

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of May 2021

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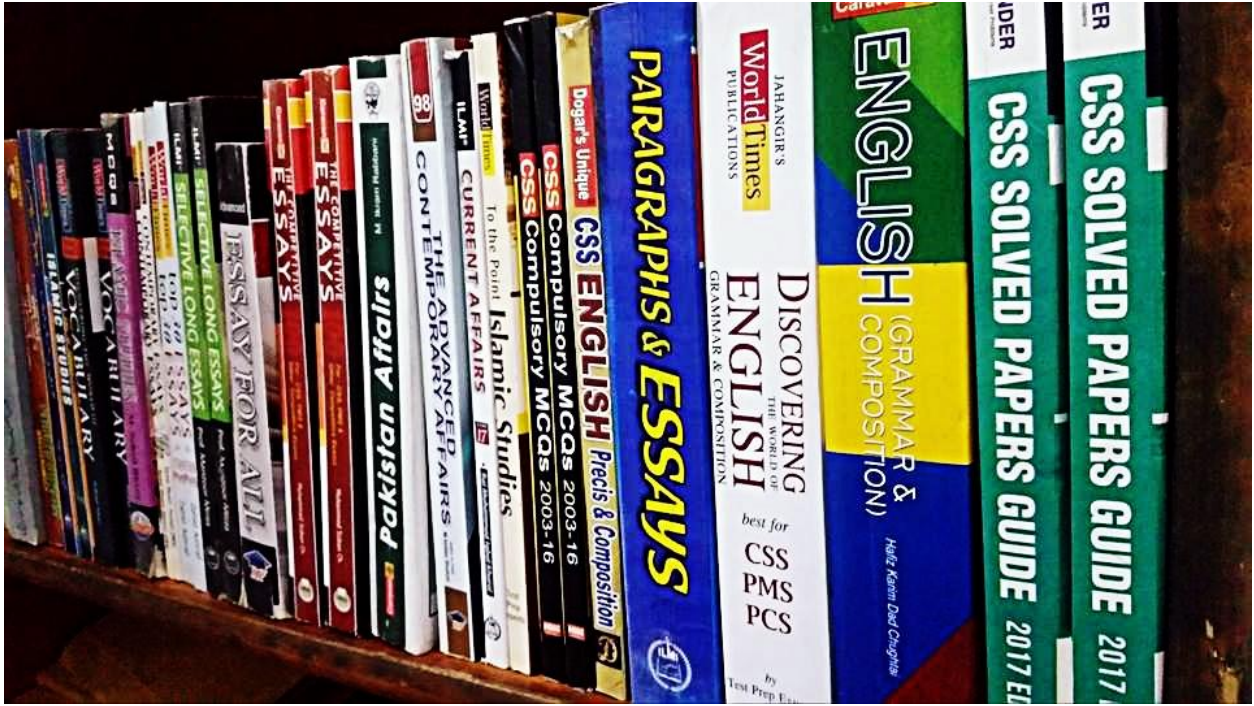
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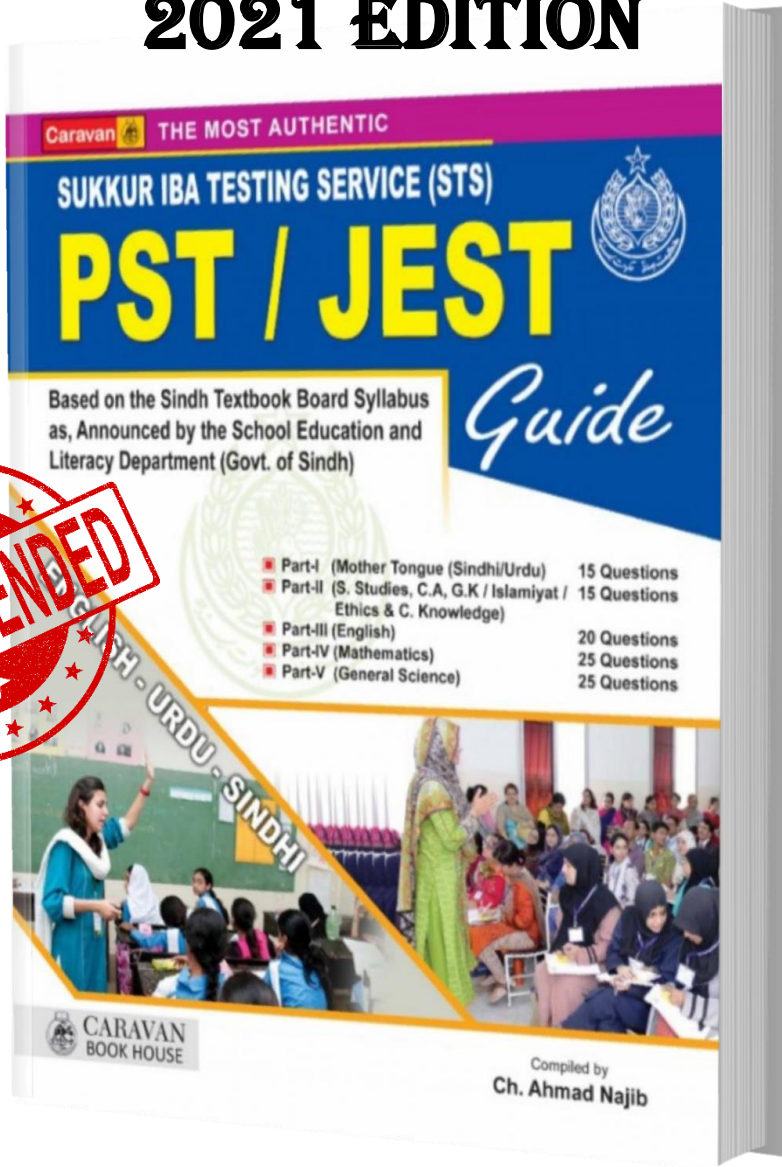
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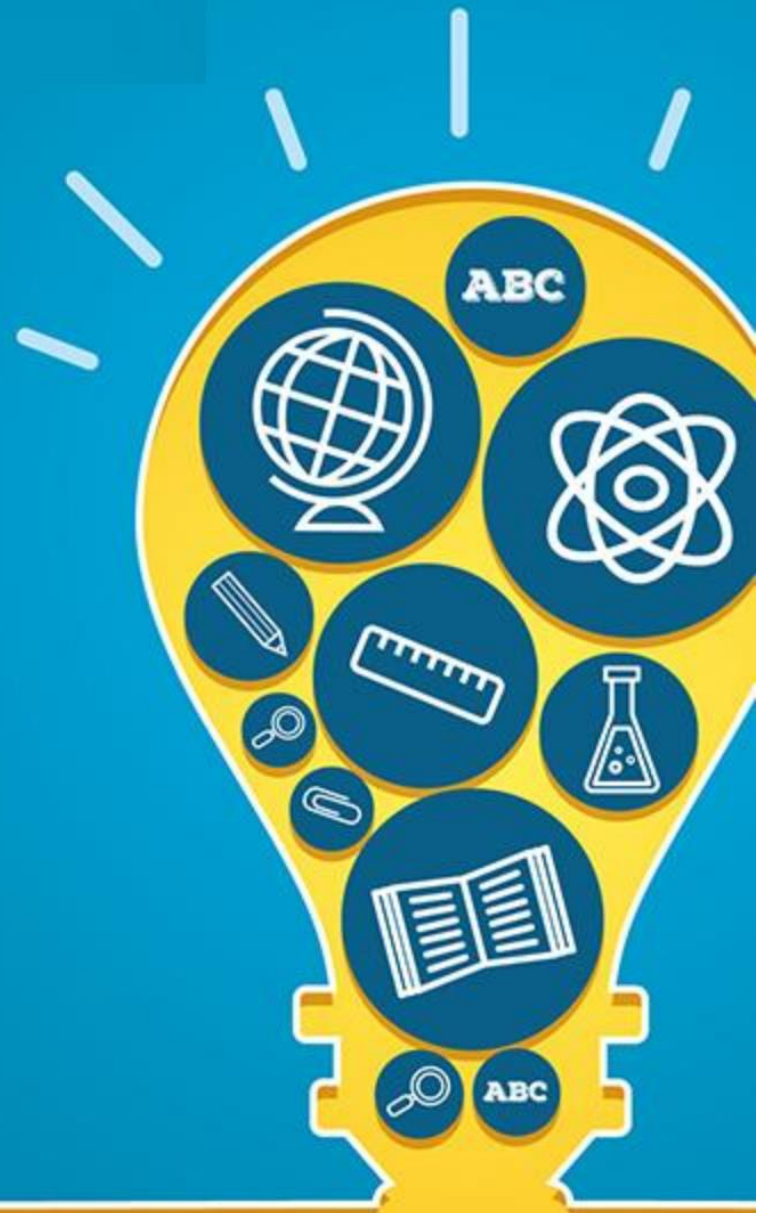
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Expat contributions

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has rightly lauded overseas Pakistanis for their overwhelming response to the Roshan Digital Account, calling them an asset for the country for their contribution to the economy. Speaking at the launch of two new products — Roshan Apni Car and Roshan Samaaji Khidmat — especially created for RDA account holders on Thursday, he pointed out that ‘the only way to bridge the balance of payments is by tapping overseas workers as long as the country’s exports do not increase to the level of its imports’. Indeed, the billions of dollars sent home by Pakistanis working abroad have helped the country pay for its burgeoning import bill for several years now in the wake of stagnating exports as well as plummeting foreign investment and other inflows.

Overseas workers can play an important role in the economic progress of their home countries. India and China are two major examples in our neighbourhood where the two countries’ non-resident citizens have played a significant role in their economic transformation. They have not only been remitting their savings for investments but have also changed the world’s perception of their nations. However, it is sad to note that successive governments in Pakistan have failed to channel remittances sent by the country’s non-resident citizens towards industry and other productive sectors to boost production and exports. Instead, there is a propensity to squander the hard-earned money of Pakistani immigrants on luxury imports for the wealthy. Little wonder then that Pakistan is repeatedly forced to seek support from the IMF for mitigating its balance-of-payments troubles. The incumbent government has taken several initiatives to successfully encourage overseas Pakistanis to send more dollars back home than before for investment in the stock market, government debt and the realty sector through RDA. Still, it needs to do more to persuade non-resident Pakistanis to bring back their savings to invest in the manufacturing industry to enhance growth, create jobs and make up for the shrinking foreign investment. The country needs such initiatives more than ever before.

A critical phase

THE coming weeks are critical for Pakistan’s Covid-19 response. With a national positivity ratio of 10pc and an average of over 150 daily deaths this week, the

situation is as alarming as ever. According to NCOC chief Asad Umar, the number of critical-care Covid patients on oxygen reached 5,360 on Friday — a figure that is 57pc higher than last June's peak.

Though the federal minister tweeted that the government is working on building oxygen capacity, given the rate at which the virus is spreading it may not be enough. As the nightmare unfolds in India, the desperate search for oxygen appears to be a key feature in the heartbreaking pleas of citizens who turn to social media for help.

Even at Pakistan's current positivity rate, oxygen availability continues to be a major constraint. Any higher, and the country will be plunged into the hell that India is living through right now. Along with oxygen availability, trained doctors are a finite resource. If the hospital inflows of critical-care patients increases, hospital staff will be left to make the heartbreaking decision of who lives or dies — a reality we have seen in Italy at the start of the pandemic and now in India.

Given these realities, SOP compliance and prevention in the last two weeks of Ramazan are vital. The alternative will be the near total collapse of the country's healthcare infrastructure. The end of Ramazan usually sees huge crowds in indoor markets set up for Eid shopping. And on Eid, families make multiple visits in a day to relatives —largely indoors as temperatures are high. If Eid activity continues as per normal, the post-Eid period will be dark. Here, the government's efforts to enforce SOPs and send the right message are critical. Unfortunately, even public officials, such as the KP health minister, Taimur Jhagra, are seen violating restrictions. At a time when the provinces need clear leadership, such a message is devastating for the Covid-19 response.

Even if Pakistan emerges from the third wave peak, the Covid-19 threat will not go away. With restrictions not enforced, compliance levels go down and the infection spreads with a vengeance. Pakistan has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the world — a tragedy given how much the healthcare system, economy and education have suffered in the pandemic. Though the government has now announced vaccinations for those who are 40 and above, the fact is that we have managed to vaccinate only 2m of our 220m population.

The government expects to get 15m new doses of the vaccine in the next two months, but it must have a better plan in case of delays. Till now, the vaccines being administered in the country are largely donations from other countries or

private imports. The government must do more to strengthen its vaccine programme, or face the consequences of Covid waves every few months.

Softened Saudi tone

THE surprising change in tone of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman towards Iran is indeed a welcome development in a region torn apart by war and geopolitical rivalries. In a recent TV interview, the kingdom's de facto ruler said he aspired to have a "good and special relationship" with Iran, though also chiding Tehran for its "negative behaviour". This conciliatory tone is far from the warlike statements the prince was issuing not too long ago, threatening to take the battle to Iran. Over the last few years, Saudi-Iranian relations — hardly cordial in the post-1979 period — reached their nadir when Riyadh executed Saudi Shia cleric Sheikh Baqir Al Nimr, in retaliation to which a mob ransacked the kingdom's embassy in Tehran. Moreover, across the Middle East, both powers have been on the opposite ends of the geopolitical spectrum. Saudi Arabia remains part of the American geostrategic alliance in the region, whereas Tehran has been the biggest adversary of this bloc in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. Also, both countries have supported opposing parties in the Syrian civil war and the Lebanese political arena, while Riyadh and Tehran are fighting a brutal proxy war in Yemen. Given these realities, a Saudi-Iranian detente is a welcome development.

The major question is: what has prompted the crown prince to change course? Some say the change of guard in Washington may be the trigger. While the Trump administration gave a practical carte blanche to the Saudis, Team Biden does not appear to be as accommodating. Perhaps the realisation has dawned in Riyadh that instead of depending on outsiders to settle regional issues, the countries of the Middle East need to sort out their own problems. The Saudi prince's interview came after reports had emerged that Saudi and Iranian officials had met in Iraq to discuss a host of issues. Some observers have said senior intelligence and military officials from both sides were involved, while other key Arab states, including the UAE and Egypt, were also reportedly talking to Iran. This process must be carried forward in the interest of regional peace. Primarily, it is hoped some accord can be reached to end the destructive war in Yemen, and to start rebuilding a shattered Syria. Any Saudi-Iranian rapprochement will also have a positive impact on Shia-Sunni relations across the Islamic world, and

both Riyadh and Tehran need to put in their best efforts to make the effort succeed.

