calculation, three-fourths of the population contracts Covid-19, the results in Pakistan would be catastrophic. At present, 2.2pc of those testing positive in the country die. Even if that grim percentage is halved, if 140m people contract Covid-19, we would be looking at at least 1.4m deaths. It would require the immuno-compromised to be sacrificed for the sake of the economy — a notion which is unacceptable and inhumane.

Despite what Mr Umar appears to be suggesting, the herd immunity approach is being pursued by very few countries. The UK's initial decision was to take this approach, but the lack of restrictions and the rapid spike in cases and deaths forced a rethink. Currently, it is only being pursued by Sweden, which is drawing flak from scientists across the world.

The government needs to say clearly that it is not pursuing the policy of herd immunity as it eases the lockdown.

Mourning processions

MOST experts are of the firm view that social distancing and avoiding large crowds is the best way to keep the coronavirus at bay. However, this sage advice has fallen on deaf ears in some countries, Pakistan included. Despite fervent appeals by medical experts, people have failed to practise social distancing and are treating Covid-19 as just another illness. This has had an obvious impact with cases crossing the 28,000 mark, and more than 600 deaths in the country. Unfortunately, many clerical elements in Pakistan have also reacted emotionally, and instead of counselling their flock to pray at home have insisted that congregational prayers at mosques continue. While doctors and health experts had advised against allowing large communal prayers, the state caved in to the clerics and gave the green light for congregational prayers, including taraweeh during Ramazan. Now the majority of Shia clergymen in the country insist that the mourning processions to mark Yaum-i-Ali, which falls on Friday, will go ahead. A delegation of Shia ulema met the federal religious affairs minister on Friday in Islamabad and said the processions will be taken out. Although the minister remained ambiguous, the Sindh government had recently issued a notification indicating that processions and all other large-scale religious programmes would not be allowed.

This is a time for prudence, not emotionalism. While clerics say the processions will be brought out 'by observing SOPs', this is easier said than done. After all, tens of thousands of people attend the main processions, and especially in Karachi, when the juloos winds its way through the old city area social distancing becomes impossible. Local Shia ulema need to reconsider their inflexible approach, especially when the highest Jafari jurisprudential authorities in Iraq and Iran have urged caution, and have called on the faithful to follow government protocols. No heed should be paid to social media campaigns being run by anti-Shia extremist groups celebrating the temporary suspension of mourning processions. At this juncture, preventing more infections and saving lives should be of paramount concern.

Healthcare lessons

PARTS of the world are beginning to emerge from the worst of the coronavirus pandemic. Battered and bruised they understandably are, but in the long run what will sustain them and all the others who are still in the thick of the crisis are the lessons learnt from the horror they have lived through, and their willingness to act on them. On Wednesday, at a virtual briefing in Geneva, the World Health Organisation chief Tedros Ghebreyesus said as much when he urged countries to invest in their healthcare systems rather than scramble for solutions when the next pandemic arrives. "We cannot continue to rush to fund panic but let preparedness go by the wayside," he observed. The world, he added, spends around \$7.5tr annually on health — amounting to nearly 10pc of global GDP — but had for too long neglected investment in preparing for emerging pathogens.

Pakistan is far from out of the woods, and the next few weeks could be critical. All eyes are on the country's creaky health infrastructure as it comes under increasing, unbearable strain. The pandemic has been a rude wake-up call for the country's leadership and its skewed priorities that have always placed security concerns above all else. Health is chronically underfunded, far below 6pc of GDP recommended by WHO. Planning is shambolic: a substantial chunk of even the inadequate health budget often lapses by the end of the fiscal year. Several chronic medical conditions — exacerbated by cultural practices, lack of access to quality health services and often ineffectual public awareness campaigns — are endemic to the population. These ailments, among others, include hepatitis C (one of the highest prevalence rates in the world),

tuberculosis and of course polio, where we stubbornly remain among the last two countries where the disease is yet to be eradicated. Sporadic, seasonal outbreaks of dengue, measles, Congo-Crimean haemorrhagic fever, etc add further to the disease burden and the toll on the economy through lost working days. Moreover, because Pakistan has been so remiss on the health front, challenges thrown up by the pandemic could make us fall behind still further. Reports suggest that the lockdown has adversely affected children's routine immunisation as well. And two WHO reports indicate that disruption to health services because of the contagion could cause a 20pc increase in TB incidence over the next five years.

After the coronavirus storm finally passes, it should not be business as usual. Pakistan's ramshackle public health sector must get the funding and the priority it deserves. Instead of a fragmented approach that leans towards firefighting, there must be holistic, multi-sectoral preventive health programmes engaging a wide range of stakeholders. It is also time to kick-start the country's moribund population planning programme. This once-in-a-century pandemic should be accompanied by the realisation that health must be treated not as a privilege, but as a right.

A divided world

ON Friday, UN Secretary-General António Guterres condemned the "tsunami of hate" that is being witnessed in the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic. There may indeed be a spike in the number of hate crimes and xenophobia globally, taking a uniquely ugly shape in each country it poisons, but much of these resentments were already in place before the pandemic unleashed itself. The seeds of division were planted long ago, and have seen the sudden rise of populist leaders who capitalised on divisive sentiments to come to power. As people now search for scapegoats to pin the collective blame on, racism and paranoia have only intensified. In particular, Chinese and Asian-descent people have been the target of verbal harassment and physical assault. In the US, a man from Myanmar and his young children were stabbed by a teenager who thought they were "infecting people with the coronavirus". In Australia, a video surfaced of an unruly woman kicking and spitting at two sisters of Asian descent. In Italy, racist graffiti appeared overnight, and in one video, an elderly Asian couple are being followed by a man with a camera, calling them "filthy" and

“disgusting”. On the other hand, in China itself, African immigrants were subjected to racism after being accused of carrying the virus. In India, Muslims have been repeatedly targeted, attacked, humiliated, and in some instances, barred from entering their homes and villages. In Bulgaria, the Roma community cited discrimination after facing stricter lockdown measures.

To make matters worse, the misuse of technology and the rapid spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories have led to minority groups being singled out for violence. Mr Guterres particularly voiced his fears about the increasingly rabid anti-immigrant sentiments, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, but also extended his concerns to various professional communities who are on the front lines of the battle against the virus: journalists, healthcare practitioners, human rights activists and aid workers. Then there is the stigmatisation of sickness, with Covid-19 patients being subjected to cruel and careless words and ‘jokes’, increasing their sense of isolation and helplessness. With the virus continuing to claim victims at an alarming scale, it is shameful that, even in these desperate times, better sense has not prevailed. The pandemic presented an opportunity for unity, collective action and the recognition of our shared humanity. Instead, the world is as divided and unkind as ever.

The informal challenge

INFORMAL workers everywhere are the most threatened by the situation arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic. An ILO report has acknowledged this fact as it builds a case for maximum possible protection for the 1.6bn informal-sector workers across the globe. The report focuses on the double-edged sword that these countable, yet in so many ways unrecognised and exploited, workers have been exposed to thanks to the dangerous virus that targets both lives and livelihoods. These informal workers ie fruit vendors, domestic help, doorstep salesmen, gardeners, etc, whose jobs have been insecure even in better times, are perhaps the earliest economic martyrs of Covid-19. Already many of them — men as well as a large number of women with almost invisible jobs — have received the bad news that a world with closed doors cannot support the type of trade or service they offer. The numbers all over are going to rise before policymakers go back to the drawing board to redesign the world along the lines of hopefully more humane economic principles.

Health and exposure to disease has been one area of concern for those trying to steer the informal workers towards some kind of security. The ILO report hints one more time at the grave health risks that come with informal work, such as domestic labour for example. Denied any kind of formal medical cover, people working as domestic help or in small-scale informal industries or at a limited level on their own cannot afford medical care. And given their particular circumstances they are most likely to be asked to perform chores that force them to intermingle and take them deep into danger zones — for instance, kitchen workers who may be exposed to infections their employers are afflicted with at a particular time. Small shopkeepers, plumbers and tailors working diligently to complete Eid orders all populate the informal sector. Covid-19 is a reminder that they too need to be protected from both the infection and economic hardship.

A worrying gamble

AS was expected, hundreds of thousands of people came out of their homes on the first day of the relaxed lockdown. In every province, markets and shops were crowded as if the virus and its very real threat were things of the past. Scenes in bustling commercial areas showed that the practice of ‘social-distancing’, mask-wearing and general precaution were all but forgotten. This happened as Pakistan crossed the 30,000 mark for positive cases and Sindh recorded over 1,000 Covid-19 cases — the highest in a single day. These results were obtained after close to 5,500 tests were conducted in the province in 24 hours, which means approximately 20pc were positive. The situation is already serious and the reports from hospitals and doctors suggest that the situation will get worse. According to the Sindh health minister, there is a sharp increase in the number of patients “after every half an hour” and the number of beds in high-dependency units across hospitals in the province are running short. While the graph for positive cases remains on the incline and recorded deaths reach 670, the lockdown appears to exist merely in name. The caveat for following SOPs, too, has been ignored, and bodes poorly for what lies ahead.

The coming weeks will determine whether the government’s gamble of restarting business was worth the risk. Worryingly, the data and the size of crowds in public contradict this decision. If the government is unable to effectively enforce SOPs, as the scenes from yesterday indicate, the results will be disastrous. Already, congregations in mosques are violating the protocols agreed upon between the

government and clergy. There is also very little hope that the rest of the general public will suddenly observe SOPs. In Punjab, where contact-based industries such as barbershops and salons have been allowed to open, implementing SOPs will be an even bigger challenge as many of these businesses exist in closed, private spaces. If the cases and deaths continue to climb at this rate — which the data predicts may happen — the authorities must be quick and decisive in their response and revoke relaxations in the lockdown. A scenario where these cases and deaths rise and no action is taken will cripple the healthcare system and be a collective blow to both society and the economy.

As the government mulls its next move, it should focus its resources on ramping up testing. While testing has increased to around 12,000 per day, it is still far less than the goal of 25,000. Furthermore, members of the federal and provincial governments should end hostilities which are continuing unabated in this pandemic. The presence of the coronavirus and the ensuing chaos have created an unprecedented situation which demands extraordinary leadership. Name-calling and blame games will only worsen the public's already low levels of trust in the state.

Railway probes

TRAIN accidents are a common feature in Pakistan — and for the railway bureaucracy they are just another routine matter in their daily work. Statistically, at least one train accident takes place in the country every three days and an increase in their frequency can be noticed in recent years. For the most part, the accidents are caused by derailments and involve the loss of railway or private property. But in other instances, such as the horrific Tezgam fire accident in October last year, we have seen scores of people losing their lives for no fault of their own. Normally, the railway authorities carry out a departmental probe into every accident for the sake of meeting legal requirements. However, most such probes are usually left incomplete because no one — not the politicians, bureaucracy or the public — is interested in the reasons. It is only when there is significant loss of life that a serious investigation is ordered under public pressure. It is another matter that the findings of such probes are also swept under the carpet on completion because most of those who travel in trains come from the middle- to low-income groups. Moreover, to pacify the public and to protect the higher railway bureaucracy, the inquiries are generally a way to find

scapegoats and put the blame on junior operation staffers such as drivers. It is difficult to recall the railway management ever initiating administrative action against higher officers after an accident. Even when a railway officer or junior staffer is suspended on the recommendation of a probe, the orders are revoked in a few weeks if not within days.

A recent inquiry into a couple of incidents of train derailments carried out by the intelligence unit of the railway police has identified four main factors responsible for accidents: poor railway infrastructure and fractured tracks, overloading of freight trains, over-speeding by drivers, and indifference and negligence on the part of the higher railway bureaucracy towards the current state of affairs. The report clearly shows that a number of accidents could have been prevented had the senior railway management/bureaucracy performed their jobs honestly and were more vigilant. The inquiry shows the necessity for holding the top rail bureaucracy to account for their acts of omission and commission. But will the authorities be able to carry out the accountability of the senior railway bureaucracy? The jury is out.

Media workers at risk

FIFTY journalists were tested for the coronavirus in Quetta recently. The results of no less than 27 — more than half — turned out to be positive. It is yet another reminder that the list of those who advocate protection against the virus but do not always practise what they promote doesn't end with the government. Media workers, in their rush to get the news, are constantly seen exposing themselves to the danger the virus presents. Unfortunately, news-disseminating organisations are prone to crossing the line very frequently, thus exposing their staff to risks that would not normally fall in the category of the usual occupational hazards. Bad news related to these journalistic exposures that emanate from pursuing dangerous trends in the cut-throat information market is then only to be expected, as we have seen in the case of Quetta which is not the only instance of media workers testing positive. Journalists and their co-workers, in the latest race to rule the airwaves, have been struck by Covid-19 in other parts of the country as well. In the grimmest example, offices have been sealed and staffers forced into quarantine. The latest evidence provided by Quetta only reinforces the bitter irony that those who have been calling out for everyone else to take

protective measures have themselves been forced to work without sufficient safety measures in place.

So where does this leave those who employ these reformers, opinion makers and information disseminators who have been trying to guide the public to a safe path in order to protect them from infection? The restraint the professionals in the field and media trade unions have been pleading for has been thrown to the wind as the force of the market brutally lifts the old-fashioned mission-mask to reveal yet one more time tendencies that call for urgent pro-worker action. Providing protective gear to those exposed in the field must precede a commitment by media owners who hardly need to be sensitised about the dangers they are pushing others into.

Lawmakers' reality

BOTH houses of parliament have returned to work.

Unfortunately, it seems that the long break away from the legislature has done little to diminish the lawmakers' enthusiasm for blame games which are witnessed as much outside as within the august halls.

On Monday, the National Assembly met after nearly two months for a pre-budget sitting to discuss the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The session will continue till Friday before the Assembly reconvenes for the budget session after Eid.

Unlike the British House of Commons, which recently chose to convene a hybrid session, allowing only 50 MPs out of a total of 650 inside the chamber while accessing the input of others through videoconferencing, our elected representatives had rejected a proposal to organise a virtual session, citing constitutional and technological reasons.

Their insistence on meeting in person at a time when infection rates are rising indicates their aversion to changes that democracies across the world are willing to consider.

True, the Assembly administration had taken social-distancing measures, some routine rules were suspended and political parties allowed their members to use their personal discretion when it came to attendance.

The presence of bureaucrats and journalists was also restricted.

Yet, a number of MNAs ignored social-distancing guidelines, shook hands and hugged each other despite warnings from the chair.

Many did not wear masks or gloves.

It makes no sense then for the opposition, especially the PML-N, to not budge from its position and make room for hybrid or virtual sittings at this time.

Their fear that the government could misuse a hybrid or virtual system to curtail the opposition's role in future stems from a deep-rooted mistrust between the two sides.

No doubt, it is necessary for parliament to function even in these times.

The opposition in a democracy has a very important role to play by questioning and debating government policies and actions.

However, one expects more flexibility from both sides in the face of new, perilous realities.

With the National Assembly speaker and some others from the parliamentary staff having tested positive for Covid-19, great care should have been exercised before convening the session.

Had the opposition agreed to a virtual or hybrid sitting, its leader Shahbaz Sharif and Prime Minister Imran Khan, as well as some others could have participated in a meaningful debate.

All is not lost.

The treasury and opposition can still use this session to reach an agreement on parliamentary sittings until the threat is over.

We know that many MNAs such as Minister Chaudhry Fawad Hussain who did not attend Monday's session genuinely feel there is an unnecessary risk involved.

An agreement at the national level will be an incentive for the provinces to also hold virtual/hybrid sessions.

After all, it is as important to discuss provincial Covid-19 policies as the federal response to the crisis.

Medicine import

THE issue of importing medicines and raw material used in the making of drugs from India continues to generate a heated debate in this country. Any import from across the border is frowned upon given the tense relationship between the two countries especially after New Delhi's brute annexation of India-held Kashmir a few months ago. But while the subjugation of the people of occupied Kashmir is no doubt one of the sorest points in global politics, other realities reflect the extent to which one country must depend on another to keep itself moving. The latest example is the brief spat between the US and India where President Donald Trump put pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi to lift the ban on the export of hydroxychloroquine.

Pakistan's own demand of medicines from India is seen in a context where the recipient is expected to be grateful to the supplier. It should not be impossible to see these imports from India, especially at this time, as trade deals, instead of viewing them as a favour. Indian exporters of drugs have a big market in Pakistan. Pakistani importers place their orders with them since it is a cheap and convenient choice. They don't purchase other items from India simply because they can afford not to. The day drug manufacturers here find a better alternative they will move away from India. No one is doing anyone a favour even if the exercise saves lives. The prime minister's aide Mr Shahzad Akhtar must keep this in mind as he probes the unauthorised import of Indian medicines. A report in this paper has put the number of such drugs at more than 450. There is also a strong message from drug manufacturers in the country who have warned against the banning of raw material import from India used in the making of medicines. It is said that 95pc of drugs here are manufactured from imported raw material. Of this almost 50pc is from India and the rest from China and the West. This reflects our dependence on others and points to the need for investment in research by pharma. Until better alternative local or foreign sources are found, we have no option but to buy it from the best market option available, without

thinking that there are any compassionate grounds behind this bargain between us and the shopkeeper.

Banning groups

STARTING from the Musharraf era, the state has regularly been proscribing a variety of outfits, including sectarian death squads, jihadi militant groups as well as extreme nationalist organisations advocating separatism. This process of banning has yielded mixed results, with some outfits simply changing their names and carrying on with business as usual under new monikers. In the latest round of proscriptions, three Sindh-based groups have been banned by the state: the Sindhu Desh Revolution Army, the Sindhu Desh Liberation Army as well as the Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz-Arisar group. While the first two are known to be involved in militant activities, JSQM-Arisar has mostly been involved in nationalist politics. With the latest listings, the number of proscribed groups in the country comes to 76.

The business of bans is a tricky one, for while there are clearly violent actors that need to be tackled with the full force of the law, other non-violent outfits have been proscribed because their narrative differs from that of the powers that be. The process of proscription must be transparent and effective. Indeed, all those groups that espouse violence within this country's borders or beyond them, as well as those involved in spreading sectarian, religious and ethnic hatred, need to be put out of business. However, the bans should not be confined to proscribing groups on paper. Even after the Musharraf administration started banning groups, many of these outfits continued their activities, with the leaderships, central cadres and finances untouched. The present government has taken some solid steps, especially to meet the needs of FATF, but the process of keeping a watch on violent actors must be a continuous, proactive one, for the sake of this country's security. As for those non-violent organisations that adhere to constitutional limits yet have been proscribed, the state needs to reconsider its decision. The focus of the state must be on violent extremists and those who reject the Constitution, not groups that simply advocate alternative narratives.

NFC award

THE announcement of the constitution of the 10th National Finance Commission has come at a time when devolution of significant administrative and financial powers to the provinces under the 18th Amendment is under renewed attack from the proponents of a stronger centre. The additional agenda for the new commission — whose sole constitutional job is to divide financial resources between the centre and the provinces — is reflective of this mindset. The presidential order indicates that the centre wants the provinces to fund security expenditure, share losses of SOEs, bear the cost of subsidies and fund federal debt repayments. Islamabad is also looking to them to help finance its expenditure on AJK, GB and former Fata. Since the provincial share from the tax divisible pool cannot be slashed from the present 57.5pc under the Constitution, the federal government is attempting to bypass it by putting these proposals on the NFC table. This isn't the first attempt to undo the gains the provinces have made under the seventh award. Back in 2015, the PML-N government had also demanded they voluntarily give up 7pc of the undivided pool for some of these federal responsibilities. The demand was rejected as unconstitutional.

The 18th Amendment and the seventh NFC award are regarded as a watershed in the country's constitutional and fiscal history; neither can exist alone. While the amendment devolved several federal ministries and functions including education, health, women development, tourism, environment, etc to the provinces, the NFC created fiscal resources from the divisible pool and enhanced the provincial tax base by recognising the provinces' rights over services tax and CVT on immovable property to support their new responsibilities. It also conceded the provinces' right to their natural resources, and made some subjects like ports, electricity, water resources, national planning, census and regulatory authorities a joint provincial and federal responsibility. These steps have helped the provinces increase their incomes and spend more on development and delivery of public service to their citizens.

The increased provincial share is often blamed for increasing the federal budget deficit, which isn't based on facts. A study by the Punjab government shows that the enhanced provincial share from the tax resource has contributed just 0.8pc to 1pc of GDP to the federal deficit. The real reason for the deficit lies elsewhere. For starters, Islamabad has failed to raise the tax-to-GDP ratio from 10pc to 15pc

during the five-year life of the seventh award. It also continues to spend a lot of money to maintain structures of the devolved ministries and functions because of political reasons, and is unable to plug the massive haemorrhaging of resources by SOEs. Devolution has done much to strengthen the federation. The centre should focus on raising taxes, cutting its unnecessary expenditure and pulling out of devolved functions. It should look ahead and not attempt to reverse the progress made so far.

Shocking target

IT was a bloody Tuesday in Afghanistan — alas, one of many such blood-soaked days this forsaken country has been experiencing over the last four decades. In Kabul, a truly shocking attack on a maternity hospital resulted in the deaths of a number of people, including newborns. The pictures and footage of little bodies wrapped in blankets must have left even the most jaded of observers numb. Meanwhile, in the eastern province of Nangarhar, a suicide bomber reportedly killed over 20 people at the funeral of a police officer. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has held the Taliban responsible for the Kabul atrocity, and the militant Islamic State group for the Nangarhar assault. The Taliban have denied involvement in both attacks. The fact is that Afghanistan is a patchwork of armed groups and insurgents, and due to a weak central government and strong militant groups, acts of mass violence are no rarity in the country.

While only a proper investigation can track down the perpetrators, there are strong clues that IS may have been responsible for the Kabul hospital attack, while the terrorist group has already claimed responsibility for the assault on the funeral. The hospital is located in an area of the Afghan capital dominated by the Shia Hazara community — a favourite target of the sectarian shock troops of IS — and the so-called caliphate has been involved in attacks on hospitals before. And while the Taliban have a history of violence, the hospital attack does not match their usual modus operandi. Apart from the shocking disregard for human life and values by the perpetrators, the attacks show that the peace process in Afghanistan may be in its death throes. For example, the Afghan president's order to his forces to resume offensive positions indicates that Kabul has lost patience with the Taliban, while a senior Afghan security official has said "there seems little point in continuing to engage Taliban in peace talks". Though the Americans have urged Kabul and the Taliban to join forces to bring the

perpetrators of the attacks to justice, in the backdrop of such horrific violence, with the trust deficit widening between Afghan factions, this may be wishful thinking. Which is bad news for the Afghan people. Indeed, as the government and the Taliban square off, IS and others of their ilk will take advantage of the chaos and continue to perpetuate their business of death and destruction.

Palestinian anger

ON Tuesday, in an incident strangely reminiscent of the biblical story of David and Goliath, an Israeli soldier, wearing a helmet and armed to the teeth, was killed by a Palestinian whose only weapon was a stone. The incident occurred in a West Bank village which Israeli forces had intruded. According to an Israeli army spokesman, the village was “a hotspot of terrorists”, a crude cliché for freedom fighters used with equal felicity by Israel’s friends in India-held Kashmir. The latest demonstration of anger against Tel Aviv in this “revolution of sticks and stones” came on the eve of American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s visit to Israel with the Likud-led coalition government finalising its plans for the annexation of Jewish settlements. The annexation will merely be a formality, because the Jewish colonies have been there — and are proliferating in size and numbers — for decades in violation of several UN resolutions, besides the international treaties to which Israel and its patron, America, have been party. To recap, the existence of the Jewish settlements, their territorial expansion and the establishment of new ones violate the Camp David accord brokered by president Jimmy Carter and the Declaration of Principles signed on the lawns of the Bill Clinton White House.