EU trade review

THE European Parliament's resolution calling for a review of the EU's trade relations with Pakistan is deeply unsettling. Though not formally binding, the resolution was passed by an overwhelming number of MEPs and can prompt action from the council of ministers. It is also a reminder of the potential consequences of a 'trade boycott' of European goods — one of the demands of the TLP as it protested against the French ambassador last month.

The resolution was passed just weeks after the government and the TLP brokered an agreement to end a weeklong protest by the banned group that had paralysed cities — a protest that had made international headlines as the religious-political organisation led a massive anti-France protest.

Though the European resolution notes anti-French sentiment in the country, its major call is to review the preferential trade status granted to Pakistan since 2014 because of the country's blasphemy laws and their alleged misuse. In fact, such misuse is very much a reality; far too many people have been falsely accused and incarcerated for years pending a trial and, in some ghastly cases, have been victims of vigilante violence. But while these issues very much stand, limiting trade with Pakistan will not resolve them. In fact, removing Pakistan — for whom the European bloc is its most important trade partner — from the list of GSP-Plus countries would hurt our economy and in turn the people. The prime minister raised this very point when he attempted to persuade the TLP to end their protest and said that ending diplomatic relations with Europe would badly hurt Pakistan's exports. Though the EU is right in saying that it is in Pakistan's own interest to review laws, protect minorities and promote tolerance, its parliament's message to penalise the country hardly addresses the problem.

The key here is engagement — both internal and external. If this is the sentiment that has been expressed by lawmakers in Europe, our government must view it practically. The Foreign Office might have rejected the criticism of Pakistan's judicial system and laws, but it would do well to highlight Pakistan's commitment to ending terror financing under FATF obligations, and move to address the issues of religious intolerance. Stronger punishment and quick justice for those

who take the law into their own hands is also key. And it should not take a threat from the EU for Pakistan to see how the blasphemy law is being misused.

Ten years after

IT was a surreal, sobering moment. Ten years ago on this day, Osama bin Laden, then the world's most-wanted man, was taken out by an American special forces hit squad in the garrison town of Abbottabad. Much water has flowed under the bridge since the event, with the landscape of global religious militancy changing considerably, while the state and society in Pakistan have yet to fully come to terms with the fact that Bin Laden was found in this country. At its height, Al Qaeda, the terrorist group Bin Laden founded, could strike far and wide, across continents, creating a major security headache for governments worldwide. However, in the years since the Abbottabad raid, Al Qaeda has become a shadow of its former self, overtaken by even more virulent actors such as the self-styled Islamic State group, which also appears to be in decline though is far from vanquished.

The story of how Osama Bin Laden became a cult-like figure in the world of religious militancy is a strange one. The scion of a large, incredibly wealthy Saudi family of Yemeni origin, Bin Laden shunned his father's business interests and instead earned his stripes on the Cold War battlefields of Afghanistan, at the time working on the same team as his native Saudi Arabia and the US against the Soviets. However, his eventual transformation from an Afghan-Arab 'mujahid' to the mastermind of Al Qaeda helped usher in the era of transnational global jihadi outfits. After Al Qaeda's violent exploits the world witnessed IS's reign of terror, until it was brought to heel, but not after leaving a trail of blood across Syria and Iraq. Bin Laden, therefore, has the dubious honour of being the prototype for globalist jihadi groups, even though Al Qaeda may now be a largely spent force. His killing also throws up the uncomfortable truth that world powers once used religiously inspired militants for geopolitical purposes, yet soon changed tack when geopolitics took a new turn.

Closer to home, even more uncomfortable questions concerning Bin Laden's presence in Pakistan remain unanswered. Some answers lie in the Abbottabad Commission report, which was leaked to the media but has never been officially released, much like many earlier commission reports probing national disasters.

Because such reports are not publicly released or discussed in a democratic manner, conjecture and rumour-mongering end up clouding the facts. The state should release the Abbottabad Commission report so that the mistakes made can be acknowledged and future blunders avoided. The raid on Bin Laden's compound was no small event. The people of this country need to be told why the world's most notorious militant was found in a Pakistani town, and how foreign forces managed to carry out a complex operation, by violating our territorial sovereignty, and escape without being detected.

Controversial by-election

THE hotly contested NA-249 Karachi bypoll has thrown up a few surprises and challenges for the future. Not many anticipated a big crowd on polling day owing to surging coronavirus infections, the month of fasting and the hot weather. But, given the hectic campaign run by the contesting political parties, few could have predicted just how abysmally low the voter turnout would be. Then we had election officials who for some inexplicable reason took a long time counting the ballots despite the low turnout. The emergence of PPP's Qadir Mandokhel — who had trailed behind all his rivals in 2018 — as winner was a major surprise. But the bigger one was the pathetic showing of the PTI — far worse than was expected by political analysts — in a constituency considered its stronghold. The loss of one poll after another by the ruling PTI in recent months — especially in constituencies it won in the 2018 poll — demands serious introspection within the party and an honest review of the performance of its government.

The fact that the number of votes rejected was greater than the margin of victory has enhanced public perceptions of wrongdoing. Hopefully, the ECP will thoroughly investigate the PML-N's allegations, especially accusations of delayed announcement of results, now that it has accepted the PML-N's application for a recount. What happened in Karachi and earlier in Daska (the ECP had to order re-polling after 20 of its election officials went missing for several hours) weakens the electoral process and underscores the dire need for reforms that have been on hold for a long time now. The introduction of electronic voting machines as proposed by the government can be considered but the administration will have to go far beyond that to ensure transparent and fair elections. The opposition should consider the prime minister's latest offer to discuss electoral reforms and

both sides must extensively debate and forge a consensus on the kind of changes they want well before the 2023 election.

Resumption of PSL-6

THE Pakistan Cricket Board's recent announcement that the remaining matches of the Pakistan Super League's sixth edition would resume from June 1 has not met with a lot of enthusiasm because of the resurgence of the coronavirus in the region. Besides, several key overseas players who appeared in the League in February-March, might not be available this time because of international commitments. PSL-6 came to an abrupt halt in March with just 14 out of 34 matches completed after seven people participating in the tournament tested positive for Covid-19, amid reports of gross violation of the bio-secure environment by players, officials and franchise owners. Concerns about the safety of players and fans are bound to increase if the matches resume in a month's time — the third wave of the virus has been particularly harsh and has already resulted in a large number of deaths in the country. Besides, the franchises themselves, although they have invested millions of rupees in the League, are concerned about how the absence of some big cricketing names could dent the popularity and competitiveness of the matches. The PCB, which came under scathing criticism for its poor handling of PSL-6 in March, has vowed to make foolproof arrangements for the remaining games in June that would include robust and strict implementation of the protocols as well as maintaining a zero-tolerance approach towards all those who breach the SOPs. The cricket governing body has also decided to hire a globally recognised safety management company that specialises in providing Covid-safe technology solutions.

Having said that, nothing can be predicted about the severity of the pandemic nor of the response of the players or the public if PSL-6 matches do go ahead in June as scheduled. Hopefully, the PCB will promptly reschedule the remaining League games after assessing the situation towards the end of this month and not take any undue risks that could damage Pakistan's flagship cricket event and hurt its credibility.

Press Freedom Day

TODAY is World Press Freedom Day: for Pakistan's beleaguered journalist community, it is a reminder of how the space for them is steadily shrinking. But this grim reality should also be of concern to those who understand the critical importance of a free press in a democracy. A media in chains cannot hold the powerful to account and serve public interest as it is meant to do. Indeed, the very quality of a democracy can be gauged by the state of its press.

In its latest report, the International Federation of Journalists has ranked Pakistan the fifth most dangerous country in the world for mediapersons. During the period between 1990 and 2020, no less than 138 journalists lost their lives here for reasons connected to their work. Freedom Network Pakistan documented at least 148 attacks or violations against journalists across the country from May 3, 2020, till April 20, 2021. These include six murders, seven attempted assassinations, five kidnappings, 25 arrests or detentions, 15 assaults and 27 legal cases registered against journalists. And state authorities, responsible for protecting constitutional rights, emerged as the biggest threat to media practitioners — perceived as the perpetrators in a whopping 46pc of the documented cases.

Certainly, journalists' safety appears to be very low on the government's list of priorities. The human rights ministry had drafted the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Bill over a year ago. To its credit, this was a comprehensive piece of proposed legislation that managed to take into account many of the problems confronting the media and provided workable solutions. For instance, it suggested dealing with the critical issue of impunity by setting up a seven-member committee to be headed by a former Supreme Court judge, which would have wide-ranging powers of investigation and redressal. Just as it appeared that the government had woken up to its duty towards the media, the cabinet decided to club the draft with another bill prepared by the information ministry and, for that purpose, send it to the law ministry — where it has been languishing ever since. Then SAPM on information Firdous Ashiq Awan had said that while more time was needed, "the process is in the final stage and we will try to speed it up". The cabinet's inexplicable decision conveniently placed an urgently needed piece of legislation on the back-burner, leaving media professionals to fend for themselves.

Meanwhile, threats from known and 'unknown' state elements continue to be hurled at journalists; news editors are coerced into censoring 'undesirable' information or giving stories a certain slant; media outlets are threatened with financial ruin if they refuse to toe the line. In the midst of this, for government functionaries to insist that the press in Pakistan is free, as they are wont to do sometimes, is no less than a bald-faced lie.

A mission for the PM

THERE appear to be strong reasons behind the abrupt recall of the ambassador to Saudi Arabia along with some other staff members. The increasing number of complaints against them from Pakistani expatriates will now be investigated, and the chairman of the Prime Minister's Inspection Commission has constituted a team for this purpose. While the prime minister has done well to take swift action, one hopes that the details of this case will be revealed to the public and that those recalled will have an opportunity to defend themselves. An overwhelming number of complaints usually pertain to consular services and this problem has persisted over the years regardless of who is running the government in Islamabad. Since Prime Minister Imran Khan has always given special attention to overseas Pakistanis, the stern action will be seen as a warning to other errant missions. Pakistani expatriates in several countries have long complained of inefficient services provided by our embassies and missions but no major improvements have taken place despite the gravity and frequency of the problem. The nature of the Pakistani state has never been service-oriented and the missions are no exception. They are staffed by bureaucrats and other government officials who are steeped in a culture that lays little emphasis on service delivery and efficient public dealing. The systems they run are archaic and burdened with lack of incentives for performance. The result is an apathy that percolates from the top all the way down to those members of the missions that have direct contact with the citizens.

This must change. The PTI government is best suited to spur the effort by paying special attention to the performance of embassies and consulates across the world. Mr Khan should instruct the Foreign Office to revise all systems, audit the performance of its staff in these missions, and establish a system of feedback that keeps the ministry linked to the problems of the expatriates. The old ways of running these missions must give way to a service-oriented approach that

prioritises the welfare of the people. This will not be easy to achieve. However if the prime minister can present this as a challenge to Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, he can ensure that the Foreign Office begins work to reorient all missions and gets them to start performing with the efficiency that is to be expected in this day and age. The prime minister should demand no less.

Routine immunisation

AS countries around the world grapple with the deadly third wave of Covid-19 and we witness the horrific devastation across the border, it is easy to forget about other prevalent infections and their damaging impact on countless lives. While millions wait desperately for any brand of the Covid vaccine, there are many who have little awareness of the necessity of routine vaccinations that can prevent common illnesses such as measles and polio. They thus end up endangering the lives of their children. In fact, it emerged at an event recently organised by the Ministry of National Health Services in connection with World Immunisation Week (observed in the last week of April every year) that vaccination provided under the government's Expanded Programme of Immunisation can prevent 17pc of fatalities among young Pakistani children. The EPI provides free essential immunisation for children up to 15 months of age. This set of inoculations prevents 11 illnesses: tuberculosis, polio, measles, diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, haemophilus influenza type B, hepatitis B, diarrhoea, pneumonia and typhoid.

Poor vaccination coverage results in thousands of deaths of small children and infants who have not received adequate care at home or in public hospitals that often lack proper medical services. This gaping hole in our healthcare system is preventing us from achieving SDG 3 that relates to infant and child mortality. While matters have slowly improved over the years, the mortality rate still remains high — as many as 67 children out of 100,000 die before their fifth birthday. Unfortunately, poor facilities and the government's apathy have taken us to a point where many illnesses that have been eradicated in the rest of the world, such as polio, are still prevalent in Pakistan. The lives of thousands of children can be saved through vaccines that are part of our routine immunisation programme. Unfortunately, free immunisation on its own is not enough if there is no attempt on the part of our health authorities to make vaccines accessible to the public and to educate the latter on their importance.

Electoral reforms

THE government's proposal on Monday of extensive electoral reforms is a welcome announcement. Far too many elections, including last week's NA-249 bypoll, have ended in accusations of manipulation and rigging. From 'missing' electoral staff to the hijacking of entire ballot boxes, even the most far-fetched of schemes somehow become possible during our election process.

But although Babar Awan's specific proposals to the Elections Act 2017 are a step in the right direction, the history of strained relations between the government and opposition means that a constructive debate on this crucial issue will be an uphill task.

Here, the government must take the lead, not just in proposing amendments but also in demonstrating its commitment to parliamentary debates. Underpinning this exercise is trust. The opposition parties have little confidence in the government. Prime Minister Imran Khan on several occasions has talked of electoral reforms, but his party's toxic relationship with the opposition has left little room for engagement on this, or any other, issue. He and his government must prove their commitment to reforms with a consistent debate in parliament, where the opposition feels it is being heard.

The latter, on its part, must not be quick to reject every proposal made by the government if it seeks a resolution to the problem. Ironically, the party, which has rejected the establishment's role in elections and accused the PPP of winning with its help in the NA-249 poll, has called for army personnel to take custody of the ballots in Karachi. A comprehensive debate followed by consensus on electoral reform — an exercise that should categorically rule out any role for the establishment as the PPP chairman indicated at a press conference yesterday — is the only way to address the instability and chaos that are all too evident when polls are held.

For far too long, our elections have been marred by the interference and influence of either the ruling party or the establishment. Pakistan is fortunate that its electoral system is linked to Nadra, which has several layers of identification for those registered with it. A rigging-proof system, which cannot be manipulated through technical delays, is possible if political stakeholders sit together to make it so. This unpleasant and dangerous trend of tainted elections must end, as it

steals the right of the electorate to indicate their choice. Moreover, these episodes erode the public's faith in the system and in democracy itself.