With the coalition partners having agreed on the modalities of the annexation scheme, it appears rather odd that Mr Pompeo should still peddle President Donald Trump’s — in fact, Mr Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner’s — ‘vision’ for peace in the Middle East. The truth is that Israel never had such a pliant do-gooder in Washington. All American administrations have kowtowed to Israel, for they know the lethal power of the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee, but never has a US government been so keen to fulfil Israeli demands as the current Republican administration. Yet, no matter how much diplomatic and military power the US arms Israel with, it will not be easy to defeat an occupied people who feel they have nothing left to lose.

University exams

COVID-19 is pushing tech-based innovation to new levels. As all areas of life prepare to put into practice a new workable system, the model is experiencing a baptism by fire in the most basic of sectors — education. Like the rest of the world, Pakistan is trying to find a way to handle the tough challenge the virus has thrown up. There are no easy answers and the solutions that have so far been offered for junior classes, in which millions of young Pakistanis are enrolled, have been controversial in many instances. Even where they have been accepted, approval has been accompanied by sighs of despondency. As primary and secondary levels are crossed, things become more difficult, and experts are calling for new ideas so that university students can emerge from this mess without their future prospects being harmed. The HEC has asked universities for exam and admission policies by the start of next week. “Examinations and assessments are an integral part of the teaching process. Attempts to eliminate exams will have severe repercussions.”

Quite clearly, the message is that the policy of promoting students to the next grade, which is being practised at levels up to Intermediate, cannot be applied to those pursuing higher education in the country. At a crucial videoconference the other day, institutes for higher levels promised to come up with strategies in accordance with the needs of their students. They will surely be looking at how other education systems around the world are tackling the coronavirus menace when it is time for exams. They are dealing with large numbers here and while it is impossible to hold online exams and assessments for primary and secondary schools, this could prove more practical at advanced levels. Postponement of exams for a few months could also be considered while the HEC and universities hammer out a strategy that allows students to be assessed in a manner that does not constitute a risk to themselves or their fellow students.

Dam deal

THE government has finally closed the deal for the construction of the Diamer-Bhasha dam.

The Rs442bn contract has been awarded to a joint venture comprising China Power and the Frontier Works Organisation.

The world's tallest roller compact concrete dam is but a part of a multipurpose Rs1.4tr hydropower enterprise that will be funded through public-sector development and commercial loans.

The 4,500MW power station will be built later.

That the contract for the dam construction has been awarded nearly 40 years after the project was originally conceived, 16 years after its feasibility was completed, 12 after its design was finalised and almost 10 years after it was approved by the CCI speaks volumes for the financial difficulties and political issues in implementing a large water development scheme.

In between, one president and three prime ministers found time to lay its foundation stones between 1998 and 2011.

Recently, work on Diemer-Bhasha was delayed by international lenders' decision to pull out of the project after India objected to the location of the dam, which straddles Gilgit-Baltistan and KP.

Last year, the government decided to split the project into two major components — the dam project to be constructed with public-sector funds and the power project to be developed in IPP mode — and involve Chinese firms and money to complete it.

The Diemer-Bhasha project is an economically important enterprise as it will create water storage of 8.1MAF for agriculture and generate 81bn units of clean electricity once it is completed in 2028.

It is also billed to save the economy Rs23bn in flood losses annually, bring 1.23m acres of additional land under cultivation, reduce water shortages from 12MAF to 6.1MAF, increase water storage capacity from 30 days to 48 days, and add 35 years to the life of Tarbela by reducing sedimentation.

During its construction, the project is expected to create 16,550 jobs (mostly for the local population), generate a large demand for cement and steel, and stimulate economic growth, which is estimated to contract by up to 1.5pc owing to the pandemic.

The years between 1958 and 1976 were seen as the best period for the development of the water sector and hydropower projects in the country.

Tarbela and Mangla are also from the same period.

It was followed by a largely dry spell until 2007 when the pace of such projects picked up as water shortages became more acute and thermal electricity generation unaffordable and erratic — this in spite of the Water Apportionment Accord of 1991 between the provinces that underlines the need for building more water storages to store floodwaters and overcome growing shortages.

The availability of water for irrigation is declining and weather patterns are getting erratic because of climate change.

The country needs to build large storage capacity to save wastage of water in order to protect food security and the Indus Basin habitat.

NAB's politics

THE National Accountability Bureau has stepped up its investigations against the PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif and has been summoning him for interrogations on a regular basis. Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmad, who is fond of making political predictions based on what he claims are his close sources, says there is a likelihood that NAB may arrest Mr Sharif after Eid. To inflame the situation further, the government's accountability czar Barrister Shahzad Akbar hurled fresh allegations of financial wrongdoing at Mr Sharif on Wednesday and hinted that more legal troubles were brewing for the former chief minister of Punjab. The PML-N has termed these allegations a pack of lies and reiterated its position that NAB is unleashing persecution on opposition members including Shahbaz Sharif at the behest of the government. In the meantime, NAB has once again summoned former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi despite the fact that nothing substantive has been brought out against him in a court of law. Politics, it seems, is heating up in sync with the alarming Covid-19 situation.

There is much that does not add up here. The conduct of NAB has become so controversial that it is very difficult to believe that its actions are not laced with partisan politicking. This perception is solidified every time opposition leaders are hauled up on flimsy charges while government ministers charged with similar offences are left alone. NAB has done itself no favours by refusing to nullify this

negative perception. On the contrary, the bureau has stepped up its activities against those who are opposed to the PTI government. This is unfortunate because NAB is a taxpayer-funded organisation that is mandated to carry out accountability in a manner that is impartial. In this respect, NAB has been a spectacular failure. Similarly, the PTI government has done a disservice to the cause of accountability by subordinating it to the political interests of the party leadership. By unleashing a torrent of accusations against opposition leaders, government representatives like Barrister Shahzad Akbar undermine the role that a sitting government should play. This role demands that the government either carry out thorough investigations and take the accused to court, or allow NAB to conduct its own inquiries through due process. By hurling accusations through the media, the government only reconfirms the perception that the real objective is less legal and more political. This cannot be justified on any grounds.

Postponed cricket

THE recent of the Pakistan cricket team's tour to Ireland in July due to the coronavirus pandemic is a setback to the respective cricket boards as well as to the game itself.

Cricket, like all other sports, has been severely hit, compelling the ICC and affiliated boards to desperately look for alternatives and reschedule tours.

Pakistan, too, is beginning to feel the heat.

Following the unfinished fifth edition of the PSL in February, back-to-back postponement of tours to the Netherlands and Ireland have come as an additional jolt to Pakistan that was looking forward to an unusually busy international calendar.

Quite often in the past, the PCB has been blamed for failing to negotiate a busy cricketing season.

With home assignments next to nil in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore in 2009, the players looked to the PCB to rope in overseas assignments to keep them motivated and earn a substantial sum.

It is, therefore, to the PCB's credit that not only was home cricket revived, but a busy, lucrative season had also been planned.

The pandemic, though, is threatening to spoil all that.

While the Netherlands and Ireland tours include a few T20 games each, the PCB is really worried about the fate of the England tour in late July, which comprises a three-Test series and as many T20 Internationals.

The tour is equally, if not more, important for the England and Wales Cricket Board which is also grappling with the impact of the pandemic.

Both Pakistan and England appear willing to play behind closed doors if their respective governments, medical advice and time frames allow.

What must be admired, however, is that despite the postponed tours, the PCB has not resorted to desperate measures.

The board's CEO Wasim Khan, though expressing his disappointment at the postponement of the Ireland tour, said it was absolutely the right thing to do as human lives were far more important than a cricket match or event.

Let Kashmir breathe

PAKISTAN has once again called on the world to take urgent notice of the unending asphyxia that the Kashmiris have been subjected to and demanded that the held valley be at least allowed the supply of medicine and food. Giving a policy statement in the Senate on Thursday, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi lambasted the Indian government, holding it responsible for the situation in occupied Kashmir in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The communal mindset of the Narendra Modi set-up has been fully reflected in how the rulers in New Delhi have inspired through their actions a witch-hunt in which zealots have painted Muslims as 'willing', indeed 'sponsored' carriers of the coronavirus. The minister's words captured some of the anger with which these preposterous insinuations against a large religious group in a country that calls itself a democracy have been greeted. Mr Qureshi linked the escalation in cross-LoC violations by the Indian army to New Delhi's desire to deny the world a clear, unblocked view of what it is like to live under an occupying force. There have been more than 900 instances of such violations since January. When one looks at the steep increase in these violations since the new order under which India forcibly snatched the occupied region's special autonomous status was enforced last year, an increasingly grim picture emerges.

A lot has been in turmoil since the annexation of a thinking, breathing people whose aspirations for freedom have been well-documented over decades. Countries across the world are experiencing the feeling of isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. People and governments, scholars, politicians and lawmakers of all stripes have suffered from a sudden denial of essential freedoms as the number of infected individuals rises. They had taken their liberties for granted and it can be safely assumed that they at least wished others to lead their lives with the same degree of freedom they enjoyed. They must have seen the virus as a confirmation of what the deprivation of freedom can do and how it can be overcome. Experts hopefully talk about a new world emerging from this horrifying bout with the virus, shrugging off all that scarred the previous one. A humane approach, culminating in freedom, towards subjugated peoples everywhere must be one of the main themes around which this new world is to be created.

Violating SOPs

A VIRUS which has wreaked havoc in far more developed countries is gaining ground in Pakistan, yet the public largely appears to have thrown caution to the wind and is resuming commercial activities as if it is somehow immune to the coronavirus.

Even as daily new cases rise, the relaxations in the lockdown continue and the public seems to be in no mood to comply with SOPs.

A record jump in Covid-19 cases was reported only days after the reopening of markets, with total cases crossing the 35,000 mark and deaths at 820.

Even as these figures climb, scenes in commercial hubs are reminiscent of pre-Covid-19 activity at shopping centres in the days ahead of Eid.

People are cramming into shops — many of them without face coverings — and blatantly flouting the government's orders on limiting the possibility of transmission.

As a result, provincial governments have been forced to take action by shutting down shopping centres for violating SOPs despite repeated warnings by the authorities.

This lax attitude of traders and shoppers towards their self-protection raises several questions.

Why is it that so many people are unaware of the risks of contracting the potentially fatal virus and the circumstances in which it spreads?

The answer lies in the government's messaging.

Despite the fact that it has been more than two months since the first Covid-19 case was detected in the country, the authorities have failed to convince the public of its danger.

This attitude is alarming and will come with very high costs; it can partly be attributed to the popularity of conspiracy theories which historically find many takers — such as the notion that Covid-19 will not affect people in countries with warm temperatures or that the BCG vaccine protects against it.

Ironically, some public figures, including the governor of Sindh, also perpetuated the mistaken belief that the coronavirus is not much worse than the seasonal flu.

The government must act responsibly and ensure that its message is unequivocal and lays out the facts: that the virus can be fatal, that there is no way to protect oneself other than by limiting contact, and that there is no guarantee that Pakistan's numbers will remain lower than in the West.

Since it has made the decision to reopen the country and is relying so heavily on individual responsibility, the government must fulfil its duty to educate and protect the public.

In order to communicate effectively and send a clear message that is ingrained in the psyche of the nation, the federal and provincial governments must work together.

Sadly, the coronavirus pandemic has shown the same, if not worse, political discord among political parties.

The government must move towards a working consensus with the opposition parties as disharmony will further dilute the message trickling down to the average citizen.

Bickering and unending blame games will not yield results.

Countries reopen

AFTER some success in lowering the daily deaths and new cases of coronavirus, several countries are slowly relaxing lockdowns in an attempt to revive economic activity. In Europe, the hardest-hit countries which include the UK, Italy, Spain and France, are rolling out plans for some sectors such as construction and primary schools to open up after nearly seven weeks of closure. In the US, the president has left it to the governor of each state to ease restrictions, which has led to the easing of lockdowns in Georgia, Oklahoma and Alaska. Many of these countries have told citizens to wear face coverings in public and practise distancing at shopping centres, with some — especially in Europe — still limiting public gatherings such as weddings.