The events of the two recent NA bypolls in Daska and Karachi, and the Senate polls this year, are an example of the mayhem that will unfold if political stakeholders do not address electoral challenges before the next general election. Reforms eliminate the involvement of those who rig the ballot box and it is in the collective interest of the political parties to accept this. Failure to do so will be a loss for everyone.

Unmet tax targets

THE FBR has increased its tax collection by 14pc to Rs3.8tr this year during the 10-month period from July to April — up from Rs3.3tr a year ago. But this amount is not enough. At the current pace, it will not be possible for the board to meet even the revised tax target of Rs4.7tr for the entire year. The poor performance of the FBR remains a source of concern for every stakeholder— government, multilateral lenders and the public at large. Year after year, the FBR has failed to meet its tax targets although millions have been spent on restructuring the board and 'reforming' tax administration over the last two decades or so. Little wonder then that Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio remains one of the lowest in the world. But it would be unfair to lay the entire blame on the tax collectors. Successive governments — civil and military — have also contributed to the current state of affairs by postponing tax reforms to broaden the base of taxpayers, as well as allowing exemptions to the wealthy out of political expediency. Consequently, less than 1pc of the population files income tax returns. This is in spite of the official claims that the board has credible data of more than 7m people whose withholding taxes are deducted, but who do not file their returns. They also include over 3m people who, according to the FBR, frequently travel abroad, live in large homes in posh localities and drive luxury cars but do not pay income tax.

The narrow tax base means that the share of direct taxes, especially income tax, would shrink in the total tax revenue, which is worrying given the established relationship between poverty and the high incidence of indirect taxation. Even the bulk of direct taxes is collected 'indirectly' through imposition of withholding and presumptive levies, which shifts the burden of the wealthy onto the poor and middle-income segments of the population, while powerful lobbies such as big

farmers and retailers/wholesalers get away without paying their share of taxes. A narrow tax net also restrains the government's ability to reduce the burden of taxes on the organised sector at the expense of new investment and jobs. Raising the ratio of tax revenues to the size of the economy will remain a pipe dream without meaningful restructuring of the FBR to plug leakages, reduce inefficiencies and eliminate corruption in addition to reforming the entire taxation regime to make it equitable and fair.

Path of growth

FINANCE MINISTER Shaukat Tarin finally specified the future direction that the country's economic policy will take when he disclosed his intention to secure IMF relaxation in some of the harsh conditions linked to the Fund's \$6bn loan. In his testimony before a National Assembly panel, Mr Tarin, an outspoken critic of the IMF-mandated contractionary economic adjustments, was convinced that the country would be in deep trouble if the economy did not grow rapidly. "If we continue with economic stabilisation policies, there will be no growth, the absence of which is creating enormous problems for the country," he is quoted to have said. According to him, the economy needs to expand by a minimum of 5pc a year to increase revenues, create jobs and check debt accumulation — public and power both. A plan to put the economy on the growth path is ready. The idea is to meet IMF targets and conditions by expanding the economy instead of suffocating it. The plan aims to boost public development spending, broaden the tax net and leave power prices where they are.

This course correction isn't surprising. The prime minister had been under pressure from his party to break away from the stringent IMF conditions and give some relief to the people battered by inflation and unemployment. The situation worsened when the coronavirus gripped the world though temporary suspension of the programme provided some room for monetary and fiscal stimulus at home. The defeat of PTI candidates in the recent bypolls also bolstered party demands for a change in economic direction. The electoral losses are seen as an outcome of the government's poor economic performance.

Mr Tarin's assertion that Pakistan could no longer afford economic stagnation is spot on. With nations everywhere trying to support their economies through generous fiscal and monetary incentives because of the pandemic, it is unfair to

think that a country like Pakistan can meet the IMF's difficult targets without hurting the people and the economy for a long time to come. Continuation of tough adjustments such as a drastic increase in electricity prices and taxes, in addition to the constraints on government spending, at a time when a new Covid wave has deepened economic and investment uncertainty would be disastrous. Although the economy has shown signs of recovery from the impact of the pandemic since last summer, it still remains fragile and in need of a stimulus to return to the path of growth. The present growth momentum should be sustained. However, it is not possible without strong support from the IMF. It is time the Fund showed, in Mr Tarin's words, "kindness" and afforded the economy and the people some respite. Flexibility shouldn't be problematic for the Fund given that the government only wants to pursue a different strategy to put its economic house in order, without leaving the programme or abandoning its targets.

Human rights 2020

THE human rights situation in Pakistan, almost predictably bleak every year, was deeply impacted in 2020 by an unprecedented factor — the Covid-19 pandemic. While the contagion has affected all segments of society, it has exacerbated existing socioeconomic inequalities. No 'great equaliser', this global crisis has dealt a cruel blow to already disadvantaged sections of society. The recently launched annual report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan takes into account the ways in which the pandemic led to many of the gains in health and education of the previous decades being rolled back as the economy tanked and people — especially factory workers and private employees — lost their jobs. People suffering from health conditions other than Covid-19 found it difficult to access medical help; and tens of millions of children missed both polio and routine immunisations last year.

The nationwide lockdown in March 2020, though necessary, led to widespread misery among daily-wage labourers and the poorest households. However, the HRCP report notes that the government's provision of monetary relief through the Ehsaas and BISP programmes mitigated its effects for a number of people. The closure of schools and the extremely patchy switchover to online education left a vast swathe of children unable to continue classes due to absent or unreliable internet coverage. This loss of an entire school year will have long-term consequences for literacy levels, especially where girls' education is concerned.

Meanwhile, the pandemic — with ‘work from home’ directives and curtailed freedom of movement — also threw together victims and perpetrators of domestic violence and sexual abuse in close proximity for extended periods of time, leading to a spike in these crimes. Crammed into overcrowded prisons that are ripe for the spread of disease, prisoners got no relief from the highest court in the land that stayed high court orders to release some of them on a conditional and temporary basis. At least, far fewer convicts were awarded the death penalty last year — down to 177 from 158 in 2019 — and no execution was carried out. In major respects, Pakistan continues to run counter to international conventions. Enforced disappearances remained a blot on this country’s reputation, and the government appeared no closer to criminalising the act of ‘disappearing’ people. In fact, two major national human rights institutions have been without chairpersons since 2019, which raises questions about the centre’s commitment to protecting citizens’ rights. The picture is not a heartening one.

Unreasonable behaviour

DR Firdous Ashiq Awan should have known better. As adviser to the chief minister of Punjab, she carries the weight and authority of the government on her shoulders. This official gravitas, mandated to her through the office she holds, demands an exhibition of grace, decorum, and above all, restraint. Sadly, Dr Awan showed neither when she unleashed her anger on an assistant commissioner accompanying her to a market in Sialkot.

In a fit of rage caught on tape, Dr Awan reprimanded the official, a woman, in a most severe tone for what she termed a dereliction of duty. This she did in full view of the cameras and the accompanying retinue of people. The officer preferred to walk away from this tirade rather than engage the enraged adviser. The subsequent outrage in the media, and a strong protest by the chief secretary, forced Chief Minister Usman Buzdar to summon his adviser for an explanation. After the meeting, Dr Awan held a press conference and defended her actions. If she was repentant, she did an admirable job of disguising it.

Read: No one appreciated Firdous Ashiq Awan disrespecting the Sialkot assistant commissioner

Whatever the merits of the case in this situation, Dr Awan had absolutely no right to publicly denigrate and demean an officer of the government. Decorum and

decency demanded that she express her displeasure in private, and if needed, report the assistant commissioner to her superiors. By humiliating the officer publicly, Dr Awan undermined her authority as a member of the district administration and also violated her dignity as a citizen of Pakistan.

This has sent a very bad signal to the bureaucracy which in any case is under pressure as a result of the PTI government's attitude. If the chief minister takes no action, he would be seen as condoning his adviser's tirade. This will further demoralise the bureaucracy at a time when the government needs it to work with full diligence. Mr Buzdar should therefore reprimand Dr Awan for her coarse behaviour and make sure she tenders a public apology.

Proceed with caution

ONCE again, Eidul Fitr is around the corner. Last year at this time, the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic had not yet peaked in Pakistan. The authorities had perhaps not realised the scale of the devastation the contagion would end up wreaking across the world. Whatever the reason, and despite the misgivings of some provincial administrations that were urging caution, people were allowed to indulge in the customary tradition of shopping for the festival. It proved to be a short-sighted decision that undoubtedly contributed to the spike in cases in the following weeks.

This year, with the ongoing third wave, and having realised the impact that abandoning social-distancing measures can have on the rate of infection transmission, the timings for shops remain curtailed. The National Command and Operation Centre has also announced that during the May 8 to 16 Eid holidays, all retail outlets, aside for those providing everyday necessities or services, will be closed. Tourism has also been suspended, which is just as well because the extended holidays would have encouraged people to throng to holiday spots.

On Monday, Pakistan documented 3,377 cases — the first time in over a month that less than 3,400 cases had been recorded. The very next day, however, the daily tally went up to 4,113. All indications are that we must continue to take full precautions in the coming weeks. Thankfully, the response to the inoculation drive is picking up and on May 3, the number of vaccinations administered in this country was 164,168, the highest so far — bringing the total figure to 2.7m. The near-apocalyptic scenes of Covid-19 ravaging India and making headlines across

the world, have almost certainly contributed to people here deciding to take the jab. With the momentum of inoculation picking up, it makes little sense to close the vaccination centres for three days over Eid, as the NCOC is considering. Surely, if the emergency facilities at hospitals can remain open during religious festivals, so can vaccination centres. We are living through exceptional circumstances, and exceptions must be made in response. For many people, the Eid holidays may be the most convenient time to get themselves inoculated. It is also critical that the supply of vaccines does not dry up.

Pakistan may yet again be standing at a crossroads where the pandemic is concerned. The slightest loosening of SOP protocols could send us hurling in the direction where India finds itself today. The decision by the centre and second-tier governments to call on the army's assistance to enforce SOPs appears to be bearing fruit. According to the NCOC chief Asad Umar, the national average compliance has doubled from 34pc on April 25 to 68pc on May 3. If this is sustained beyond Eid holidays, we could ride out the third wave without our health system buckling.

IPP dues

THE ECC decision to pay the first tranche of outstanding dues of one set of IPPs, and further delay the payments of unpaid bills of another is discriminatory given that the government has signed identical agreements revising the terms of their original power purchasing agreements. The government had renegotiated contracts with 47 IPPs set up between 1990 and 2013, which will potentially save it over Rs800bn in future payments to them and slow down fresh build-up in the power sector's circular debt. In return, it had agreed to pay them their unpaid bills of Rs403bn in two instalments. But the first payment was delayed after NAB decided to investigate the 2002 IPPs. Now the ECC wants to clear the dues of the pre-2002 projects before the end of this month, holding back payment of the 2002 IPPs till the NAB inquiries are concluded. It may take years before NAB completes the probe, preventing both government and consumers from reaping the benefits of the deal, in addition to damaging Pakistan's international image.

NAB's intervention after the finalisation of the agreements is surprising, especially because the revisions in the PPAs provided for an independent arbitration under the Arbitration Submission Agreement option on alleged excess

payment of Rs58bn made to the 2002 projects for an amicable resolution of the dispute between the IPPs and the government. There are quite a few theories about why NAB interfered with the process. But whatever the truth, the accountability authorities' role of spoiler is only damaging the credibility of the government and strengthening perceptions that we are a country where contracts made with investors are not honoured and where economic policies are frequently altered with the change in political leadership. Hence, few foreign investors want to bring their capital here — and that too only when the government offers them a higher risk premium on their investments in the form of guaranteed returns as has been the case in the power sector. We have paid a heavy price for the shenanigans of successive governments. The current set-up has to pay the outstanding bills of the power producers one way or the other. If the accountability authority does not back off, the possibility of the affected IPPs using their right of international arbitration and invoking sovereign guarantees cannot be ruled out. This would harm prospects of future investment in this country and our relationship with multilaterals.

Violence against doctors

HEALTHCARE workers and doctors' associations in two major hospitals of KP are adamant that the KP Healthcare Services Providers and Facilities (Prevention of Violence and Damage to Property) Act, 2020, be implemented. The doctors of Hayatabad Medical Complex in Peshawar and Dogra Hospital in Khyber district have been on strike for the past few days to protest incidents of hooliganism at their institutions and demand legal action against the perpetrators, who allegedly include two MPAs from the PPP and BAP, under the above-mentioned law. A group of people led by the lawmakers threatened the doctors while violently protesting the death of a young boy from Khyber district at the Hayatabad Medical Complex on April 30. A day later, a PTI MNA with a group of people reportedly barged into Dogra Hospital in Khyber district where he had a heated exchange with the medical superintendent whom he is said to have held hostage for a couple of hours.

Such violence against doctors is not new, and often protesters, that include angry relatives, have resorted to damaging property and attacking medical personnel for real or perceived medical blunders. But for members of parliament to lead the charge is simply appalling. As holders of public office, they should be assuaging

feelings of rage and working for the benefit of healthcare workers and the public instead of abusing their position and instigating brawls. Those responsible should face the law while the political parties to which these legislators belong should take strict action against them if their active participation is established. No doctor deserves to be hounded in this manner; there are less damaging ways of taking to task medics who are found wanting in their professional duties. In these times of Covid-19, doctors are working round the clock as wards fill up with patients. Their services are indispensable. In the current case, the doctors, who are rightfully demanding the law's enforcement, should rethink their strike as there are thousands of people who need their healing touch

Reprimanding envoys

IN a dressing-down that was broadcast for the world to witness, Prime Minister Imran Khan this week lambasted the country's top diplomats for failing to serve the Pakistani diaspora in their respective countries of residence. A recording of the video meeting chaired by the prime minister showed around 20 ambassadors and high commissioners on a split screen listening as he furnished a damning list of transgressions reported by overseas Pakistanis through a citizens' complaints portal.

Mr Khan chastised the diplomats for having a "bad attitude" towards the labour community. Among other things, he indicated that basics such as working hours were not communicated to the community. He also said that the ambassadors had failed to attract foreign investment, noting that Indian diplomats are more proactive — a statement that made headlines across the border. While the prime minister's censure of the poor performance of some of the missions is valid and must lead to remedial action, the manner in which the no-holds-barred criticism was publicised is quite bizarre.