While there is no doubt that the coronavirus and forced shutdowns have unleashed economic hardship, the reality of the viruses' deadly nature persists. Although the emotional and financial toll of this uncertain new era already seems unbearable, the truth is that the world is still in the early stages of the pandemic and must be vigilant. In doing so, it must adapt to rapidly changing scenarios — such as a possible second wave as has been reported in China. As countries open up and the possibility of transmission grows, mistakes made in the first wave will become essential learnings. For example, the UK was too late to lock down and therefore saw its healthcare system become overwhelmed as Covid-19 cases spiked. The situation has forced British authorities to look for local manufacturers for PPE and ramp up daily tests. The increased testing, dedicated isolation centres and mechanisms for contact-tracing developed during lockdowns should help countries that are now opening up. Here, Vietnam serves as an excellent example of the learnings it employed from the Sars outbreak nearly two decades ago. As it recognised its healthcare limitations, it was one of the quickest to alert its citizens and take action. This timeliness, aggressive infection control and targeted awareness campaign for its population are strong factors behind its zero reported deaths. In a country that borders China and with a population of over 90m, this is an undeniable success — and proof that 'overreaction' and caution can save lives and also justify the reopening of commercial activity. While many countries have learned these lessons the hard way, after ghastly death tolls and the crippling of healthcare systems, they must remain vigilant and react quickly when the second wave comes.

Mental health helpline

LAST week, Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah announced the launch of a mental health helpline in the province, in light of the psychological toll being wrought on citizens by the Covid-19 pandemic. This facility has been established by the Sindh Mental Health Authority, which was constituted in September 2017, five years after the passage of the Sindh Mental Health Act. If this timeline is indicative of the low-priority status given to mental health by policymakers, it is hoped that the helpline might signal a reorientation. On a macro level, the pandemic has not only revealed how intrinsic public health is to the security and stability of nations, but also exposed how little has been invested in it. The socioeconomic impact of poor health, including poor mental health, can be devastating for individuals, families, communities and countries alike, particularly in times of crisis. A study by AKUH in 2016 estimated the direct and indirect financial costs of mental illnesses in Pakistan at the time at over Rs250bn annually.

Today, as the pandemic upends every aspect of life as we know it and plunges millions into precarious circumstances, addressing people's mental health needs is as important as ensuring they have food in their bellies, a roof over their heads and other basic rights. In turn, promoting psychological well-being and resilience cannot be done in isolation from the environmental, social and economic factors that may trigger or exacerbate a mental health crisis. Though limited in scale and scope, the Sindh mental health helpline should constitute one in a series of interventions geared towards developing an integrated and holistic suite of social protection services to support vulnerable and at-risk individuals. A woman suffering from domestic violence, for example, may need access to shelter, legal aid, income support, etc as much as she needs psychological counselling. When a lifeline is extended, we must commit to seeing it through — to ensure that, for every call for help, there is a response.

Nepra report

THE State of the Industry Report for 2019 released by Nepra, the power regulator, has brought the focus back on the real problems dragging down the power sector. The recently leaked government-mandated report on IPPs had

shifted the direction of the debate on issues plaguing the power sector to the validity of power purchase agreements executed with private producers, as well as 'excess' payments made to them at the expense of hapless consumers and the accumulation of a massive circular debt. Indeed, it can be argued that the agreements executed with private thermal power producers since 1994 could have been less generous to the investors, and more favourable to government and consumers had those been negotiated properly. Nevertheless, it is misleading to blame IPPs for the chaos in the power sector. The capacity payments and other costs of IPPs may have contributed to making electricity more expensive for consumers and to a huge circular debt, but governance and other issues raised by the regulator are the real cause of distress in the power sector.

The regulator has called for meaningful governance reforms in the power sector to make it efficient and reduce generation, transmission and distribution costs. It has also advised the government to deregulate and decentralise decision-making powers for improvements in the performance of public-sector distribution firms and follow it up with their privatisation. The report has rightly raised questions over the use of inefficient state-run power plants instead of employing efficient generation capacity and pointed out that the centralised governance model for distribution companies had failed to bring about noticeable improvements in performance over a period of more than 15 years. The companies continue to face distribution losses because of theft, corruption and lack of investment in a crumbling power transmission and distribution network. The previous government had added more than 12,000MW to the system to end rolling outages but failed to invest anything in the distribution network. Then, the distribution firms are unable to fully recover their bills, resulting in a significant rise in the unrecovered amount to Rs1.1tr, or more than half the current circular debt.

These and other inefficiencies of state-run power companies, together with the impact of poor governance, have added to the cost of electricity generation and distribution, which is eventually passed on to consumers through Nepra. The inefficiencies and losses that cannot be recovered through tariff increases are added to the circular debt. The power sector is in dire need of policy, governance and pricing reforms. This effort should focus on eliminating inefficiencies and losses in the power sector rather than a witch-hunt against private producers. But that should not stop IPPs from playing their part and making adjustments in their

agreements to help the government reduce electricity prices for consumers who are in trouble because of the economic slowdown and loss of jobs in these times.

Kabul deal

APART from the myriad problems facing Afghanistan — decades of war, militancy, a barely functioning state, etc — the infighting amongst the Kabul elite has hobbled all efforts to address problems in an effective manner. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon, as for decades militia leaders, warlords and strongmen have jostled for the throne of Kabul, which has resulted in the collapse of governance in Afghanistan, and the emergence of semi-autonomous fiefdoms within the country based on ethnic and tribal lines. Even after the American invasion and the fall of the Afghan Taliban, the US and their Nato allies failed to ‘build’ a functioning state. For example, the Ashraf Ghani-Abdullah Abdullah partnership that started in 2014 ended up in acrimony. While the Afghan election commission had declared Mr Ghani victorious in last year’s presidential election, Mr Abdullah cried foul and declared himself leader of the country. However, after much bitterness both men seem to have reconciled, apparently after considerable ‘prodding’ by the Americans, as they signed a power-sharing deal on Sunday to end the impasse.

It would be naïve to assume that the deal will lead to a perfectly functioning dispensation in Kabul; expectations should be realistic and not too high, as the relationship between both men is tenuous. However, for the sake of Afghanistan, they will need to sink their differences and maintain a working relationship, or else the considerable challenges their country faces will overwhelm them. For example, the peace deal that the Americans signed with the Taliban is close to death; major efforts are needed to revive it. Unless this deal succeeds, an intra-Afghan settlement will be difficult to reach. Moreover, the bloodthirsty fighters of the IS-Khorasan chapter are waiting in the wings to pounce. The recent diabolical attack on a maternity hospital in Kabul, believed to have been the handiwork of IS, shows that the terrorist group can easily reach the capital. Also, if the Ghani-Abdullah combine fails to function, there will be a major financial crisis; the Afghan government suffered a blow when Washington cut funds as ‘punishment’ for infighting in Kabul. And with Covid-19 cases threatening the feeble Afghan health system, a paralysis in governance will only make matters worse for the Afghan people.

Considering these challenges, Mr Ghani and Mr Abdullah will have to make greater efforts to deliver good governance to their people, and above all tolerate each other. If petty infighting and power games continue, the Kabul elite will not stand a chance against the various threats they face from militant actors. Moreover, unless there is unity within the government, the Taliban will not take them seriously and the bloody battle for the control of Afghanistan will continue. And as events have shown, IS and terrorists of their ilk will gain the most from a state of chaos.

Manhandling medics

REPORTS that members of the public are resorting to ransacking hospitals and beating up medical workers are extremely worrying. Multiple incidents of individuals assaulting staff at hospitals have surfaced. In the first, attendants and relatives of a patient at Karachi's JPMC vandalised the coronavirus isolation ward after being refused permission to take the deceased patient's body home. In a second incident at the same hospital, a doctor was attacked by relatives of a patient thought to be infected by the coronavirus and who passed away after being brought in with a cough and shortness of breath. More recently, a group of unruly youths went on the rampage at the Red Crescent Hospital in Hyderabad after being asked to observe the government-prescribed SOPs while entering and staying in the health facility. They roughed up several staff members and caused extensive damage to the hospital's property after being told to wear face masks. Fortunately, police arrived at the hospital while the rampage was still going on and managed to arrest four suspects.

These incidents are alarming. Just like in other countries, doctors and medical staff in Pakistan are on the front line and are essential to the battle being fought against the pandemic. With full knowledge of the potentially fatal nature of the coronavirus and its high rate of transmission, these professionals are putting themselves and their family members — including those who are immunocompromised — at great risk by continuing to attend to patients. Hundreds of healthcare providers in the country have already tested positive for Covid-19. Incidents of assault on medical workers and hospital staff are unacceptable, particularly under these circumstances. While it is commendable that these hospitals remain steadfast in enforcing SOPs for coronavirus wards and patients, their staff deserves better protection. All provincial authorities must engage with

hospital administrations to understand how better security can be provided to staff. Government officials must also reflect on how they can improve their messaging and awareness campaigns to address the fears of citizens. Understandably, learning of the death of a loved one can be upsetting and the Covid-19 SOPs for the washing of the body can take a further toll on the emotional well-being of the family. Authorities must address these challenges and devise solutions so SOPs can be enforced with minimum pain for the family — all the while giving utmost protection to hospital staff. In any humane society, hospital staff must be respected and protected at all cost.

Mayor's suspension

THE federal government has suspended the mayor of Islamabad Shaikh Anser Aziz for 90 days on the recommendation of a PTI-dominated local government commission. The commission had argued for the mayor's suspension so that an inquiry against his alleged corruption could be initiated. The mayor's party PML-N has protested the move by the federal government and termed it a coup d'état. The two members of the commission from the opposition parties have also cried foul, saying the commission initiated this surprise move when they were not present at the meeting due to their parliamentary commitments.

This radical move comes in the wake of many months of tension and tug of war between the PML-N mayor and the PTI local leadership that dominates affairs in Islamabad Capital Territory. By resorting to such a decision, the federal government has signalled that it will brook no opposition regardless of the fact that the mayor is an elected official. The mayor has now moved court. However, the decision of the federal cabinet is bound to further ratchet up political tension at a time when the nation is battling the scourge of Covid-19. The decision is needlessly provocative and ill-timed. If there were festering issues, there were many other ways to address them instead of going for the extreme step of suspending an elected official. It also reinforces the perception that the PTI in power is not willing to accommodate the opposition in the spirit of representative democracy. This tolerance deficit is a dangerous trend that can lead to a weakening of the system at a time when Pakistan requires the system to be further strengthened. It is unfortunate that the PTI leadership is adamant in its inflexibility towards the opposition and is unwilling to reach across the aisle to build a working relationship in the larger interest of the people. This latest

misadventure is bound to create legal and political ripples that will create instability and further vitiate the atmosphere in the country.

SC order

THE Supreme Court's words have undoubtedly gladdened the hearts of many chafing at the official restrictions on commercial activities in the country at present. On Monday, the apex court bench, hearing the suo motu case pertaining to the authorities' handling of the coronavirus pandemic, set aside the federal government's decision to close shops, markets and businesses on Saturdays and Sundays. "People of my country are poor and they need to earn their bread and butter on a daily basis," said Chief Justice of Pakistan Gulzar Ahmed. The court also ordered the provincial governments to reopen all malls but to ensure the SOPs are strictly observed. Alongside this, the bench expressed concern that the amount being spent on fighting the pandemic could not be justified because Pakistan is not "seriously affected" by it.

There will be those in government who will argue, if behind closed doors, that this is yet another instance of judicial overreach. However, the federal and provincial authorities cannot absolve themselves of creating a situation where the Supreme Court may have believed an intervention on its part was called for. Led by the centre, the once-in-a-century pandemic should have seen them set aside their political differences, reach out across the aisle and hammer out a coherent administrative response based on scientific expertise and best practices in public health policy. It was not essential that each part of the federation be in lockstep with each other throughout, but it was necessary to have a unified, well-reasoned narrative with a consensus on priorities. Instead, there has been acrimonious point-scoring and undermining of each other's strategy, further fuelling conspiracy theories and public discontent. A populist response has now come from the bench, and there are legitimate fears it could open the floodgates for the infection to spread.