Soon after he tweeted a link of him scolding the diplomats, senior ex-officials of the foreign service expressed their reservations. Former foreign secretary Tehmina Janjua said she was "deeply dismayed at the unwarranted criticism" of the foreign ministry and objected to Mr Khan's reference to a "colonial mindset" when referring to officers. She also said the problem cannot be resolved through tweets. Ex-foreign secretary Salman Bashir said the criticism was misplaced and that public critique "demoralises the best and brightest". Former US envoy Jalil

Abbas Jilani, too, said it was unfair. Though they protested against the public criticism, they all acknowledged long-standing issues and flaws. Why did Mr Khan feel it was important to broadcast this admonition? Is it a political move to win the electoral support of 9m overseas Pakistanis, after the PTI has lost a string of by-elections?

A public telling-off will demoralise an already under-fire Foreign Office — which is the only institution that is professionally trained to tackle the country's foreign policy matters. There are certainly better ways to improve embassies' public service delivery. Unprofessionalism is unacceptable. It is also deplorable that some officers in the foreign service ignore the requests of expats from low-income and working-class backgrounds. Shockingly, there are even reports of officers asking for bribes to process paperwork.

All these problems must be addressed, but grandstanding is not the solution. There are systemic issues that need to be fixed when it comes to consular services, which often face acute resource constraints. Staff appointed to these missions must be trained, selected and motivated. Poor performance at certain missions appears to be a perpetual problem, but it cannot be solved with a broad-brush approach that blames the entire institution. Instead of demoralising the entire service, the prime minister should have engaged with honest and respectable officers to identify how solutions can be found.

Foreign funding case

THE foreign funding case against the PTI has become a never-ending tale. It has been dragging on for years and after many dozens of hearings it is still nowhere near concluding. The case pertains to a complaint by Akbar S. Babar, one of the founding members of the PTI, in which he has accused the party of acquiring illegal funding. The case is being heard by the Election Commission of Pakistan which is the relevant authority to decide whether the PTI stands guilty as charged. The ECP had appointed a scrutiny committee to go over all the relevant documents and determine if the case could actually be proved against the PTI. For its part, the PTI has also accused the PPP and PML-N of illegal funding.

The hearings of the case are now bogged down in minor details like the use of laptops for data uploading and whether printouts of this data should be allowed in the hearing or not. The whole exercise appears to be dissolving into a farcical

project given the unnecessary delays that do not appear to be grounded in substantive reasons. This is giving rise to all manner of conjecture that has an adverse impact on the credibility of the ECP. The chief election commissioner therefore needs to rap the scrutiny committee on the knuckles for its unjustifiable tardiness. The committee must fast-track its process and not allow the lawyers to drag the arguments endlessly. The committee should also move swiftly to determine if the documentary evidence being presented holds up to legal scrutiny. The tediousness of the process should not become an excuse to keep the hearing going without any conclusions. The chief election commissioner must emulate the decisive deadlines that had been given by his predecessor to wrap up the case. After his retirement, the scrutiny committee had gone back to its slow pace. It is never easy for any institution to hold the ruling party to account. This may be one reason why the ECP is not pushing the case as firmly as it should. However, given the time already elapsed, and the high stakes involved, nothing less than the personal intervention of the ECP chief will expedite matters. The nation has a right to know the truth of the matter under scrutiny. The PTI also deserves a decision so that the matter is settled once and for all.

Water woes

IRRIGATION experts have voiced concern over the decline of freshwater flow through Kotri barrage, which has led to 'drought-like conditions' in Badin's Laar region. The grievance is a long-standing one, and it concerns the distribution of water between the provinces, with the coastal regions of Sindh receiving a trickle of the flow from the mighty Indus. The experts brought up the issue of discriminatory practices and 'water theft', which has not only exacerbated the problem of water scarcity, but deepened underlying resentments. This is compounded by water mismanagement and wastage, in a country where millions lack access to clean drinking water, despite having more glaciers than any other part of the world, barring the polar regions. Presently, several parts of the Indus Delta face dire water shortages, which has led to the intrusion of saline seawater onto the land, wreaking havoc on the soil, ecology and economy of the region. In a cruel irony, residents are deprived of water, and simultaneously threatened by it — caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, between scarcity and excess. To make matters worse, global warming and rising sea levels have only accelerated the process.

Most people in the region are dependent on agriculture and livestock, and as the land becomes uncultivable and uninhabitable, they are forced to relocate or migrate to other parts of the province. Furthermore, mangrove forests are depleting due to the lack of freshwater flow to the delta region. Not only do the trees sustain a diverse ecosystem and support the fishing community, they have also protected the coast from natural disasters and soil erosion for centuries. Now, in a span of a few decades, thousands of acres of land have been lost to the sea, particularly in Badin and Thatta districts. According to researchers, it will take just another few years before other parts of the region are submerged under water, unless the present, self-destructive patterns are reversed. It is a warning we should heed.

Rise in dog bites

ON Wednesday, an unusually high number of dog-bite cases were reported in Larkana, when 19 people — the majority of them children — were admitted to the accident and emergency unit of Chandka Medical College Hospital. The next day, taking notice of the worrying rise in cases, the Sindh high court tasked the local government secretary to set up a mechanism for weekly updates with the district municipal corporations, with regard to the dog-bite incidents in their areas. Keeping in mind the shortage of rabies vaccines in hospitals, even if most dogs are not carriers of the disease, the rise in dog-bite cases is very alarming. In Karachi alone, more than 7,000 cases have been recorded so far this year. Last year, around 200,000 cases were reported across the province. Each time such an incident appears in the news, there is outrage, outlandish statements are thrown about, and the authorities respond by carrying out mass culling operations, shooting or poisoning dogs on sight in the streets. And yet the problem only seems to get worse, while the stray dog population keeps increasing. Clearly, these knee-jerk ‘solutions’ are not working, and might even be exacerbating the issue. Instead, trap-neuter-release — TNR — programmes need to be carried out on a mass scale, even if the process is more expensive and time-consuming.

Along with TNR operations, there have to be popular campaigns that aim to change attitudes towards animals. Issues like these cannot be left to a handful of individuals to ‘fix’ or ‘solve’ because there is a deeper cultural problem at play, and this concerns the general population’s treatment of stray dogs, which can

range from demonisation to indifference. Few people with means are ready to adopt them, choosing breeds that are not local to the region. It is also not uncommon to see people treat stray animals with cruelty: teasing, torturing or beating them. Dogs are loyal companions and protectors, and only become a threat when they feel threatened.

Delayed poll debate

THE debate on electoral reforms is going nowhere. Even though the major political parties say reforms are critical, they are not getting any closer to even initiating a debate on the issue, let alone reaching a consensus. In fact, they appear to be either protesting and stalling the debate or forging ahead without engagement.

Given the storm caused by the recent bypolls, the issue of reforms is undoubtedly a pressing one with far-reaching consequences for our democracy. Why then, are stakeholders delaying the debate? And if this deadlock continues, will the government bring reforms without engaging the opposition, and choose the controversial route of making changes via ordinances which the federal cabinet has already approved?

The PTI has of late signalled its intent to push for reforms on several occasions. First, the prime minister in a series of tweets invited the opposition to sit with the government and discuss the matter. Next, his parliamentary affairs' adviser Babar Awan held a press conference with key federal ministers and shared the details of the government's proposals. In the midst of this, the prime minister even wrote a letter to the National Assembly speaker to initiate the process in parliament. Though these efforts reflect the government's intentions, the opposition has rejected them.

There are two reasons behind the opposition's pushback. The first is the acrimonious relationship between the opposition and the ruling party. Time and again, the collective opposition has criticised the prime minister's attitude and said that he avoids debates by not coming to parliament — a valid criticism, given the hounding of opposition members in corruption cases and the prime minister's poor attendance record in parliament. Secondly, as the PPP has pointed out, these reforms do not address the question of the proverbial elephant in the room: pre-poll and election day manipulation that has become a blight on

the democratic process. This, too is a serious issue, and one that results in the creation and breaking up of political parties with pressure from external forces.

Though the opposition's concerns are valid, its persistent refusal to participate in the process will mean that a solution will be reached without it. The government, which has not shied away from bullish behaviour in the past, will likely bring about electoral changes via ordinances, without the opposition's input.

To avoid this situation, members of both the government and opposition need to take off their boxing gloves and really think of the chaos the country will be plunged into if yet another general election takes place in the midst of serious challenges. Key points of contention, such as electronic voting, electoral and software manipulation and the eligibility of dual nationals to contest must be ironed out. A sincere debate on a truly free election is in everyone's interest. Those shying away from it have nothing to gain.

Reducing deficit

THE numbers show that the government has managed to arrest growth in fiscal deficit — the difference between the government's income and expenditure — as a ratio of GDP during the first nine months of the present financial year to March. But the problem with numbers is that they are often used by governments to mask the reality. The government may have brought down the deficit to 3.6pc of GDP from 3.8pc a year ago through a reduction in development spending and a provincial surplus of nearly 1pc of the size of the economy. But the question is: can it keep it at that level during the last quarter of the fiscal? That would be near impossible. The fiscal gap is estimated to grow to at least 7.5pc by the close of the fiscal year as the government's bills become due, the expenditure side of its balance sheet expands and the provincial surplus disappears into thin air. That makes a lower deficit number at this stage irrelevant unless the government can contain it at that level in the last quarter as well.

The more important numbers in the summary of the country's fiscal operations relate to the spiking cost of debt servicing, and the burden placed on common people through indirect taxes and levies. The debt-servicing expense has shot up by almost 12pc to Rs2.1tr or equal to 82pc of total revenues, forcing the government to borrow more money to pay its other bills. The share of indirect taxes and levies — which impact, directly and heavily, low-middle-income groups

— in revenues is surging. The collection of petroleum levy, for example, has jumped by a whopping 87pc and of indirect taxes by 14pc (compared to 9pc increase in direct taxes). The fiscal deficit is at the heart of our chronic economic troubles and the government's inability to invest in infrastructure to forge growth. Indeed, the government has been successful in achieving primary surplus — the difference between revenues and expenditure excluding debt payments — in the last two years. But this was done by curbing essential expenditure, especially development spending, at the cost of people's well-being and jobs rather than by increasing its tax revenues. There is no possibility of decreasing the overall budget deficit and controlling growth in public debt without rapidly raising tax collection. For that the PTI government will have to undertake tax reforms, which may hurt powerful lobbies. Does it have the political will for that? It has not really shown any so far.

Sharif mission aborted

THE government is in no mood to let PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif leave the country. The opposition leader was stopped and turned back by FIA officials at the Lahore airport, though a court order issued that day gave him one-time permission to travel abroad for medical treatment.

Although the court said Mr Sharif's name should be removed from the 'black list' — which in itself is steeped in legal controversy — the PML-N said it appears his name has now been added to a new no-fly list. In a video clip of the episode at the airport, FIA officials told Mr Sharif that the 'system had not been updated' in accordance with the court order, hence travel was blocked. Later, accountability adviser Shahzad Akbar also tweeted the finer details of Mr Sharif's name being off one list and not the other. The reason for preventing him from travelling, however, goes deeper than a small technicality.

Key government members have been up in arms about the court's decision from the moment it was announced. They have criticised the court for a "hurried" decision and are considering an appeal once court activity resumes after Eid. The government's reaction is unsurprising, given that their decision to allow former prime minister Nawaz Sharif to travel is a sore point, but their defiance of a judicial order can amount to contempt of court.

Why is the government that paranoid that Shehbaz Sharif will not return? After all, he is the opposition leader and party president, and has in the past returned to the country even after living in London for some months. The attitude of the government here is only strengthening the perception that it is leaving no stone unturned when it comes to hounding political rivals — a criticism opposition parties have levelled against it for the last two and a half years.

The hurdles in the way of the PML-N chief's journey are by no means over. But if and when he does make it to London, his meeting with his elder brother will have serious implications for the future of the party. It will be the first time they will meet after Nawaz Sharif called out the security establishment for interfering in governance — a narrative at odds with Shehbaz Sharif's less confrontational approach.

Editorial: Shehbaz Sharif has tough challenges ahead of him, from family dynamics to a fractured alliance

While every party has individuals who are not always fully on board, Shehbaz Sharif is more than a regular party member. He is seen as the de facto heir to the PML-N throne, a position held by Maryam Nawaz during his incarceration — and one that saw her gain popularity both within the party and with the voter. As Shehbaz Sharif acclimatises to the party's changing dynamic, his meeting with Nawaz Sharif will no doubt set the tone for his future role. First, however, he must battle the bureaucratic hurdles the government will doggedly create to prevent him from travelling.

PCB's parental policy

THE Pakistan Cricket Board's announcement of its parental support policy earlier this week is praiseworthy, for both the signal it sends and the substance of the concessions now offered, particularly to female players. Women cricketers are now entitled to avail up to 12 months of paid maternity leave, with the guarantee of a contract extension the following year. They can also choose to transfer to a non-playing role in the days leading up to their leave. Upon their return, new mothers are entitled to medical and physical rehabilitative support, and, if required to travel, are entitled to travel with their infant child and another caregiver of their choice. Men are also given the option of availing up to 30 days of paid leave within the first two months of their child's birth. With the policy for

cricketing parents coming into immediate effect for all players, the scheme already has its first beneficiary in Bismah Maroof, who in April announced her indefinite leave from cricket as she is set to begin a new chapter of her life as a mother.

Women's cricket has long languished due to a lack of investment compared to the men's team, but the PCB appears to be holding firm to its more recent commitment to provide their female players the resources and support they require — by improving the terms of their central contracts, expanding the network of girls' academies and organising regular domestic tournaments. All the same, the parental support policy represents a huge leap forward for the cricket board as a progressive and women-friendly organisation. Not only does it attempt to offer players a better work-life balance in between the gruelling training sessions and lengthy match schedules, it enables women to have the choice to continue pursuing their sporting careers even if they decide to start their own families. Clearly, the PCB recognises the value of their players and wishes to ensure that they can have long, successful careers without it being at the expense of their personal lives and well-being. More organisations should follow suit.

Amazon opportunity

THE decision by global e-commerce giant Amazon to add Pakistan to its sellers' list is expected to unleash enormous business opportunities for the country's small and medium manufacturers and entrepreneurs to market and directly sell their products globally. It is also a major breakthrough for the country's growing e-commerce industry, as well as companies and professionals working in the digital space. Pakistan is the only South Asian state, which is not on the list of the 102 countries on the Amazon platform in spite of being the second biggest economy in the region. The new development will hopefully put Pakistan on the global e-commerce map, opening up a new era of business boom by connecting its entrepreneurs and goods with millions of consumers across the world. The best thing about the new development is that Amazon will now provide a new venue to individual sellers to ship their products in small parcels to consumers outside Pakistan. This will afford them a chance to work on and develop their own brands for better prices. Moreover, they will not have to worry about their payments as Amazon will directly transfer the money into their local accounts.

The advantages of being on Amazon can be gauged from the fact that in India, which is a small contributor to the e-commerce giant's total global sales, some 100,000 sellers are exporting products worth more than \$2bn a year. That shows the opportunities Amazon can provide to small Pakistani sellers, especially women and entrepreneurs, who have goods and products needed by consumers outside Pakistan but cannot afford to have a big export set-up. For instance, they have a large Pakistani diaspora scattered across the countries, especially in the Gulf, to cater to. The significance and use of online marketplaces such as Amazon has increased immensely since the outbreak of Covid-19. Pakistan's e-commerce market itself has grown dramatically over the last one year and is estimated to have expanded by 35pc in the first quarter of the current fiscal to Rs96bn from Rs71bn a year ago. But there are several impediments to its expansion, the poor quality of goods being the main hurdle together with the absence of a mechanism to address product complaints. Amazon, like other international companies and brands, is a highly consumer-centric marketplace where customers' reviews of a product are taken very seriously. Therefore, our entrepreneurs will have to be careful if they desire to benefit from the opportunity.

Al Aqsa clashes

IT is unlikely that clashes at the Al Aqsa mosque between Palestinians and Israeli police will end soon. At the core of the violence lies the Jewish state's greed for land. The clashes began on Friday, and continued on Saturday. The epicentre of the tension is located in East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, where six Palestinian families are facing forceful eviction from their ancestral homes, with the supreme court expected to rule on the decades-old case today.

Unless solved peacefully, the problem could unleash greater Palestinian anger. At Al Aqsa, the presence of Israeli police was itself a provocation, because tens of thousands of Palestinians had gathered to offer prayers. As they fired on the worshippers, Israeli policemen entered the sacred precincts leading to a worsening of the situation. On Friday, many of the over 200 injured Palestinians had to be hospitalised because of their injuries they sustained at the hands of Israeli police who used rubber-coated metal bullets and stun grenades.

In pictures: Hundreds wounded as Israeli forces target Palestinians in weekend of violence

While calls for restraint came from many capitals, one can see an unfortunate difference between what the European Union said and what the reaction from the US was. While the EU declared that “potential evictions” were cause of concern since they were “illegal under international humanitarian law” and called upon the Israeli authorities to “cease these activities and provide adequate permits for legal construction and development of Palestinian communities”, the US State Department merely called for avoiding “steps that exacerbate tensions ...” though it evinced concern at the looming eviction.

By avoiding a reference to the illegality of the action by Israel, the US was creating a false equivalence between the Palestinians and Israeli police. Regrettably, hopes for a more realistic US attitude on the Arab-Israeli conflict seem unrealistic. US policy remains wedded to blind support for the Jewish state. The reality is that unless the Democrat administration reverses some of the follies committed by the Trump administration — such moving the US embassy to Jerusalem — tensions will only grow.

Safe havens

THE pull-out of foreign forces from Afghanistan has security ramifications for that country as well as neighbouring states, particularly Pakistan. While Afghanistan was hardly pacified during the decades-long presence of US-led forces, there are genuine concerns that with the withdrawal of the foreign troops, and the collapse of any semblance of order, terrorist groups will find an ideal launching pad for their violent activities. Already there have been recent incidents which have sent up red flags. A soldier was injured when terrorists opened fire in Bajaur district late on Friday from across the border, according to ISPR. The banned TTP is believed to be responsible for the attack. Moreover, a number of troops were martyred and wounded in several recent attacks in KP and Balochistan. While the TTP claimed responsibility for those attacks, the military said they were also carried out from Afghan soil.

While the TTP and Afghan Taliban may have somewhat different ideological views on certain subjects, they are bound together by tribal traditions, the militant code and a similar worldview. Moreover, it is clear that the TTP are taking

advantage of safe havens in Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban, in areas beyond the writ of the Kabul government. It appears to be payback for the TTP's 'hospitality' as after the American invasion the Afghan Taliban took refuge in erstwhile Fata, in areas then controlled by Pakistani militants. And while the former tribal belt has largely been cleared of militants, as lawmaker Mohsin Dawar recently pointed out in a letter to the president, fighters are once more regrouping in the merged tribal districts of KP.

The reign of terror that the TTP and those of their ilk unleashed on this country is still quite fresh in the mind. Hardly any part of Pakistan was spared bomb blasts and suicide attacks, and it took far too many precious lives among this country's soldiers, police officers and civilians to neutralise the terrorist threat. Therefore, the resurgence of militants either in the country or across the border in Afghanistan is a matter of grave concern. Pakistan must exercise its influence with the Afghan Taliban and let them know that allowing the TTP or other anti-Pakistan groups to use space under their control will not be tolerated. This point cannot be emphasised enough, especially considering the fact that foreign forces have begun their exit from Afghanistan. In a recent statement, Pakistan, Russia, China and the US urged both the government in Kabul and the Afghan Taliban not to let their soil be used against any other country. While primarily the onus is on the Taliban to not provide safe havens to terrorist groups, the Kabul government must also do more to ensure the security of the country, and eliminate ungoverned spaces which militants can use to spread havoc in the region.

Important bills

AT last, there is some movement on critical legislation that appeared to have been put on the back-burner. The federal cabinet on Thursday approved the Journalists and Media Protection Bill and the Forced or Involuntary Disappearance (Criminal Law Amendment) Bill, and they will be presented in the National Assembly during its next session. Parliament must make a single-minded effort to ensure that both pieces of legislation are enacted without unnecessary delay. Their passage will send the signal that this country is prepared to address two issues that have long been a blot on its global image and are completely at odds with a democratic system.

Getting to this point, where the bills are ready to be tabled, has been a frustrating process for rights activists and those directly affected by the assault on the rights to freedom of speech and due process. The International Federation of Journalists has ranked Pakistan the fifth most dangerous country for the practice of journalism. According to the organisation, 138 media practitioners here lost their lives in the line of duty between 1990 and 2020. So far this year, three journalists have been murdered in this country, and two injured in attempted assassinations. Early last year, the human rights ministry had drafted a bill hailed by journalists as being comprehensive and offering practical solutions to very real issues faced by the community. However, the cabinet decided to club it with another bill on the subject drafted by the information ministry. Journalists feared that the end result would be a considerably watered-down bill. Hearteningly, though details are still scarce, it appears that the composite draft differs only in minor details. Meanwhile, enforced disappearances that began several years ago in the backwaters of Balochistan and erstwhile Fata on the pretext of fighting terrorists and insurgents have extended to major urban centres, including Islamabad. They even take place in broad daylight. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances has managed to trace a considerable number of those missing, but has utterly failed in the second part of its mandate, that is, to identify and prosecute those perpetrating these abductions. While the act in itself is illegal because it violates the right to due process, a specific law to criminalise enforced disappearances is sorely needed. At the end of the day though, implementation will make the difference between a law merely on the books, and one that actually protects the citizens.

Kabul massacre

AFGHANISTAN is a land that has seen plenty of massacres during decades of unrest. However, despite this almost relentless cycle of violence, Saturday's bloodbath targeting a school in a Kabul neighbourhood leaves one numb. Nearly 70 young lives — mostly schoolgirls — were wiped out as terrorists targeted the school in the Dasht-i-Barchi area, a neighbourhood populated by the Shia Hazara community. The area is not new to tragedy, as in 2020 gunmen targeted a maternity ward located in Dasht-i-Barchi, slaughtering over 20 mothers and newborns. While the Afghan president has blamed the Afghan Taliban for the latest atrocity, the militia has denied responsibility. Considering the combination of targets — a school, girl students, and a Shia neighbourhood — suspicion

squarely falls on the local franchise of the so-called Islamic State group. The Iranian foreign minister has also said IS is responsible.

At a time when foreign troops have begun their withdrawal from Afghanistan, and when the peace process is in a critical phase, attacks such as these send up major red flags regarding the shape of things to come. Will the Afghan people face more such atrocities once foreign forces quit the country and the government in Kabul is unable to protect them? With the Taliban stubbornly refusing to take the peace process forward, will Afghanistan once more plunge into complete chaos — a war of all against all — as soon as the last Western soldier departs, and IS and their cohorts step up their campaign of bedlam? There are no easy answers to these grim questions but the US-led mission that has been present in the country for the last two decades, as well as the Afghan government and the Taliban, needs to start providing some replies.

Indeed, foreign forces — initially the Soviets and later the Americans — bear major responsibility for destabilising Afghanistan. However, the country's own power players, from the Kabul elite to the Taliban to the warlords in the provinces, have all played an equally important role in the destruction of their country. Instead of looking at the bigger picture, power-hungry Afghan factions have chosen the path of war to secure short-term gains. This narrow approach must end now. It is time the Afghan elites took responsibility for their actions, and for bringing peace to their country. As of now, the onus is on the Taliban to fully participate in the peace process and work with the Kabul government to ensure a power-sharing formula. The group has announced an Eid ceasefire, but much more needs to be done. The Dasht-i-Barchi attack is but a small preview of the ferocity ahead if a power vacuum is created in Afghanistan. IS and like-minded militants play by very different rules, which is why responsible Afghan parties, aided by the international community, must join forces to defeat such extremist elements if Afghanistan is to be saved from more such diabolical violence.

Divisive move

THE electoral reforms process is off to a bad start. After weeks of wrangling with the opposition, the government has proceeded to issue a presidential ordinance authorising the Election Commission of Pakistan to go ahead with the procurement of electronic voting machines. The ordinance also authorised the

ECP to enable overseas Pakistanis to vote in the next elections while remaining in their country of residence.

According to a report, the information minister said the government had issued the ordinance to provide the ECP enough time to implement both these reforms before the next general elections. He also said that the government had decided to proceed with these reforms because the opposition was not interested. He argued that once the ordinance lapses, the government would be in a position to have this bill passed through parliament.

While there is no arguing that electoral reforms are crucial to make sure that the next elections are accepted as free and fair, the government is approaching the issue in the wrong way. The whole point of these reforms is to ensure that all major political stakeholders are on board, and that there is a consensus on them so that no one can object to the results of the elections. It is rather strange, and unfortunate, that the government decided to proclaim the ordinance just a few days after the speaker of the National Assembly had constituted a committee to discuss and debate these reforms. By making the process controversial and politically partisan for no substantive reason, the government is ensuring that the electoral process becomes even more divisive than it already is.

There is a long list of proposed reforms and the two included in the ordinance are part of this list. All the items require rigorous debate. The ECP has itself expressed severe reservations on the electronic voting machines, as have the opposition parties. These reservations need to be deliberated upon instead of being brushed aside by the government. It is never too late to be sensible. The PTI government should abandon this adversarial approach to electoral reform and utilise the platform of parliament to debate each and every proposed item on the list. The mistake of issuing this ordinance can be rectified by letting it lapse. In the meantime, the opposition too should let go of its obduracy and sit down with the government to build a consensus on these reforms.

Bank loan concerns

THE combined gross non-performing loan portfolio of the country's banks and DFIs increased marginally by 2.6pc or Rs22bn to Rs866.7bn at the end of March on a quarter-on-quarter basis from Rs844.7bn at the end of December, according to new State Bank data. This appears in line with the broader trend observed in

the recent past — a result of the contractionary monetary policy pursued by SBP until Covid-19 forced it to slash the cost of credit by 625bps to 7pc from March to June last year to support the economy and businesses. The central bank also announced other measures, including a debt relief scheme, to “preserve the solvency of the borrowers and enable them to cope with the temporary economic disruptions” caused by Covid-19. These concessions have helped businesses remain liquid, warded off potential defaults and kept the bottom lines of banks and DFIs healthy. The banks and DFIs have also moved aggressively to cover their infected portfolios by increasing provisioning against their bad loans. Hence, the net provisioning by banks and DFIs has increased to 88.3pc of the infected portfolio in December from 81.4pc a year ago. Some lenders have also done heavy ‘subjective classification’ at the cost of their profit to hedge against potential future defaults caused by Covid-19.

This indicates the banks’ fear regarding the ability of borrowers to service their loans when deferred payments become due from next month. Though there’s little evidence about the possibility of major defaults, the increasing number of infections is already keeping lenders from aggressively chasing defaulters. SBP data shows that recovery decreased to Rs21.2bn in the January-March period from Rs49.2bn during the previous quarter as the ongoing pandemic and slow vaccinations exacerbated the overall economic uncertainty because of the pandemic. How matters will pan out in the next few months, and how the pandemic will affect the economy and the behaviour of borrowers who have managed to get their loans deferred or restructured is anyone’s guess. It is hoped that the country’s financial sector will get through the worst without any major injury.

A new intifada?

THE situation in the occupied territories over the past few days has been incendiary, with tensions boiling over as enraged Palestinians bravely face the brutish might of the Israeli settler state. There is no one trigger for the latest cycle of violence; instead, a combination of developments have come together to form an explosive cocktail that has just exploded in front of the world. Among the most recent of these events is the imminent expulsion of Palestinian residents from the Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah. In one video, an Israeli settler with an American accent has the gall to tell Arab homeowners that if he doesn’t steal

their house, someone else will. Israel had also placed restrictions on Palestinians' access to Masjid Al Aqsa during Ramazan in the name of Covid-19 precautions, enraging worshippers. Moreover, a provocative march by an extremist Jewish group in the holy city chanting "death to Arabs", as well as the observance of so-called Jerusalem Day, which is supposed to 'celebrate' the Israeli occupation of the divided city in 1967, next to the walls of Haram as-Sharif, also did much to fan the flames. But perhaps the last straw was when Israeli security man arrogantly stormed Al Aqsa, injuring hundreds of worshippers and desecrating the mosque. Hamas fired rockets at Israel in response and now a vicious full-scale assault has been launched on Gaza by Tel Aviv, in which a number of children have been killed.