The SOPs are already being followed more in the breach, and while the fatality rate in Pakistan has not been increasing precipitously, the infection rate is alarming. Covid-19 has not even peaked in this country, let alone arrived at the stage where there is a 'flattening of the curve'. We could be in for a harrowing time ahead, an apocalyptic scenario where patients in need of medical

intervention would be turned away from packed-to-capacity hospitals. This is no time to downplay the risk. It should also be said that the executive must have space to make decisions, sometimes difficult and unpopular ones, based on hard-headed realism. Moreover, notwithstanding the political leadership's discordant response, there is a National Command and Operations Centre specifically set up to bring together the federal and provincial governments and the military leadership on one platform to deal with Covid-19. Excessive judicial activism has sometimes cost Pakistan dearly, such as when the Steel Mills privatisation was overturned or the Reko Diq agreement declared null and void. One hopes that history is not going to repeat itself.

Waziristan murders

LAST week, police received confirmed reports that two girls were murdered in a village bordering North and South Waziristan, purportedly to 'restore' their families' 'honour' after a mobile phone video of them began circulating on social media. On Sunday, they arrested two male relatives of the victims, who have yet to be identified by name. The mystery, secrecy and silence behind this crime bear all the grim hallmarks of similar high-profile 'honour' killing cases of the past, the most notable of them being the murders of three women in Kohistan in 2012 after footage of them singing and clapping was leaked online. A year later, in 2013, two teenage girls and their mother were gunned down in Chilas by the girls' stepbrother and his friends after a video of them smiling and enjoying the rain outdoors was circulated in the area. In some cases, these pixelated videos are the only documentary evidence we have to prove that these women ever lived, let alone the circumstances behind their untimely deaths, as the question of them ever receiving posthumous justice lingers. In fact, the pursuit of truth can itself prove deadly; last year, Afzal Kohistani, the man who spearheaded the long quest for justice for the Kohistan victims was himself gunned down on a busy street in Abbottabad.

For such crimes to be committed today, despite all the shock and horror expressed over previous high-profile cases, and despite all of Pakistan's legislative achievements and claims to uphold the rule of law, a culture of impunity for crimes against women must obviously remain entrenched in the hearts and minds of many in the far reaches of the land where the law dare not trespass. Tribal 'custom' is a law unto itself, with the state apparatus abdicating

practically all responsibility in pursuing legal action for gender-based crimes, and a public inured to brutality shrugging off or condoning the murder of yet another woman. Is it futile to expect things to be any different today than they were in, say, 2008, when Senator Israrullah Zehri spoke in defence of burying women alive in Balochistan, claiming it was “a tribal custom”? MNA North Waziristan Mohsin Dawar said of the recent murders, “Honour killings are an extreme expression of patriarchal violence, and the practice has to be condemned in the strongest terms ... timely justice must be served”. More leaders must speak out for attitudes to change and justice to prevail.

Locust threat

THE international community should give its best possible support to the call being made by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation for funds to help Pakistan and Iran in their fight against a new locust invasion. The dangerous pest has been threatening crop and non-crop vegetation in many parts of the world, in addition to Pakistan and Iran, for quite a few years now. But the danger has taken an altogether new dimension in the wake of food security apprehensions being expressed by experts in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Food security, protection of rural livelihoods and sustainable agriculture are central to any scheme to restore the Covid-19 world to minimum functioning levels. However, countries like Pakistan and Iran that face massive economic losses and unemployment in this period have little financial space to combat a fresh upsurge of the plague. The devastation, which the locust infestation is feared to cause, will further weaken these countries’ ability to fight this threat or stop it from spreading to neighbouring countries, unless the wealthier nations step in to help them sustain their efforts to avert a food security crisis.

The international funds collected by the FAO in January had helped it make significant gains in dealing with the plague in East African countries and Yemen. Much of that money had been spent on locust-control activities. Now the FAO requires more support for protecting livelihoods in countries under locust attack. For Pakistan, where 38pc of the area (60pc in Balochistan, 25pc in Sindh and 15pc in Punjab) are breeding grounds for the swarms, the situation is already turning dire as struggling farmers from different parts of the country are reporting severe crop damage. The FAO director general has rightly stated that “the battle is long”. Unless this war is won, the locust plague in Pakistan may wipe out more

livelihoods than the Covid-19 contagion and worsen food security in the coming months.

Unrest in IHK

VIOLENCE revisited held Kashmir on Tuesday as Indian forces gunned down a Hizbul Mujahideen fighter in Srinagar. This follows the killing of another Kashmiri fighter, Riaz Naikoo, earlier this month in Pulwama. Sadly for the Kashmiri people, this cycle of bloodshed and humiliation is nothing new; in fact, the people of the occupied region have been putting up with it for the past several decades. The gun battle in which Indian forces killed Junaid Ashraf Sehrai, a business graduate-turned-fighter, lasted nearly 12 hours as security forces surrounded a neighbourhood in Srinagar's old town. Residents say the Indian soldiers set houses on fire and looted jewellery from several residences under the cover of the operation.

The fact is Kashmiris are sick and tired of Indian oppression and are increasingly fighting back in order to stop India's brutality. India has disfigured the region's autonomous status, hatched a plan to engineer demographic changes, and has used even more brutal tactics when Kashmiris have objected to its high-handedness. Instead of quelling the insurgency, New Delhi's callousness has further angered educated young Kashmiris, like Sehrai, Naikoo as well as Burhan Wani whose killing by the Indians in 2016 had sparked a wave of protests. Yet the Indian establishment seems to cling to the erroneous belief that its use of violence will dampen the Kashmiri desire for rights and dignity. Moreover, Indian adventurism along the LoC has raised temperatures with Pakistan, as a number of innocent people on this side of the line have lost their lives in cross-LoC barrages. New Delhi is playing a dangerous game, crushing Kashmiris in the occupied territory, and stoking tensions with Pakistan at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic is rattling the world.

Some voices have been raised against India's brutality in held Kashmir. For example, the OIC has expressed concern over India's tinkering with Kashmir's domicile law, which would pave the way for non-locals to apply for domicile in the disputed region. This is, of course, part of New Delhi's overall strategy to alter the demographics of IHK, continuing the condemnable project it initiated last year by scrapping Kashmir's special status in India's constitution. Furthermore, the

lockdown of the region since August 2019 has added to the miseries of the local people. For example, the communications blockade has hampered the fight against the coronavirus in IHK, as India has blocked high-speed internet. Doctors say this has had a major impact on keeping in touch with patients, while patients in quarantine have also been unable to communicate with family members. As the world combines forces to combat Covid-19, the international community must put pressure on India to lift this inhuman blockade so that patients can get the care they need without hindrance. Otherwise, it will appear that the human rights of Kashmiris matter little to the self-declared global champions of freedom.

Labour's protest

IN the run-up to Eid, there is often some unrest witnessed among workers. The Covid-19 pandemic added greater purpose and urgency to the chants by trade unions as they gathered on Tuesday to take out rallies in over 30 cities of Punjab amongst others. They represented exploited workers who face an uncertain future. The issues they raised are not new to those who make and operate the system. Throughout, the stories have been the same and only the faces of workers change as they continue to be recognised and dismissed as mere 'industrial hands'. The rallies were organised by a conglomerate of various trade unions, and aimed to highlight the plight of those hit by the large-scale layoffs, cuts in and non-payment of salaries and pensions. A main protest theme of the meeting in Lahore was the 'neglect' of the working class by a 'labour-hostile' government. It was obvious that these protesters were not in a mood to be cajoled by the allowances the government had been promising those economically hit by the coronavirus. Also, the relentless prime ministerial reliance on the ghareeb or poor worker for his justification against a proper lockdown worth the name seems to have had little appeasing effect on those who live in dread of losing their livelihood.

Trade unions are in the habit of demanding more than what appears reasonable to employers and regulators. That, however, doesn't take away from the reality of how labour — even the documented workforce — is absent from the general discussion on schemes for economic uplift. Worldwide, labour has been the worst hit economically by the pandemic. Among this group, Pakistani workers are likely to be at the bottom rung, given the fact that we are still a country where labour law violations are easy to conceal, and where the authorities routinely turn

a blind eye to the wrongs committed by industrialists meaning to contribute to the 'country's economy'. The truth is that on immediate evidence, these 30-odd rallies have gone unnoticed officially. No spokesman has turned up to respond to the calls of these trade unionists. These labour leaders may be more deserving of an answer than opposition party politicians whose remarks receive a routine and loud retort from officialdom. By ignoring the issues raised by these workers, the government is only helping to intensify the feeling of exploitation and the sense of hatred against this exploitation.

Twitter outage

ON Sunday night, many internet users across Pakistan found that they were unable to access Twitter, its video-streaming service Periscope, or the popular videoconferencing app Zoom for several hours. In a subsequent analysis of network data from that time, the internet freedom monitor Netblocks and Pakistan's Digital Rights Foundation reported that the disruption was localised to Pakistan. The outage, which seemed to only specifically affect access to these particular platforms, led to much speculation about the cause of the disruption, and conjecture that it may have been done deliberately at a time when an online videoconference by those critical of state policies was also being aired via these services. The report concluded, "Sunday's incident matches the characteristics of previous documented restrictions applied on grounds of national security or to prevent unrest."

If it is indeed true that the outage, however brief, was deliberately caused, it is especially troubling in the context of feverish attempts in recent years to expand the state's power to monitor and control social media usage in Pakistan — and, in turn, its users — the most recent example of which has been the controversial Citizen Protection (Against Online Harms) Rules. That the PTA has failed to provide an explanation despite repeated requests to do so by this paper as well as digital rights experts only compounds these concerns. These tendencies are utterly counterproductive to Pakistan's interests. We have nothing to gain from a growing intolerance towards expression of dissent; or from eroding public trust in institutions through a lack of transparency and due process of the law; or — particularly at a time when online connectivity is the lifeline through which many business, educational and social activities are being sustained — to casually ignore internet users' concerns of being abruptly cut off from the services they

now rely heavily upon. Pakistan's attitude towards internet governance must be enabling, not oppressive or opaque. Intentional or not, the irony that such an outage would happen on World Telecommunication and Information Society Day is not lost on anyone.

Open ballot?

THE government has floated a proposal to end the secret ballot in the Senate elections in order to bring greater transparency to the electoral exercise for the upper house. These proposals are part of a larger set of electoral reforms that were placed before the federal cabinet recently. In a press conference, federal ministers Shafqat Mehmood and Azam Swati said efforts would be made to have a broad-based consensus on these electoral reforms so that constitutional changes could be made accordingly. The two ministers were part of a parliamentary committee formed to look into allegations of rigging in the 2018 elections. The opposition, however, did not take part in the proceedings, and ultimately, the committee focused on drawing up a list of electoral reforms.

The proposal to make the Senate election an open one makes sense in the context of manipulations that have happened in the past. These elections often attract accusations of horse-trading and in the past PTI also took action against some of its members from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa who were found to have been involved in selling their votes in the Senate elections. Similarly, the election for the chairman of the Senate was also weighed down by controversy when a number of votes shifted across party lines. Due to secret balloting in these elections, various pressure groups have also been able to influence votes and outcomes. This lack of transparency continues to cast a dark shadow over the upper house. Therefore, an attempt to reform the process would be a timely one. However, there are some complications. The floor-crossing law bars any parliamentarian from voting against his party regardless of his or her opinion on the issue. This law was aimed at curbing horse-trading and therefore when it comes to open voting, the members are bound by party policy instead of voting with their conscience. This may have served a specific purpose at one time but it does curtail the independence of thought that is expected of a parliamentarian. If the secret ballot were to be done away with in the Senate without reviewing the floor-crossing restriction, the benefit may remain diluted.

It may be prudent for political parties to perhaps take another look at this floor-crossing law and decide whether it has outlived its utility. In the same vein, parties should also factor in the complications arising from an open vote in the Senate knowing the complicated format of the election. Voters have to list their preferences for each vacant position, and it is natural that this will create bitterness when shared publicly. What is needed is a greater effort by all political parties to forge a consensus on the Senate election reform as part of a larger set of reforms that have now become overdue in light of lessons learnt from recent elections.