The lava that has just exploded in Palestine was brewing for years. Amongst the main triggers of Palestinian anger was the recognition of Jerusalem — a disputed city as per international law — as Israel's capital by Donald Trump, which effectively gave Tel Aviv's leaders the green light to trample on global conventions. Then of course there was the rush by many of the Palestinians' Arab 'brothers' to establish ties with Israel, despite the fact that the Jewish state had no intention whatsoever of respecting the two-state solution. And during all this while, nothing was done to stop rapacious Jewish settlers from devouring more and more Palestinian land. Now, with the storming of Al Aqsa — a national and religious symbol for the Palestinians — it is clear to the Arabs that Tel Aviv has been itching for a fight. From here on, the international community, particularly Israel's Western backers and its Arab friends, must convince Tel Aviv to halt the slaughter of Palestinians, or deal with the consequences of a new intifada.

PM's Saudi visit

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has concluded a productive visit to Saudi Arabia at a time when bilateral relations between the two countries required a much-needed boost. According to official accounts, the prime minister held wide-ranging talks with the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, and also met a number of other important persons including the secretary general of the OIC.

Army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa had reached Saudi Arabia a few days prior to the prime minister's arrival to pave the way for the crucial visit. The army chief has been playing a central role in Pakistan's engagement with Saudi Arabia and his presence in this meeting was proof that national security matters like Afghanistan and wider Middle East issues figure prominently in the bilateral relationship. This is important because the relationship has experienced strains in the recent past over a number of issues including Pakistan's refusal to participate in the Yemen conflict.

Ties also witnessed tension when last year Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi resorted to uncharacteristic public criticism of Saudi Arabia for its lukewarm support of Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. While Pakistan had a genuine justification for both actions, Saudi Arabia was said to have taken exception. On the Yemen issue, it was Pakistan's parliament that refused to send troops for the conflict, and that turned out to be the right decision. On the Kashmir issue too, Islamabad's grievance against Riyadh was rooted in strong reasons. However, going public with this grievance may not have been the best strategy. Mutual relations grew frostier when Saudi Arabia — in a rather unprecedented move — demanded immediate repayment of a loan it had extended to Pakistan last year. It was only through China's help that Pakistan was able to do this.

Against this backdrop, it is important that both countries make a concerted effort to improve their relationship. Swiftly changing events in the region as well as the ongoing process of withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan require Islamabad and Riyadh to closely coordinate their efforts on all fronts. Prime Minister Imran Khan has done well to visit Saudi Arabia at this important juncture and it is hoped that his visit can inject fresh vigour into the relationship.

However, at the same time, it is very important that Pakistan take no step, or agree to any demand, that can have an adverse effect on national sovereignty. Pakistan must take independent decisions, free from pressures and expectations, while keeping its national interest supreme. No doubt Saudi Arabia wields enormous influence on Pakistani policy, and the large number of Pakistani expatriates working in Saudi Arabia contribute a lot to the economy, but Pakistan has always followed a balanced policy in the Middle East and must continue to do so while according a high priority to Saudi Arabia.

SOP violations

ON Monday, Sindh Police officials were given a well-deserved slap on the wrist by a judicial magistrate in Karachi for not following government-mandated Covid SOPs. This happened when the police presented in court some 300 people, arrested for flouting SOPs over the weekend, to seek their physical remand. The judge first admonished the officers for not providing the ‘suspects’ with face masks, thus exposing them to unnecessary risk, and then told the police officers that they themselves were liable to be arrested for flouting SOPs. The detainees were released and the judge also sought a reply from those who had ordered the registration of FIRs against them.

There is no doubt that the ‘stay home-stay safe’ restrictions are more than justified at a time when the Covid numbers look threatening. But it is unfortunate that, ever since the pandemic began, both the federal and provincial governments have undermined their own authority by delaying tough decisions or taking them and then easing them partially or fully, or turning a blind eye to violators. The messaging has been very faulty and inconsistent — encouraging the public to think that there would be no consequences for not following the rules. For instance, although in the initial months the Sindh government took the lead in emphasising SOPs and imposing lockdowns, it has since been unable to effectively restrict the movement of people. Having said that, an arresting spree by the police is not the way to persuade the public to stay at home. For one, little is known about the circumstances under which the arrests took place. And for law-enforcement authorities to lock people up to save them from imminent danger and then exposing them to it anyway, and flouting the SOPs themselves, is simply absurd. For its part, the public has also been careless in following government directives which have been issued for their own protection. We will only be able to see the end of the pandemic if each and every one of us plays their part.

Eid during Covid

THE last few weeks of Ramazan have reminded us once again that we are living in surreal times. For the third Eid in a row, the run-up to the religious festival in the country has been low key, overshadowed by the ongoing pandemic. For

many, the occasion will be marked by grief for the absence of a loved one felled by the contagion. Scores of families will be praying for their parents, siblings, children, etc still clinging to life in Covid-19 hospital wards. For millions of Pakistanis, this will be not just a quieter Eid, with some form of lockdown in place in many urban centres, but it will be one spent with empty pockets and empty stomachs. Where countless small retailers and hawkers are concerned, this is a time of year when they make a windfall on the sale of celebratory paraphernalia, and they do not have the wherewithal to tide them over in lean times. The economic fallout of the pandemic on the whole has been particularly brutal on daily wagers, as well as factory workers and private employees, many of whom lost their jobs as the economy contracted sharply.

While not much can be said with certainty about when the pandemic will be over, it is indisputable that our actions now will prevent matters from becoming far worse. Notwithstanding the calls to show caution, some markets were thronged with foolhardy shoppers going about their business without paying any heed to SOPs. Calling for military deployment to assist the police in enforcing social distancing guidelines and mask wearing appears, however, to have made a significant difference. As per the National Command and Operation Centre, national average compliance with SOPs doubled from 34pc on April 25 to 68pc on May 3. Whether this trend will continue or not is a moot point, given that Pakistanis are generally averse to following rules, or giving credence to scientific facts. As NCOC chief Asad Umar tweeted a few days ago: “The danger is higher than ever. And knocking at our doors.” The situation in India remains nightmarish, where cases are increasing faster than anywhere else in the world. In Nepal, 9,000 new cases of the novel coronavirus were detected on Tuesday. The disease is surging in the region, and we must not allow ‘pandemic fatigue’ to make us lax in our behaviour lest we find ourselves in the same situation.

According to figures posted on May 11, Pakistan saw 3,084 cases of Covid-19 detected out of a total of 38,883 tests — a positivity rate of 7.93pc — in the preceding 24 hours. One hundred and thirteen people unfortunately succumbed to the disease during the same period. So far a little over 3.8m individuals have been vaccinated in the country. Let us diligently stay the course, so that the next Eid can be a little less sombre.

Foreign policy gaffes

MIXED messages, retractions and clarifications from the government have become an all-too-common occurrence when it comes to matters of foreign policy. Not only does this undermine the efforts of those in the foreign service, it also doesn't help the country's image in the international arena.

Recently, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi himself stirred controversy when he called India's scrapping of Article 370 of its constitution an "internal matter". His comment caused an uproar here and abroad for good reason. India has historically rebuffed Pakistan's position advocating dialogue on India-held Kashmir by insisting that the latter is an 'internal matter'. For Mr Qureshi to then use the same phrase in a discussion on Article 370 — the revocation of which has been firmly rejected by Pakistan — is truly astonishing. The foreign minister later tweeted that "nothing about Jammu and Kashmir can be India's internal matter", but his clarification only makes his initial remarks all the more bewildering.

Unfortunately, this is not the first communication mistake of its kind. Last year, Mr Qureshi was under fire when he publicly criticised Saudi Arabia and the OIC's silence on occupied Kashmir and demanded that "Riyadh show leadership" on the issue. It took serious backchannel efforts on Islamabad's part to repair the damage. This week, it was Prime Minister Imran Khan who after scolding Pakistan's ambassadors on live TV — something that could have been avoided in the first place — flip-flopped and said that his criticism should not have been made public. Prior to this, the cabinet's reversal of an ECC decision to trade with India, too, showed that there is utter disarray when it comes to communicating our foreign policy.

It is true that Pakistani expats have often complained of the poor quality of service at our missions. However, the foreign service's contribution to international diplomacy is commendable and something that ought to have the support of the government. Slips of the tongue, U-turns on engagement with other nations and erroneous messaging on a key issue like Kashmir undermine these efforts.

Communication on any issue of foreign policy must be unambiguous and consistent. Given the repercussions such goof-ups have on sensitive

relationships, it is the last place where the government should falter or take U-turns. These slips are a case of either poor judgement on the part of advisers or of top officials not listening to good advice. There is simply no room for such blunders in matters as delicate as foreign policy.

Zimbabwe series win

PAKISTAN'S crushing innings victories over Zimbabwe in the two Tests were a befitting end to their highly successful tour of southern Africa. In a rare show of consistency and teamwork, Babar Azam's men first outplayed South Africa in the back-to-back ODI and T20 series and then scored successive wins over Zimbabwe in the T20s and the Tests to handsomely wrap up the African safari.

More importantly, none among Pakistan's 35-member contingent tested positive for Covid-19 during the 44-day sojourn in Africa which contributed greatly to the players' performance. The top order came out with guns blazing as opener Abid Ali outshone the rest with a double hundred in the second Test against Zimbabwe. Veteran Azhar Ali, prolific Fawad Alam, young opener Imran Butt and spinning all-rounder Nauman Ali all performed well with the bat against the mediocre Zimbabwe bowling. The bowlers, too, led by the mercurial Hasan Ali and Shaheen Shah Afridi, captured a bagful of wickets. In Nauman, Pakistan seems to have found a perfect replacement for spinner Yasir Shah whose lack of variety and chequered form had left a lot to be desired. For millions of Pakistani fans, it was a thrilling experience to see their team returning to its winning ways.

To be fair to the side, they have not had much international cricket since 2009 following the terrorist attack on the Sri Lanka team in Lahore. That had left them rusty and demoralised, because cricket at home had been almost non-existent while the away tours were few. This 2020-21 season has been a busy one. Apart from allowing the players to demonstrate their abilities in front of their own crowds in the home series against South Africa, it has shown them beginning to gel as a team. Of course, they will be mindful of the challenging tour of England in June, followed by the West Indies series. But no challenge is big enough for them if they play to their potential and remain fit and focused.

Ruthless evictions

FOR a state to deprive residents of their homes without providing for alternative housing for them is a dereliction of duty. To do so during a pandemic when large numbers of people have lost their means of income is an act of extreme cruelty. A few weeks ago, the long-festering issue of encroachments on the Gujjar and Orangi nullahs in Karachi — that surfaces each time the city experiences heavy monsoon rains — once again exploded into the open. In March, Sindh government authorities began demolishing homes and commercial units located alongside the storm water drains in preparation for the coming monsoon. The residents here are of course from the lower-income strata, those whom the government finds it easiest to pummel into submission when it wants to make a show of ‘establishing the writ of the law’. That is an disingenuous take on the situation for it is the government itself that is guilty of violating the law in multiple ways while allowing these settlements to develop. Many residents have 99-year leases for their properties; they were also provided utility services in the years after they put down their roots here. Certainly the argument is valid that encroachments on storm water drains are a major reason for urban flooding. Equally compelling however, is the stance that the government whose various authorities issued the leases and NOCs for the residents to get gas and electricity connections, must provide alternative accommodation for them. The Sindh High Court has ordered a stay on the evictions until the Supreme Court hearing on the issue.

There is a dire shortage of affordable housing in the city for low-income residents, which is why encroachments come up, yet the government has paid no heed to this pressing issue. What is happening in another part of Karachi, the portion of Malir district where indigenous farming communities are being ruthlessly driven from their land to make way for Bahria Town’s ever-expanding housing project, is another aspect of the same story. Part of the land on which the project is coming up had been reserved for low-cost housing, but the land authority concerned instead handed it over to the for-profit developer. Last week, the locals put up fierce resistance when bulldozers, backed by police personnel, arrived to demolish their homes and clear the land. Several people were injured in the ensuing violence. Such evictions are bound to have serious long-term consequences on social cohesion and ethnic harmony.

Riyadh-Tehran thaw

SEVERAL official pronouncements over the last few days have confirmed that efforts are underway behind the scenes to mend the broken Saudi-Iranian relationship. On Monday, a spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry said that talks had indeed been held to improve relations between the cross-Gulf rivals. An official of the Saudi foreign ministry had a few days earlier also affirmed the fact that dialogue was under way. Meanwhile, the key indicator that ties were set to improve was a TV interview Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman gave late last month, in which he said the kingdom sought to have a “good relationship” with the Islamic Republic, though Riyadh’s de facto ruler added that he was wary of Iran’s “negative behaviour”. This was seen as a distinct change in tone, as earlier the Saudi leadership had adopted a hawkish stand towards Tehran, pledging to take the battle to Iran.

While the signals are definitely positive, no one should expect an immediate transformation in the bilateral relationship from combativeness to exchanges of brotherly feelings. Officials of both foreign ministries have been cautious about the prospects, with the Iranian side saying “let us wait [and] see”, while the Saudis have observed that it would be “premature” to comment on specifics. Perhaps the change in tone, particularly in Riyadh, has been triggered by the change of guard in Washington. The Trump administration pursued an antagonistic policy towards Iran, pampering Israel and urging America’s Gulf allies to forge a united front against Tehran together with Tel Aviv. However, with the arrival of Team Biden, the language and emphasis — particularly where the Middle East is concerned — of the White House has changed. Perhaps those that matter in Riyadh have realised the mood in the US, and have decided that the best way to sort out issues in the region is for the countries of the Middle East to reach a modus vivendi themselves without depending on outside players. Apparently, the Saudi rapprochement with Qatar is part of the same strategic thinking.

Both the Saudis and the Iranians must realise that good relations between them are critical at this juncture not only for the bilateral relationship, but also for peace and stability of the wider region and within the Muslim world. For starters, they can help end the devastating war in Yemen, where both capitals support opposing sides. Moreover, at a time when Israel is once again mercilessly

pounding the Palestinians, unity within the Muslim world is of the essence, to send a clear message that the slaughter of defenceless people will not be tolerated. There is a wide ideological and geopolitical divide between Riyadh and Tehran. But this does not mean both states have to live in a perpetual state of confrontation. Both must aim to respect each other's sovereignty and work for de-escalating tensions across the Muslim world.

Wheat concerns

THE new official projections for provisional wheat output suggest that Punjab may harvest around 20.5m tonnes of wheat this year, well above the initial estimates of 19.6m tonnes and last year's output of 19.4m tonnes. The improved wheat harvest is attributable mainly to an overall increase of 3.5pc in the area under cultivation because of enhancement in the minimum wheat support price by over 28pc to Rs1,800 per 40kg, as well as favourable weather conditions. The higher-than-expected Punjab harvest is likely to help the country achieve at least its second highest wheat output ever even if it doesn't push it closer to the record high production of 26.7m tonnes five years ago. The better crop is indeed a good development for national food security objectives and is likely to cut the growing food import bill of the cash-strapped government. But it doesn't mean that our wheat troubles will be over soon.

For starters, overall wheat production remains significantly lower than rising domestic consumption, which, according to some estimates, has exceeded 27.5m tonnes because of a high population growth rate. Hence, Pakistan is no more self-sufficient in wheat in spite of bringing maximum acres under the staple crop. Bringing more land under cultivation without raising productivity can help only so much. There is no easy fix for the nation's food security issues. There never was. The long-term sustainable solution lies in investment in the agricultural infrastructure and development of new high-yield seed varieties, as well as adoption of modern farm practices and technologies to raise crop output. Simultaneously, the government needs to review the impact of its policies on the agriculture sector and reduce its excessive interventions in the market in the name of supporting farmers and urban consumers. Past experiences show that such interventions have only created distortions in the market instead of protecting the growers from manipulative investors or consumers from price

inflation. It is going to be a tough decision for the government. But it has to be made sooner or later.

LSM growth

THE robust growth in large-scale industrial output since July last year has generated a kind of economic optimism across the country. Figures from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics for large-scale manufacturing output during March show that the large industry expanded by a robust 22.4pc year-on-year. This hefty increase in the LSM index, however, is because of low base effect on account of lockdown restrictions imposed last year to stop the spread of Covid-19. Going forward, we may even see a higher growth in the LSMI, thanks again to the low base effect. The low interest rate environment is also likely to help sustain growth in industrial production. Still, it may be noted that the LSMI has posted negative growth on a month-on-month basis for two months running. In March alone, the LSM output contracted by 7.7pc owing to the decline in sugar, wheat and grain milling, diesel, etc.

Even though LSM has posted year-on-year growth of 9pc from July to March, the declining month-on-month output underlines the fact that industrial recovery has been narrowly based as it is driven mainly by automobiles, construction, textiles, food and pharmaceuticals. In other words, LSM growth indicates the revival of economic activities in the country but also remains weak and is dependent on only a few sectors. The economy is recovering but not creating enough jobs. The rapid spread of infections in recent months and the slow roll-out of the Covid vaccine have again added to the uncertainty about the future. If this third wave of pandemic lingers, or is followed by a fourth one, it will be devastating for the nascent and fragile economic recovery seen in the last few months. A Dun & Bradstreet survey shows consumer confidence sliding on pandemic concerns and worries over loss of jobs, shrinking purchasing power and rising price inflation. It is only a matter of time before declining consumer confidence starts to infect the investors' sentiments unless the spread of the disease is contained fast and effectively.

Palestine bloodbath

ONCE more, Palestine is bathed in blood, its people left to mourn and carry the tiny coffins of its children. While some would classify the current violence as a 'conflict' between Israelis and Palestinians, it is more of a one-sided assault on the Palestinian people by Tel Aviv's war machine.

Months, if not years, of Palestinian anger had been brewing, with Israel shamelessly grabbing the Arabs' land and humiliating them repeatedly. The pressure cooker exploded when Jewish settlers staged provocative marches in occupied East Jerusalem, started encroaching upon Palestinian homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of the holy city, and finally, when Israeli troops stormed and desecrated the revered Al Aqsa mosque. In response, Palestinians took to the streets across the country, while Hamas, which rules Gaza, started firing rockets at Israel. Tel Aviv's response has been a merciless bombardment of the coastal strip in which over 180 people have been killed, 55 of them children. In the midst of this slaughter, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has promised to "continue to respond forcefully".

And what has been the global response to this latest outrage? At the governmental level, there has been mostly silence, or half-hearted appeals to stop the 'violence'. However, thousands of conscientious people across the world, including in Europe and the Americas, have taken to the streets to denounce Israel's ruthless barrage. Meanwhile, the self-declared champions of human rights keep trumpeting their view that Israel has a right to 'self-defence'. This includes the Biden administration and many in Europe. In fact, Austria had raised the Israeli banner 'in solidarity'.

One wonders whether the right of self-defence allows a country to butcher toddlers and the disabled, as Tel Aviv has done in Gaza. Moreover, Israel on Saturday bombed a Gaza building housing the offices of Al Jazeera, the Associated Press and other media outlets, an act the UN secretary general says "violates international law". Clearly, Israel is trying to prevent the world media from reporting on its crimes, hence the direct targeting of bureaux under the guise of hitting back at Hamas.

And what of the Muslim world? It is evident that the collective consciousness of the vast majority of Arab and Muslim states died a long time ago. As Palestinians

bravely face Israeli terror, the OIC and Arab League are doing little other than issuing statements. Those Arab states that only recently made public their relationship with Israel have done little to convince their friends in Tel Aviv to stop their butchery. The targeting of civilians anywhere is unacceptable. But Israel has been murdering non-combatants for decades, and getting away with it thanks to its powerful patrons. Will the international community step in to stop this mass murder? Or do Palestinians, including their children, not count when the high and mighty wax eloquent about human rights and the rule of law?

Registering madressahs

DURING the past two decades, several attempts by successive governments to standardise and regularise madressahs have met with little success. Religious leaders in the country have staunchly resisted any government attempt to oversee their institutes. The present government too is making an effort to do so, but it remains to be seen whether it is able to achieve this monumental feat. However, it has recently emerged that since late 2019, around 5,000 seminaries have registered with the federal education ministry's Directorate General of Religious Education. The directorate has 16 regional offices that coordinate and plan the registration process of the seminaries in their jurisdictions to help them set up bank accounts, admit foreign students, introduce vocational training and make the transition to mainstream education. The authorities hope that 5,000 more seminaries will be registered with the DGRE by the end of the year.

The education authorities believe there are 35,000 seminaries in the country. However, according to some estimates, their numbers could be as high as 60,000, which would mean thousands of madressahs would not be under any kind of scrutiny. Over 25,000 of the 35,000 known seminaries are said to be affiliated with five designated madressah boards of different sects. A number of madressahs are reportedly registered with the provincial governments, but as cooperative societies under colonial-era legislation. Though the DGRE chief has claimed that all factions of the religious leadership and the five designated madressah boards were on board, the relatively slow pace of registration of madressahs since 2019 indicates there is resistance to government regulations. It is noteworthy that Maulana Fazlur Rahman, who heads a large network of madressahs in the country, and representatives of Minhajul Quran, which is headed by Dr Tahirul Qadri, were not part of the consultation process with the

DGRE. But, if matters progress smoothly, the reforms would enable monetary regulation by the government, curb terrorism financing and discourage connections with extremist outfits. Though not all madressahs harbour extremists, it takes only a handful to undermine state authority and inflict violence on society, drawing concern both from within the country and internationally. Secondly, madressah students would be able to avail mainstream education benefits and be more prepared for the professional world. However, for this exercise to be effective, consistency is needed in pursuing the required changes but in a manner that does not alienate the religious leadership whose cooperation is crucial to madressah reforms.

Karachi's drains

THE initial realisation that Cyclone Tauktae was headed for the Sindh coast prompted the powers that be in the province to call for ensuring that Karachi's drainage system was in working order. While the weatherman now says that the city — along with Sindh's other coastal districts — is out of danger as the cyclone makes landfall in India, the nightmare of last year's monsoons is fresh in the mind. After the heavens opened up in August and unleashed some of the heaviest rainfall in the metropolis's history, Karachi's already creaking drainage system collapsed, and with it much of the city's infrastructure, including electricity, water supply and communication systems. However, here the lessons of disasters past are quickly forgotten. The cyclone may have thankfully changed course, but the real test of the authorities' readiness will come when the monsoon season sets in later this summer.

The government is quick to issue statements indicating it is ready to deal with disaster, as was the case when the cyclone alarm was sounded. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and when disaster does strike, more often than not the state is not able to cope. After last summer's monsoon disaster, the high and mighty of the land promised to resolve Karachi's urban flooding problem. The federal and provincial governments and disaster management bodies as well as other state institutions promised not to leave the megacity in the lurch, while the apex court ordered Karachi's nullahs to be cleared of encroachments. One hopes all these efforts will bear fruit and that the disaster of the past will not be repeated in the city. The fact is that due to decades of neglect by the federal, provincial and local governments Karachi's drainage system has been destroyed, with the

natural flow of water blocked and sewage and solid waste thrown into storm-water drains, while encroachments have done the remaining damage. Along with cleaning the drains, a long-term solution is needed to address the issue.

Hard balancing act

FOREIGN MINISTER Shah Mahmood Qureshi has told his US counterpart Antony Blinken that Pakistan desires a broad-based and comprehensive partnership with America. In his second telephonic conversation with Secretary of State Blinken, Mr Qureshi emphasised that Pakistan wanted ties based on “close economic cooperation, enhanced regional connectivity and common vision for a peaceful South Asia”.

The two senior officials also discussed the situation in Afghanistan in the wake of the US announcement of withdrawal of troops by September this year. Mr Qureshi emphasised the importance of “responsible withdrawal” of the US and other foreign forces from Afghanistan and noted that reduction in violence, a permanent ceasefire and securing an inclusive, broad-based and comprehensive political settlement were “indispensable”. This was the second phone call between him and Mr Blinken since the Biden administration took office. However, the first call between the two was dominated by the release by the Pakistani courts of Omar Shaikh who was accused of involvement in the kidnapping and murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl. Mr Blinken had previously spoken to army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa and the conversation was reported to have focused primarily on Afghanistan.

The Qureshi-Blinken call comes at an important time in Pakistan-US relations. The new US administration is in the process of reducing its footprint in the region with the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan has in recent years invested heavily in its relationship with China especially through CPEC. At the same time, Pakistan has also paid special attention to consolidating its ties with Russia. This has led to deeper engagement between Islamabad and Moscow that was evidenced by the recent visit to Pakistan of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Defence cooperation between the two countries has also seen an upswing with joint defence exercises now a regular feature. This, however, makes for some tightrope walking for Pakistan as the US is now locked in a difficult relationship with both China and Russia.

Pakistan has traditionally enjoyed very close relations with both Washington and Beijing and now is the wrong time to start prioritising one over the other. It is therefore important that Pakistan strike the right balance in these ties and not attempt to strengthen one relationship at the expense of another. CPEC remains a vital project for Pakistan despite the opposition from the US. At the same time, Pakistan remains deeply invested in America on many fronts including the military, economic, social and educational spheres. The challenge for the PTI government is to facilitate the successful withdrawal of America from Afghanistan and partner with the US to ensure a smooth transition of power in Kabul, while at the same time keep strengthening its ties with China. This balancing act may not be easy, but it is necessary if Pakistan wants to maintain a healthy relationship with the two major powers.

Covid awareness

THE effects of large gatherings over Eid as well as multiple home visits will be apparent in the days to come and will largely depend on how far people complied with the SOPs. Only recently, as the virus ravaged India, and even now continues to bring unimaginable suffering there, officials in Islamabad warned we could be in a similar situation if precautions were not taken. The variant across the border, B.1.617.2., spread rapidly just as India was proclaiming it had beaten Covid-19 — a terrible fallacy that had lulled many into a false sense of security. This misguided belief, propagated by India's top officials, was a major factor behind the mass gatherings and indifference to precautions — a trend that was witnessed in Pakistan some months ago when compliance fatigue and huge political and private gatherings were in full swing.

Pakistan cannot afford to be complacent. Our healthcare infrastructure and medical manpower do not have the resources to cater to a high volume of critically ill Covid-19 patients. We have already lost over 200 doctors and at least 30 paramedics — an alarming figure given that Pakistan's overall recorded infections at each peak were far lower than badly hit countries like the UK, where nearly as many healthcare workers have died. The high number of medical personnel deaths in Pakistan reveal the gaps in our healthcare system. With a new study showing multiple virus strains in Punjab, there is even more reason for concern. Given our lack of healthcare resources, the government's focus must be on ramping up testing, SOP compliance and vaccine coverage. Mask-wearing,

social distancing and limited gatherings, too, are key to keeping infections low. Superspreaders like the Kumbh Mela in India have been linked to the crippling third wave of infections. Even when Pakistan emerges from the third wave, it should ensure that gatherings are restricted and mask-wearing is compulsory. Above all, the government must make all-out efforts to encourage people to get vaccinated. As vaccine supplies come in, a mass awareness campaign should begin. This is essential, as the return to any kind of 'normalcy' is underpinned by mass immunisation. While the government is doing a good job of managing vaccination centres, the real challenge lies in persuading reluctant members of the public to get the jab. An awareness campaign that educates people on the dangers of contracting the virus and the protection the vaccine offers will encourage reluctant citizens to get themselves inoculated.

Ring Road scandal

THE Rawalpindi Ring Road scandal is ballooning with each passing day. On Monday, it got its first scalp in the form of the resignation of SAPM Zulfi Bukhari. As Prime Minister Imran Khan's trusted aide and confidant, Mr Bukhari's departure signifies the gravity of the issue and the realisation within the top echelons of the PTI government that the scandal can burn through its credibility.

The Ring Road project was conceived during the tenure of the previous government but the plans for the road were revised under the PTI government. Allegations recently arose that the revisions were done to benefit private entities and individuals. The names of some cabinet ministers were also mentioned as possible beneficiaries. One of those named, Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan, held a presser on Monday to claim he was being wrongly accused. Two separate reports were written by a three-member committee formed by the government and both reports apparently contradict each other. NAB has also ordered an inquiry into the matter while Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has claimed that the resignation of Mr Bukhari is evidence that Mr Khan will not spare even his close aides if they are accused of any wrongdoing.

There is much that remains shrouded in mystery about this mega project. If there were indeed doubts over the transparency of the redesign, why did Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar approve the summary? It is also unclear why a meeting chaired by the prime minister himself approved funds for the project. These and

other aspects of the scandal will need to be probed regardless of how high the blame might go. The prime minister has done well to relieve Mr Bukhari of his official duties pending the investigation.

However, he needs to take the same approach towards other people whose actions remain suspect, including the chief minister of Punjab. While NAB will conduct its own investigations, Prime Minister Khan should leave no stone unturned to unearth the facts behind the scandal. As he himself has always advocated across-the-board accountability for people in power, he should spare no one, including those who made him approve the funding for a project that was surrounded by allegations of wrongdoing and corrupt practices. The Ring Road scandal is refusing to pass the smell test and the odour is reaching up to high places. The PTI government must now lay itself open for ruthless accountability.