Debt relief

PAKISTAN is on the verge of receiving debt relief under the G20 plan and according to an official announcement the total amount is \$2bn. There is a possibility that this amount will increase if the period of coverage is extended beyond December 2020. At the moment, the relief is being extended to loans from bilateral creditors, accompanied by a call from the G20 to private creditors to also offer “comparable terms”. Perhaps the same terms can be extended to multilateral creditors too.

It was a wise decision though, on the part of the finance adviser, to make public his government’s resolve to not approach private creditors for comparable relief. All through the period since the plan was announced till today, the financial leadership of the government and State Bank sent confusing signals to private markets regarding their intention to seek debt relief from private creditors. This ambiguity adversely impacted Pakistan’s credit rating, which was put under review by Moody’s, casting a shadow over the future of the country’s B3 rating. The rating agency explicitly said that seeking debt relief on bilateral loans under the G20 initiative contributed to the review, but such action is unlikely to negatively impact the rating since it is under an officially sanctioned initiative and is more likely to free up resources than constrain them further. It was the uncertainty over whether or not Pakistan will approach private creditors that seems to have driven the decision, which it seems forced the hand of the financial adviser who made a clear announcement that the government does not intend to seek relief from private creditors. Now that the relief is imminent, it is important to emphasise that it be utilised in a manner consistent with the rationale under which it has been offered. The G20 moved at the behest of the

multilateral creditors, the World Bank and the IMF, and all three have made it very clear that the resources they seek to free up are to be utilised for the fight against the coronavirus. One part of this fight is the management of the economic fallout that the pandemic and its attendant mitigation efforts have created. But in significant measure, resources are required for social protection and ramped-up health investments. It is important that the space created by the debt relief be used to aid the fight against the pandemic first and foremost.

Women e-doctors

A TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN initiative undertaken by the Sindh government since two years is bearing fruit in unexpected ways during the pandemic. The eDoctor project, launched in 2018, is aimed at 35,000 women doctors who had quit the field after graduating from various public and private medical colleges in the country. Some 800 'inactive' female doctors all over Pakistan as well as in places like the US, UAE and Greece have thus far been enabled to resume their profession. After undergoing training in updated medical practices and virtual digital technology, they have been conducting live video-based patient consultations and clinical rotations with medical consultants in Pakistani hospitals. In the latest development, around 400 of them have been recruited for round-the-clock virtual monitoring through IT-enabled technology of 8,000 Covid-19 patients who are in home isolation in Sindh. These long-distance doctors are proving to be a valuable resource for the government to advise self-isolated patients who may have only mild symptoms, or even no symptoms at all, on day-to-day management of their illness. Information about their recovery process is also shared with relevant district and local health administrations, which helps them maintain a more accurate and up-to-date record.

Instead of reinventing the wheel, it is always more prudent to extract the most out of existing capacities and the Sindh government should be lauded on this score. The project, spearheaded by the Dow University of Health Sciences, is one way to respond to the sadly low retention rate of female medical graduates in their field. Women comprise about 70pc of students in medical school; but less than 50pc end up practising, which amounts to an enormous waste of state funds that go towards subsidising government medical colleges. Simultaneously, there must also be efforts to change the narrative on the sociocultural issues that lead to this outcome. The medical profession is too important to be sacrificed to family

pressure, often because prospective in-laws want a ‘doctor bride’ but can’t brook her practising post marriage.

PIA tragedy

AT the time of writing, rescuers were going through the debris of the PIA Airbus which crashed in Karachi on Friday, looking for survivors and, possibly, clues that could indicate the cause of the disaster.

Hopes of saving some lives were raised because of the miraculous escape of at least two passengers.

The PIA flight from Lahore was carrying 91 passengers and eight crew.

The evidence so far shows that the plane ran into trouble moments from its destination.

Capt Sajjad Gul lost contact with ground control when his aircraft was hovering around 150m.

Soon afterwards, the aircraft — which could have been carrying many more passengers had a Covid-19 social-distancing regime not been in place — crashed close to the Jinnah International Airport.

That the aircraft hit a residential area, causing mayhem on the ground, has added to the tragedy.

Consequently, as people tried to get an idea of the number of dead and injured on the plane and their names, there were also inquiries about those who were not travelling on the plane but whose dwellings had been hit.

The fact that the plane crashed in a neighbourhood raises a crucial question: do houses and buildings situated so close to a busy aircraft landing spot in the country meet the legal requirements.

Or have they been allowed to mushroom in typical Pakistani manner, with the buyers of the built property paying less because of the risk they courted on a daily basis? Perhaps more urgently asked were the questions relating to the condition of the aircraft.

True to form and post-haste, pure speculation masquerading as analyses was proudly paraded before a stunned audience.

This was yet more proof of our tendency to jump to conclusions before all the facts are known.

The aircraft was unfit, said some. Others added that the entire PIA fleet was obsolete.

There were some observations that were more to the point such as the possibility of a malfunctioning landing gear or a bird hit.

But in a country not known for releasing inquiry reports into air crashes, the eagerness to pass judgement was most painful.

The trophy went to none other than the PIA chief who stood 'reassuringly' outside an aircraft that was to apparently fly him to the site of the crash and provided his first impressions about what might have happened immediately before the crash.

He said the pilot was told that the runways were clear for landing, wondering why the captain decided to make another circle before approaching it.

One hopes that this was not an insinuation that the crash occurred due to pilot error.

That may or may not have been the case, but speculation will not help matters.

We will only know what happened when the aviation authorities conduct a thorough inquiry into the tragedy — and make their report public.

Grim numbers

IF commercial activity and the enthusiastic queues outside stores are anything to go by, it appears that both the government and the public have largely accepted the coronavirus as a non-issue. While there was an attempt by authorities to limit commercial activity earlier, the Punjab government has extended the timings for malls and markets across the province until 10pm for Eid shoppers. Eid shopping crowds and the resumption of nationwide train services, too, are strong indicators that many in Pakistan have attempted to go back to 'business as usual' — even as the daily cases climb and healthcare professionals sound the alarm. The

numbers remain grim and the graph for daily new cases continues to show a steady increase. Covid-19 infections have crossed 50,000, with over 1,000 deaths. In Sindh, at least seven doctors and five policemen have passed away from the virus. In the media fraternity, Covid-19 has claimed the lives of at least three journalists and infected scores of others. Despite the very real — and potentially fatal — threat from the virus, authorities have shown their eagerness to reopen the economy out of concern that extended lockdowns will affect daily wagers and negatively impact the economy.

The consequences of the government's gamble will be visible in the coming weeks. Even as infection rates climb, congregations continue in mosques, and many blatantly violate the government's SOPs. Despite several pleas by provincial authorities, there is little hope that Eid prayers and congregations will respect the distancing SOPs. In these circumstances, the only hope is that the government is using its time to build its healthcare and testing capacity. The government has justified its decision to reopen by saying that Pakistan's figures are 'much better than countries in the West' and that perhaps populations in South Asia have some miracle, unproven immunity. Across the border in India and Iran, which have comparable weather, a high prevalence of BCG vaccinations and a young population, the numbers paint an alarming picture. Sweden, which many lockdown detractors liberally use as an example, has reported the highest coronavirus death rate per capita. Given the effect of the virus on our neighbours and the established dangers as proved by renowned hospitals and scientific organisations, complacency and ignorance are certainly dangerous strategies. As recent events have proven, complacent countries — even those with far more sophisticated and well-funded healthcare systems — have suffered. Authorities ought to realise this and prepare the healthcare sector for a dire situation.

Changing face of sports

SPORTS has been a conspicuous casualty of the coronavirus pandemic. Since last December, the fear of the unknown has been haunting athletes and sports administrators across the world. The postponement of the Tokyo Olympics 2020 proved to be the last straw, leading sports bodies everywhere to shut down all activity until the time normality was restored. Having said that, the estimated financial losses due to inaction and mounting levels of insecurity and frustration

within the sports fraternity have led to the resumption of the German soccer league Bundesliga and a few others in Europe, besides some baseball leagues in the Far East. Such defiant moves, however, have triggered a debate all around because of the risks involved. Many players are wary of taking to the field, as the situation is still not normal even with infection rates falling in parts of the world. On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of fans have scoffed at the idea of not being allowed to witness the action firsthand as their favourite teams gear up for contests in empty stadiums.

There are massive financial challenges if sports activities continue to be at a standstill any longer. For instance, in less than two months of no activity, giant set-ups such as Premier League football in England and Cricket Australia are said to be fighting for survival amid fears of going bankrupt. The parent bodies of various sports as well as administrative set-ups, therefore, are very much inclined to accept the resumption of games in empty stadiums as the only way out, simply because there is too much at stake. With broadcasters, who dish out billions of dollars in TV contracts to teams and clubs, vociferously backing the idea, it is most likely to be adopted as the new normal in sports, at least for now. Though fans are an integral component of the game, they will hopefully come around to the idea of watching matches on TV for their own and their teams' safety.

A sad Eid

THE despondency over the increasing number of coronavirus infections that have claimed over 1,000 lives in Pakistan has been compounded by Friday's PIA air crash that killed 97, robbing the country of whatever little joy had been left at the prospect of Eid festivities. Indeed, rather than celebrating, the nation will find the day an occasion for sober reflection on a global health crisis and a national tragedy. The socialising that normally characterises Eid has been replaced by social distancing. Far from embracing each other, the coronavirus forbids even a handshake. Masks hide smiling faces, and one cannot dine out with relatives at home or at eateries. If all the SOPs, imposed by terror-stricken governments everywhere, are observed — and they should be as the mayhem the virus has unleashed is far greater than any sense of privation — one would not even be able to take a stroll in the neighbourhood park or the beach. Some have gone so far as to say that the SOPs hold sway over our fundamental rights, among them

the freedom of assembly. On a lighter note, some of history's most ruthless dictators must be turning in their graves out of sheer jealousy because Covid-19 now exercises over billions of people the power they wished they could have wielded.

We can turn our thoughts to the brighter side of life and hope that by the time we observe the next Eidul Fitr, the pandemic would be a thing of the past. But what will take years to end is the pitiable condition of millions of Muslims the world over — poverty, war and persecution have led to much suffering. Many Muslims are refugees, some in their own country and others outside it. Unceasing fratricidal wars have pulverised state structures and pauperised the citizenry. As depressing are certain religious tendencies that promote violence or an extremist discourse that have seen states capitulate — as in our case where sections of the clergy have resisted the measures taken to lessen the threat of the virus. This governmental powerlessness highlights the prevalence of an ambience hostile to reason and science. No wonder scientists of the Muslim world prefer to work in 'infidel' states where their talents are recognised and honoured. The other day, President Donald Trump named Moncef Slaoui, a Moroccan-born pharma specialist, as one of two experts charged with developing a coronavirus vaccine. In the country of his origin, Mr Slaoui would have been sitting idle.

These are all thoughts for Eid day. Perhaps it will help Muslim countries including Pakistan resolve to break out of their intellectual inertia and focus attention on creating a milieu that encourages the uninhibited pursuit of liberal knowledge. The OIC has done nothing to encourage scientific research in the Muslim world in spite of the enormous wealth of many of its members. That must change.

Crash investigation

HEART-RENDING stories from the PK-8303 crash on Friday have been trickling through: entire families wiped out, a son coming home on a surprise Eid visit to his parents who will never see him alive again, a young woman returning from a funeral in Lahore only to herself perish, and so on. At least 97 people are confirmed dead, with an unknown number on the ground sustaining injuries when the aircraft came down in a crowded residential locality just off the Karachi airport. Two passengers miraculously survived — pinpricks of light in an otherwise desperately sad episode. The survivors and their families, and the

public at large, deserve to know the answer to the question: what led to the flight's catastrophic end? There has been much speculation, largely based on the last few moments of the cockpit crew's communication with the air control tower, which is grossly little information to go on. PIA on Saturday released a summary on the technical history of this particular Airbus A-320 which said there was "no defect related to the engine, landing gear or major aircraft system".

The plane crash must be investigated in a transparent manner so the findings are credible and provide the families the most definitive answer possible as to why their loved ones died. However, eyebrows are already being raised over the composition of the team formed by the government to probe the disaster with oversight from the Special Investigation Board. Of the four members that have been named, three belong to the air force. The CEO of PIA happens to be Air Marshal Arshad Mahmood Malik; the PAF officers on the committee are all junior to him in rank. Surely there are worthy civilians who could acquit themselves equally well in their task and whose objectivity, or deference to a senior air force officer, would not be an issue? The pilots' association has also asked that it, and international aviation bodies, be involved in the probe. Independent plane crash investigation bodies worldwide usually do include airline pilots and co-opt personnel from the relevant aircraft manufacturer. Doubts about how the inquiry into the crash of PK-8303 will unfold are not misplaced. After all, it has been nearly four years since another PIA flight, PK-661, crashed en route to Islamabad from Chitral. Yet the SIB has still not released its final report that explains why 48 people had their lives cut short that day.

Saving the elephant

MARGHAZAR Zoo's sole elephant will be freed. On Thursday, the Islamabad High Court took notice of the poor living conditions at the zoo and condemned the authorities for their cruel treatment of Kaavan, who is said to have been repeatedly beaten and starved, in violation of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1890, and the Wildlife Ordinance of 1979. For over three decades, the animal suffered in silence in a small enclosure, often chained, and reportedly showed signs of severe mental distress. Elephants, in particular, are complex mammals that experience many of the same emotions as humans: joy, grief, terror, wrath and compassion. They have long memories, build strong family bonds and require companionship. In the wild, they live in herds, but Kaavan was

forced to live in solitude for years. His plight gained international attention, most notably of American singer and actor Cher, who sent out a series of ecstatic tweets after hearing of the court's decision. Earlier, an online petition for his release garnered more than 280,000 signatures.

While Kaavan's story may have a happy ending thanks to the sustained efforts of animal rights activists, many others continue to languish inside pitiful conditions that are far away from their natural habitats. One of the popular arguments for zoos is that it encourages wildlife conservation. However, it seems as if the animals are brought to Pakistan to die. Many are visibly emaciated or suffering from disease. Just last month, according to one report, Marghazar Zoo authorities said they did not have adequate medical facilities; the year before that, they admitted before the Islamabad High Court that they did not have the funds needed to take care of the animals. Next month, Kaavan may be living in an elephant sanctuary, as directed by the IHC, but there has to be a broader conversation about the use of animals for entertainment, the relevancy of zoos in this day and age, and the limits of our compassion.

Sugar probe

THE government of Prime Minister Imran Khan is being commended for sharing with the public the findings of the FIA-led inquiry commission set up last month to conduct a forensic analysis of nine sugar companies to determine the reasons for an abrupt and steep surge in the domestic price of sugar during the winter. Even the alleged involvement of some key politicians — or their close relatives — linked to the PTI government and its allies at the centre and in Punjab did not deter Mr Khan from ordering a more thorough probe and making its conclusions public. Some would argue that the factional differences within the PTI might have led the government to release the report. The recent statements by Jahangir Khan Tareen — who bankrolled the PTI's election campaign in 2018 and was a close adviser of Mr Khan — that he was being victimised by the bureaucracy have lent some support to this argument. But that does not detract from the report's findings or the government's bold act of making it public.

The investigation was ordered by the prime minister to expand on the report of an earlier inquiry into the matter with the promise of stringent action against those involved in what is one of most publicised scams in recent years. The

commission has done a good job in documenting the way the sugar business is conducted in Pakistan at a huge cost to the national exchequer, taxpayers and unsuspecting consumers. It also highlights the way politically powerful sugar barons use their clout to manipulate the market and government policies to steal from poor sugarcane growers, cheat the taxman, and secure large subsidies and export rebates — all in the name of consumers. The government, for instance, has been paying mill owners a subsidy of Rs29bn against a personal income tax of Rs9bn paid by them to ensure their factories keep crushing cane and producing sugar every year. In order to cheat the government and evade taxes, they conduct their transactions on paper slips, cartelise to inflate the cost of production, maintain two sets of accounting records, over-invoice exports and under-report their output. Sadly, all regulatory institutions from cane commissioners to the FBR to SECP to the district administration collude with the sugar mafia in its illegal enterprise to let them make windfall profits.

The commission has failed to pin responsibility for letting the industry export sugar and claim substantial subsidy. The official argument is that the ECC allowed the export of ‘surplus’ sugar and Punjab announced a subsidy on it in the wake of farmers’ protest against the mill owners’ refusal to start the crushing season on the appointed date. It does not hold much water because it is the government’s job to implement the law and not crumble under pressure from vested interests. Those who cannot withstand such pressure will only be looked upon as having failed the people.

Covid and the poor

A STARK reminder of the fight against Covid-19 has recently been issued by the United Nations. All things considered, the cost could represent “the largest reversal in human development on record”, according to a report issued by the United Nations Development Programme last week. The authors look at the human cost of the fight in comprehensive terms, from days of education lost for children to aggravation of gender-based inequality and internet access, to name a few. This approach is far superior to others that look only at foregone wages of the poor; it encompasses the many dimensions of poverty as well as providing a more long-term view of the cost impact of the fight against the virus. “The drop in human development is expected to be much higher in developing countries that are less able to cope with the pandemic’s social and economic fallout than richer

nations,” the report states, and points to the enduring nature of the challenges that are opening up before us all. This goes far beyond the ‘lockdown versus livelihoods’ debate, which was a non-debate to start with because it pushed the poor to pursue their livelihoods in the midst of a mushrooming pandemic.

Those using the human development approach to the problem are reminding us that deprivation takes many forms and a renewed commitment to equity and social and economic justice is going to have to be a part of the new policy software that governments will have to adopt, regardless of their resource endowments. “This crisis shows that if we fail to bring equity into the policy toolkit, many will fall further behind,” the report’s lead author says, warning that the government’s response will need to go much further than simply enhancing social protection schemes, and certainly far beyond the simple reopening of the economy so that the poor can be made to return to work regardless of the risks posed by the infection. Among the many challenges that are opening up before the government now, the improvement in internet access across the country is a critical one because it is a key enabler of mitigation strategies for the pandemic. Beyond this, education, gender equality and access to health are going to be long-term challenges. The moment clearly calls for a serious rethink of major priorities for countries such as Pakistan where the already depressed social indicators have not made the task any easier.

England tour

THE Pakistan Cricket Board’s decision in principle to allow the team to tour England in late July for three Test matches and an equal number of T20 games has been well received. Cricket, like all other sports, has been severely hit by the coronavirus pandemic which has either forced cancellation or postponement of a number of scheduled series on the international circuit. So the news of the tour going ahead has come as a relief to fans in both countries. With Pakistan having played some very exciting cricket during the last two England tours, the upcoming series is bound to attract top broadcasters who bring in a major share of revenue for the boards whose coffers are fast being depleted. Having said that, the agreement between the England and Pakistan cricket boards is just the first step. Much will depend on the extent and intensity of the pandemic.

The ECB has briefed the PCB about the strict measures that will be in place for the Pakistan team to guard against the virus. The players would arrive in England early July and be quarantined for 15 days after which they would start training and play practice matches before the first Test likely to begin on Aug 5. The team is to be treated as a ‘family unit’ with no visitors or outsiders allowed to enter the place where the players stay. The team is set to travel with an unusually large contingent of 25 men to cover both Tests and T20s and to play inter-squad matches. And last but not the least, they will be playing in empty stadiums which is a big challenge in itself. Indeed, these are extraordinary measures to cope with extraordinary times. The PCB has acted wisely by leaving the final choice to the players to tour or not. Although most might want to play if things improve, those opting out would be within their rights to do so. If risks remain, the PCB itself should review its decision.

Relentless rise in Covid-19 cases

THE relaxation in countrywide lockdowns, coupled with the government and superior judiciary’s mixed messaging about the coronavirus threat, seem to have induced the public to throw already barely existent caution to the wind. Scenes of zero socially distanced revelry, with scarcely a mask in sight, have marked Eid — an occasion when toned down celebrations this year would have been appropriate for more than one reason. Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health Dr Zafar Mirza has warned that if the current trajectory of coronavirus cases persisted, “strict lockdowns” may have to be reimposed across the country.

There are now around 60,000 confirmed Covid-19 cases in Pakistan, a mere week after we reached the 50,000 milestone. This despite testing for the disease having dipped considerably during the festival holidays: from 16,387 on May 21, it came down to 10,049 on Eid, and 7,252 the day after. Testing needs to be scaled up once again, and quickly. Moreover, the Tracking, Testing and Quarantine strategy must focus on areas where clusters have already been detected so the infection transmission rate can be locally contained. However, that we stand at this juncture — where health professionals are warning of hospitals rapidly approaching saturation point with Covid-19 patients — should surprise no one. The federal government has given selective attention to information. For instance, it has used the relaxation of lockdowns in several

European countries to justify the correctness of its stance, arguing that even rich nations have realised that lockdowns are not the answer to the pandemic. However, it has conveniently ignored that these countries began to lift restrictions only after the ‘flattening of the curve’, thereby giving a breather to their over-stressed health systems.

This pandemic has cut a swathe across the globe; but Pakistan was not among the first countries to be badly affected. We could have been ahead of the game by observing how Iran, Italy and Spain were dealing with its fallout. However, the federal government has taken a muddled approach — indeed, a partisan approach where Sindh is concerned — instead of showing consistent, assured leadership based on empirical data rather than populist posturing. If, as Dr Mirza apprehends, strict lockdowns have to be reinstated, the government needs to be very clear about their parameters and impress upon the need for provinces to enforce them properly. The hemming and hawing thus far has reduced the concept of a lockdown to a joke — a dangerous one at that. This is the time to try and plug as many loopholes as possible. There are, for instance, reports the government is considering testing only symptomatic passengers from among those being repatriated from abroad. This is a highly risky strategy, given that many are arriving from countries where the virus is on a rampage. Each and every passenger must be tested. We simply cannot afford to be complacent.

Trauma of families

THE trauma and grief that the families, relatives, friends and colleagues of those who lost their lives in the PIA plane crash in Karachi last Friday are going through cannot be expressed in words. There is very little that anyone can say or do to mitigate the unbearable pain they are experiencing. What has added to their agony is the unsympathetic attitude of the government and the PIA authorities as the affected families keep rushing from one hospital to another and from one mortuary to another to try and retrieve the remains of their loved ones. In between, they are required to go through a cumbersome process of verification and documentation involving police and other government agencies before they are handed over the remains of their loved ones for burial.

The bodies of most passengers on the fateful flight were burned beyond recognition. There is no way that the remains can be identified without a DNA

test, the results of which may take some time to come. However, those who have lost their children, spouses and parents in the crash want speedy results and identification. A news report, which quoted Faisal Edhi, the head of the Edhi Foundation, as saying that at least 19 bodies were forcibly taken away from a hospital mortuary by relatives, shows how frustrating the dysfunctional system is proving itself to be for the distraught families. That may have put at risk the DNA testing process for identifying the deceased. Further, a video posted on social media shows a man, who lost his wife and three children in the tragic incident, calling upon Prime Minister Imran Khan to intervene to cut the bureaucratic red tape; this reveals how the lack of trust between the federal and Sindh governments is jeopardising the DNA testing process and delaying the handing over of bodies to the grieving families. The ongoing debate about what might have led the plane to crash moments before landing seems to have sucked in the PIA authorities from the very moment the rescuers started scouring the flight wreckage in the hope of finding survivors. Normally, other airlines immediately establish a dedicated system for assisting the affected families in such cases to keep them informed of developments and help them in completing the formalities. But PIA remains true to its old character. It has abandoned them. The government hasn't done any better either.

Train danger

THE tragic accident at a railway crossing at Pattoki in Punjab on Tuesday is yet another reminder that once negligence sets in, disaster is never far away. The accident which took the lives of two newly married couples has been blamed on the man in charge of the crossing at the time. It was around 10 am when the Khyber Mail from Lahore hit a car carrying the two brothers and their wives — a time when railway staff are expected to be rested and ready for the day's work. Unfortunately, the railways' vulnerability to all manner of accidents is well documented however much the authorities may promise a turnaround. Late last year, reports emerged in the papers describing 2019 as one of the worst years for Pakistan Railways, with some 100 accidents of a minor or major nature taking place. Other occurrences signifying system failure, such as the breaking down of 111 train engines en route, were in addition to these accidents.

Accidents at crossings are frequent, even though not much effort is required to ensure that railway phattaks are properly manned. Indeed, rail tracks all over the

country have many unmanned crossings, and to give readers just one example, a score of accidents took place at these unmanned pickets between August 2018 and June 2019. Sadly, these unmanned danger spots are often accepted with a sense of resignation; hardly any step is taken to make the crossings more secure after a tragedy. The site of Tuesday's collision has witnessed gory scenes of a train ramming hard into a car or some other vehicle all too often. Most infamously, an accident here in 2016 killed eight people. It is a shame that such accidents are allowed to happen in these technologically advanced times. But the railways has not even learnt to use simple gadgets to ensure greater security — like a mobile phone to communicate to the person manning the crossing that the Khyber Mail is just a few kilometres away.

US exit

A MAJOR development in the Afghan theatre has been the apparent US decision to speed up the withdrawal of troops from the country. While Donald Trump has been ambiguous about his exact intentions, the numbers point to a more concrete reality: the American president wants to get his soldiers out of the Afghan war zone as soon as possible. According to reports in various media outlets, the US drawdown of troops is happening faster than expected, and if sources are to be believed, the last American soldier in Afghanistan may be out of that country before the November presidential elections in the US, instead of May 2021, the deadline set by the peace deal signed by Washington and the Afghan Taliban in Doha in February.

While Mr Trump has not been a big fan of American military involvement in overseas conflicts, here purely domestic concerns, namely re-election, may be driving his Afghan policy. After nearly two decades of involvement in Afghanistan, the Washington establishment seems to have realised that the nation-building/counterterrorism experiment launched by another Republican president — George W. Bush — in the aftermath of 9/11 has failed miserably and the time is ripe to cut losses and 'bring the boys home'. The Taliban are far from defeated, which is apparent by the fact that the Americans are suing for peace with the hard-line militia, while a wobbly coalition is sputtering on in Kabul. These are far from ideal conditions, therefore Mr Trump, his generals and advisers have arrived at the apparent conclusion that further involvement in the Afghan theatre will be counterproductive. It seems the Americans have reached the same

conclusion the Soviets had at the end of the 1980s, when they finally realised that their own decade-long imperial foray into Afghanistan was doomed to fail. Moreover, America's other Nato allies may also be thinking of bringing back their own troops should the US quit Afghanistan.

From the above developments, it is clear that very soon foreign forces will be out of Afghanistan. Of course, the million-dollar question is: what next? As stated above, the Taliban are far from routed, and unless some intra-Afghan settlement is reached, the long war will only continue, with Afghan factions pulverising each other, and their battered country. While the US and Europe are clearly tired of the Afghan imbroglio, perhaps other regional states — Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran — as well as major Muslim states can play a greater role to help facilitate an intra-Afghan deal. Unless this is done, the country may plunge into a Mujahideen-like internecine civil war pitting tribes, ethnic groups and rival warlords against each other in an open-ended conflict. If Afghanistan fails again, it will have a negative impact on regional security and prolong the nightmare of the Afghan people. The window of opportunity for a workable deal is closing fast.

Police volte-face

SINCE the beginning of this year, events in Shikarpur, Sindh, offer an object lesson in why governments are so keen to have local law enforcement in their pocket. In January, a leaked report by SSP Shikarpur Dr Rizwan Ahmed exposed an alleged nexus between hardcore criminals and Sindh Energy Minister Imtiaz Sheikh that had rendered the area a haven for illegal activities. The PPP immediately declared the contents of the report as being a complete fabrication and a brazen attempt to malign its party's MPA. The police authorities, however, stood by the SSP, and asked for a JIT to further probe the allegations and make recommendations to shield the LEA from "extraneous pernicious influence", ie political interference in police postings. This created yet another point of friction in the already fraught relationship between the provincial police and the Sindh government. The provincial inspectors general of police are federal appointees and the Sindh government had been trying for some time to have then IG Sindh Dr Kaleem Imam removed and an official more 'amenable' to it appointed in his place. It finally managed to effect a change of command and now a committee is to be set up to probe the veracity of the report itself — an about-turn if ever there was one.

When the police acts as handmaiden to the political leadership, the repercussions for the rule of law are dire. Instead of working to ensure the safety and security of the people's lives and property, a politicised police facilitates violation of the law for the benefit of its de facto bosses and their cronies. In the process, it becomes wholly complicit in a variety of criminal enterprises. Whether land-grabbing, gunrunning, drug smuggling, etc local police can be found to have a finger in every pie, protecting the interests of various mafias through brute force. While the above-cited example relates to Sindh, the fact is every provincial dispensation — except perhaps KP to some extent — tries to keep the police on a short leash. The PTI-ruled Punjab has seen no less than four IGs changed since the party came to power at the centre in 2018. Police officials should not be transferred on political grounds; security of tenure must be respected; and any allegations against them of misconduct or dereliction of duty transparently investigated. There are many upright police officers but they can truly serve the people only when their independence is guaranteed.

The plastic problem

LAST year, over 180 countries agreed to include mixed plastic scrap in the Basel Convention, which would make it more difficult for developed nations to ship their hazardous waste to the developing world. Ever since China banned the import of plastic waste two years ago, some of the world's largest polluters — including the US, the UK, Japan and Germany — have been seeking other nations to fill in the gap. The environmental damage and health repercussions caused by plastic are well established, and it is simply unfair for some of the world's wealthiest countries to outsource their plastic problem to the developing nations. This is just one more example to show how mindless consumerism and capitalistic disregard for the environment disproportionately affects poorer countries, even though they are responsible for a far smaller percentage of total global pollution. It further exacerbates inequality between nations and individuals within those nations. But while other Asian countries have increased restrictions on the import of plastic scrap as they recognise that the long-term harm of plastic far outweighs short-term economic gains, the dumping of such waste has only increased in Pakistan. According to a report in this paper recently, in the past three years alone, thousands of tons of plastic have made their way to Pakistan, which is still struggling to create proper waste management infrastructures and provide adequate healthcare to all its citizens. Despite being a signatory to the Basel

Convention and having several other legal restrictions in place to prevent the country from becoming a dumping ground for the world's plastic addiction, the reality on the ground speaks otherwise.

The present government has time and again brought up the urgency of addressing global climate change challenges. Given that Pakistan is one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, it is now time to act upon those words, and take strict action against the import of plastic scrap, particularly single-use plastics, and perhaps look into banning it altogether.

New locust attack

A FRESH swarm of locusts is on its way from Africa to Pakistan. It is expected to arrive here in early July, according to Federal Minister for Information & Broadcasting Shibli Faraz. We are not aware of the size of the swarm travelling towards Pakistan at present. But it is quite clear that when the crop-eating hoppers from Africa join the local infestations that have already invaded a significantly large area, we will witness the massive destruction of crops as well as rural livelihoods across the country. In a report released a few weeks back, the FAO had warned of "a potentially serious food security crisis" and significant livelihood losses unless urgent action is taken to contain local breeding by the pests. The FAO estimates of potential crop and livelihood losses owing to the new wave of locust attacks over the next several months are quite staggering at a time when the economy is already teetering on the brink because of the coronavirus outbreak.

The minister claimed that the government had formulated a national strategy and made adequate preparations to tackle the locust plague, which had appeared in Pakistan after 27 years, and a national locust control cell was being set up to effectively control the threat. However, it remains unclear as to why the government has been slow to respond to the plague in spite of the alarm raised by the affected farmers as early as last summer after the hoppers attacked and destroyed a significant part of their crops, as well as consistent warnings by international agencies. While the federal government declared an emergency in February to combat the plague, little was done to prevent local breeding and new infestations across 38pc of the country's total land area in recent months. The

FAO report had also blamed insufficient efforts to control breeding and the formation of new swarms for the rapid growth of local locust infestations.

The efforts to control the locust invasion in the country have so far been inadequate and disjointed at best. The Sindh Abadgar Board, a growers' body, has drawn attention to the absence of coordination between the federal government and the province in the face of the looming danger. Politics has kept the centre and Sindh from uniting their resources and cooperating in order to respond effectively to the threat — to the detriment of the livelihoods of smallholder farmers and food security. The official response to the locust attack in the other provinces has not been satisfactory either. In most parts, farmers have been left to tackle the menace on their own. All stakeholders should realise that time is of the essence in the fight against the crop-eating pests, and they must join forces. The country has already lost a lot of precious time that should have been spent on controlling the formation of local swarms — and not on political point-scoring.

Temple construction

THE announcement made recently that the construction of the Ram mandir in Ayodhya — upon the ruins of the Babri Masjid — will begin within six months serves as just another troubling sign that India's transformation into a Hindu rashtra is nearly complete. Rather than a purely religious edifice, the temple would be a victory monument for the Sangh Parivar, announcing the triumph of extremist Hindu thought over what remains of Indian secularism. The representatives of a Hindu religious trust made the announcement last week; the Indian supreme court had ruled last year that the temple would be built on what is believed by Hindus to be Ram Janmabhoomi — the birthplace of deity Ram. But far from religious matters, the drive to build the temple, and before it to demolish the Babri Masjid, is part and parcel of the ruling BJP's ideological make-up. After all, the party's stalwarts were at the forefront of the movement of Hindu zealots that culminated in the demolition of the mosque in 1992, marking the beginning of the end of Indian secularism, and the bloody, violent arrival of Hindutva on India's national stage.

The Pakistan Foreign Office has criticised the decision, observing that the move is part of a pattern in which “Muslims in India are being marginalised,

dispossessed, demonised and subjected to senseless violence”. Indeed, the monster of Hindutva has emerged from the rubble of the Babri mosque and spread its tentacles across India, smothering minorities, particularly Muslims, and recreating the country in the image of the Sangh Parivar. Whether it is cow vigilantes lynching Muslims on suspicions of eating beef, the shock troops of Hindutva terrorising Muslim men, women and children, or the Indian state introducing discriminatory legislation designed to disenfranchise the Muslim population, all indications are that hatred and majoritarian arrogance have now been mainstreamed in India. The ideologues of the Sangh have never accepted Pakistan and constantly seek to provoke this country, while internally they are meting out treatment to Indian Muslims not too different to what the fascists of Europe did to Jews in the 20th century. There is great horror and revulsion over Nazi crimes — and rightly so. But though the Hindutva brigade is seeking to replicate what their ideological twins did in Europe during World War II, the world is mostly quiet, courting the ‘world’s largest democracy’ that looks the other way as its Muslim citizens are beaten, harassed and murdered.

Trump on the warpath

AFTER his relentless verbal onslaught against the mainstream media, US President Donald Trump has unleashed his wrath on social media companies. Through an executive order signed on Thursday, Mr Trump ordered the removal of some of the legal protections given to Twitter and Facebook. The move came after the microblogging social platform hid a tweet posted by Mr Trump, saying that it “glorifies violence”. In his tweet, Mr Trump warned people in Minneapolis who were protesting against the killing of a black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer that he would send the military to intervene if there was “any difficulty”. The tweet was still accessible but a warning was added by the social media giant explaining Twitter’s policies and reducing the post’s algorithmic distribution.

Mr Trump is no stranger to controversy and has a record of aggressive behaviour towards journalists and critics. His antagonistic and combative manner with reporters at press conferences has now become a common feature of the news cycle. These fresh attacks on social media giants — which he ironically uses liberally to disseminate his views to circumvent traditional media — are a continuation of his sustained offensive against critics. The executive order is

largely symbolic, as these threats will have to cross many legislative and procedural hurdles before they become law — if at all. But what Mr Trump is signalling clearly is that he will not tolerate criticism or evaluation, and that no matter how unpresidential his actions are, he will push back. Not only is this attitude unacceptable in a democracy, it is yet another alarming reminder that an impulsive and authoritarian leader is at the helm of affairs in a global superpower. At a time when the world is combating a pandemic which has overwhelmed healthcare systems and crippled economies, the president of the United States is throwing his toys out of the proverbial pram to make a point — that, too, a dangerous message loaded with threats.