Investing in agriculture

THE PTI government has an ambitious plan to develop agriculture over the next three years. It intends to invest Rs110bn — with equal contributions from the federal and provincial governments —and boost agriculture credit by 80pc to Rs2.7tr for almost doubling the grain harvest, increasing fruit and vegetable production five times, and trebling milk output. The government also suggests importing semen for free distribution among farmers to boost livestock productivity, supplying subsidised fertilisers, increasing the number of crops grown and encouraging fruit and vegetable production. The authors of the strategy expect the interventions will help alleviate rural poverty and enhance household incomes. The government is also hopeful that the interventions under this project will bring about a fundamental change in the agriculture sector by persuading farmers to venture into the commercial domain by growing more value-added crops and enhancing milk yields not only for the local market but also for exports.

Indeed, agriculture remains the lifeline of Pakistan's economy. It is the source of livelihood for over 60pc of the population and employs nearly 40pc of the national labour force. Besides, the nation's food security and the bulk of its manufactured exports are dependent on the performance of agriculture. The poor cotton and wheat harvests last year, for instance, show how a decline in this sector can intensify food insecurity, feed into domestic price inflation, increase the import bill

and affect exports revenues. Sadly, previous governments are responsible for the criminal neglect of agriculture. It is, therefore, heartening to see the current administration focusing on agriculture and diverting resources to uplift it.

But will the government succeed in achieving its targets and make agriculture competitive through these interventions? Not really. To begin with, the suggested plan focuses mostly on subsidies without any mention of the required changes in an official policy that discourages growers from shifting from low- to high-value crops. The details released show that the government is still not addressing the root causes of the decline in agriculture, including but not limited to the lack of research in development of high-yield seeds, fighting disease and shifting weather patterns as well as slow adoption of modern technology, obsolete farm practices and decreasing soil fertility because of excessive chemical use. Neither does the plan spell out measures for supporting smallholder, subsistence farmers who are forced to take out a mortgage to purchase inputs like seed and fertilisers. Past experience shows that subsidies rarely help. Instead, the government should allocate maximum resources to promote agriculture research, set up initiatives to speed up adoption of modern farm technology and practices to increase productivity and reduce costs, encourage private investment in the supply chain to minimise wastages, increase growers' access to cheaper formal credit, and link them directly to the markets to put more money in their pockets.

Tribal feuds

DESPITE the PPP's tall claims of running Sindh efficiently, the grim spectre of tribal feuds continues to haunt the province's upper districts. In one particularly bloody incident, nine people lost their lives in a tribal clash involving the Chachar and Sabzoi communities in Kashmore district last week. Police officials claim the feud erupted over stolen livestock. This is not the first incident of its kind as upper Sindh frequently sees such violence, as well as kidnappings, particularly in the districts bordering Balochistan. A police report published in this paper last year says over 100 people have lost their lives in tribal feuds in upper Sindh over the past few years. The violence has been triggered by disputes over access to water and land, so-called honour and matrimonial issues, while trivial matters such as cattle theft and scuffles between children have also led to bloody exchanges. Illegal jirgas are also common in the area with tribal sardars and other influentials settling disputes that should be decided in courts of law. Some

parts of upper Sindh are practically no-go areas for citizens, with unfortunate consequences awaiting those who venture into the 'wrong' zone.

Much of this violence is fuelled by heavy weaponry, some of it military grade. The key question is how such weapons end up in the hands of the feuding tribesmen and criminal elements, without the federal and provincial administrations noticing. While the justice system needs to deliver so people do not have to refer to jirgas to settle their disputes, the flow of weapons into the katcha and other no-go areas needs to stop in order to stem the bloodshed. Moreover, the PPP, whose lawmakers represent the districts concerned, needs to make more of an effort to encourage peaceful resolution of disputes, while lawmakers and government officials can in no way be allowed to patronise illegalities. The people of upper Sindh need the rule of law above all else, not the law of the jungle.

Mob attack

IN yet another display of vigilante justice that has, unfortunately, become a regular feature of national life, a highly charged mob attacked a police station in the federal capital on Monday. Armed with batons and iron rods, the angry crowd surrounded the Golra police station and broke into the premises, damaging the offices of the moharrir, investigation officers and the station house officer. The law-enforcement officials tried to protect themselves by locking themselves up but had to seek help from another police contingent that included personnel of the anti-terrorist squad, the anti-riot unit and the counterterrorism department. It took a heavy police contingent an hour of tear-gas shelling and baton-charge before the charged crowd could be dispersed. The protesters wanted the custody of a suspect who was under investigation for a blasphemy-related complaint. Increasingly, there is a tendency to ignore the fact that the fora to probe any offence are the law enforcers and the courts, and not a violent mob. What incidents such as these show is a deep distrust of the judicial system. Even if someone is under investigation and in police custody, the vigilantes want to administer their own barbaric form of 'justice'.

It is unfortunate that no action has been taken to curb such behaviour and thinking — the consequences of not addressing the regressive ways of society. Mob justice is not limited to cases of alleged blasphemy. Mobs have beaten an alleged teen robber to death in Karachi (2019) and lynched two brothers in

Sialkot under the very nose of police officials (2010), and ransacked a traffic police picket in Rawalpindi (2017). Not only do these incidents expose the weakness of the state and its inability to impose its writ and win the confidence of the public through good governance, they also expose the failings of our weak judicial system that often tends to favour the rich and powerful rather than protect the vulnerable. The country needs fair and transparent rule of law, and it needs it urgently.

The threat within

ESTRANGED PTI leader Jehangir Khan Tareen wants his pound of flesh. Even though Mr Tareen insists that he and his group remain a part of the PTI, his decision to nominate 'parliamentary leaders' from among the legislators supporting him in the National Assembly and the Punjab Assembly shows that he is prepared to go to any lengths to force the hand of his once close friend Prime Minister Imran Khan.

With some 30 MPs and almost 10 MNAs standing 'firmly' with him, he has the magical numbers to turn the tables on his leader both at the centre and in the largest province if the government does not stop the FIA from investigating him and his son on multiple charges of money laundering, fraud and corruption. Mr Khan appears to have already caved in to the pressure. The speed of the probe has slowed down with the formation of a one-man commission to look into allegations of injustice against Mr Tareen at the behest of some powerful aides to the prime minister.

Call it a split or not, the formation of the PTI forward bloc at the centre and in Punjab has exposed the weak foundations of the party and the government. This should send alarm bells ringing in the ruling party since Mr Tareen's actions are clearly meant to send a strong message to both the prime minister and the beleaguered Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar to desist from hurting Mr Tareen's business interests or acting against his supporters in parliament. It is also a clever way of showing that he enjoys enough clout within the party to disrupt the PTI's apple cart if pushed to the wall further. How far Mr Khan can or will go to accommodate him to avert this danger to his frail government remains to be seen. The pause in the inquiry has already damaged the credibility of the prime minister's claims of across-the-board accountability.

Meanwhile, Mr Tareen's repeated show of power at his dinners for 'dissident' PTI parliamentarians and during his court appearances indicate that he will leave no stone unturned to extort concessions from his old friend. Whether the pro-Tareen parliamentarians will remain a pressure group or move further to forge a deal with the opposition to bring about a change at the centre or in Punjab depends on the extent to which Mr Khan chooses to accommodate them. His party's former secretary general has cleverly pushed the ball back in Mr Khan's court.

Should the Tareen group succeed in forcing him to accepting its demand, it could lead to the activation of other dormant pressure groups within the PTI, which would further compromise Mr Khan's control over the party and his ability to govern effectively. Mr Khan may have skirted the threat to his rule from the divided opposition. But will he survive the threat from within his party?

Guantánamo release?

GUANTÁNAMO Bay, the American gulag in Cuba, is one of the more egregious examples of how democracies can bend and break the rules when it suits them. The detention camp entered the popular global lexicon in the aftermath of the 9/11 events, when the US started holding terror suspects in the facility. However, over the years the penitentiary developed a reputation for notoriety, particularly when it came to the abuse of prisoners' rights and the flouting of due process. Amongst Guantánamo's prisoners is Saifullah Paracha, a septuagenarian Pakistani businessman who has been held in the gulag for over 16 years. While the Americans claim he was an Al Qaeda 'facilitator', Mr Paracha denies the charge. It is important to note he has never been charged with a crime, while he claims he was abducted in Bangkok and tortured at Bagram, Afghanistan. Saifullah Paracha's long nightmare may be about to end as he has been approved for release as the US feels he is "not a continuing threat". However, his attorney adds it may take several months for him to be a free man.

While transnational terrorism has thrown up unique challenges for the global community, nothing justifies the torture and abuse of prisoners, or holding individuals without charge for over a decade, as is the case with Guantánamo. The Biden administration must speed up the process of closing down the facility permanently. While at one time it housed over 700 prisoners, today around 40 are still incarcerated at the detention centre. Former US president Barack Obama

had early in his tenure called for closing down the gulag but he failed to do so while Donald Trump put the brakes on the process altogether. Now, Joe Biden must do the needful. If there are individuals the US believes have aided or participated in acts of terrorism, they should be tried in courts of law. If not, they should be released. The fact that Washington opened the facility in the first place indicates the Bush administration's hesitation in allowing the cases to be heard in normal courts. Extra-constitutional and extralegal methods must be avoided as due process is sacrosanct. The lives of numerous individuals have been destroyed in Guantánamo, while they have not been convicted of the crimes they were accused of. How can states that swear by fundamental rights justify the use of such methods in the name of security?

Record remittances

REMITTANCES sent home by Pakistanis living and working abroad continue to surge, defying the economic slowdown resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. State Bank data shows that diaspora remittances jumped by a hefty 29pc to an all-time high of \$24.2bn during the 10-month period between July and April of the ongoing financial year when compared to the cash sent home by overseas Pakistanis during the same period a year earlier.

April saw remittances spike to an unprecedented \$2.8bn, up by a whopping 56pc from the previous year. The 10-month aggregate has also exceeded expectations and the full level achieved in the last fiscal year by over \$1bn. Saudi Arabia continues to be the largest source of remittances to Pakistan followed by the UAE, UK, EU and the US. Pakistan is now in sixth position amongst the top 10 recipient countries of workers' remittances globally, and is likely to move up at least one place by the end of this year.

The central bank claims that proactive policy measures to encourage more flows through formal channels, curtailed international travel, altruistic transfers to Pakistan amid the health crisis, orderly forex market conditions and, more recently, Eid-related inflows contributed to the surge in remittances. This continuing growth has also lessened concerns of an economic slowdown in countries hosting the largest pool of Pakistani workers, which had caused remittances to dip at the start of the pandemic. In its new report, the World Bank has attributed the steady remittance flows to fiscal stimulus that resulted in

better-than-expected economic conditions in the host countries, the shift in flows from cash to digital and from informal to formal channels as well as cyclical movements in currency exchange rates and oil prices. The 17pc growth in remittances to Pakistan in 2020 was faster than the combined 5.2pc increase flows to other South Asian nations, says the World Bank.

Workers' remittances are the single largest source of foreign currency for Pakistan ahead of exports. They provide key support to currency and forex reserves by bridging the balance of payments in the face of reduced dollar flows from other sources. The rising remittance flow has so far helped support the current account that has posted a surplus of \$959m, creating a semblance of external-sector stability. But the contributions of expats can do only so much. The other important component — financial account — of the balance of payments continues to be in deficit as FDI plummets, equity investors pull out their money from stocks, foreign debt payments jack up, and amortisation and other outflows increase. Overall, the external sector appears stable for now and the government is unlikely to face any difficulty in financing its debt and other payments for the next year or two. But the long-term external sector outlook will remain fragile without a dramatic increase in exports and direct investment inflows.

Debating poll reform

THE PTI government is pushing ahead with its version of electoral reforms that focus on the introduction of electronic voting machines and enfranchising overseas Pakistanis. In a latest move to shore up support for EVMs, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry had a model machine showcased in parliament so relevant stakeholders could be briefed on its working. The minister said parliamentarians would be better informed for a debate after getting familiar with the EVM and its benefits. The opposition has so far remained non-committal about the EVMs while the ECP has expressed reservations about their utility. However, there should be no rush to judgement. Now that the government is lending its full weight to these and other reforms, it will be useful if parliament can thoroughly debate the pros and cons of the EVMs. There is plenty that needs to be dissected in this regard. Across the world many countries have had varied experiences with their usage and all these should figure in an informed debate in parliament. The matter can also be debated threadbare in the committee constituted for electoral reforms. It may be important that hard data about the

success and failure of EVMs across the world is made the basis of the discussion in the committee and experts or consultants are brought to provide indepth assessment of the EVMs. The ECP should also play its role and provide well-researched conclusions to parliamentarians so they can make an informed decision. It goes without saying that the public too must be educated in their intricacies.

Meanwhile, the matter of enfranchising overseas Pakistanis, while fairly persuasive conceptually, may be burdened with various complications. Some overseas citizens carry national identity cards, others have NICOPs and some other variations and these all require clarity in terms of their eligibility for voting. This aspect in itself could open up a Pandora's box and generate controversies regarding the right to vote. It is therefore important that parliament weigh each and every proposal carefully and deliberate upon it without any timelines or deadlines. These reforms should be beyond partisan agendas. They are meant to strengthen the democratic system, not the electoral prospects of any one party. In this spirit therefore they need to be fleshed out in as much detail as possible before any decision can be made. The government should not make the mistake of rushing for a decision through a vote. Let parliament take the high road for once.

Political vendetta?

IN Pakistan, crossing certain 'red lines' carries an inherent risk. But it is truly alarming when such actions invite harsh reprisals even during an ostensibly democratic government. On Monday in Multan, a district administration team razed commercial buildings and a marriage hall owned by the son-in-law of Javed Hashmi, veteran politician and perennial maverick. The family alleged that besides these constructions, two poultry farms, the wall of an educational institute and a residence belonging to them were also demolished. According to the authorities, the demolition was part of a drive against illegal construction in the area. The official handout pointed out that the approval of the design of the marriage halls was not obtained from the tehsil council. It added: "The action against all illegal constructions is being taken without any discrimination and political affiliation."

Circumstances surrounding this operation, however, strongly suggest an underlying political motive. A few days before the district administration swung into action, Mr Hashmi in a social media post had excoriated political meddling by the establishment and reminded them of constitutional limits on their power. Given that PML-N is at the moment taking a 'softer' approach towards the civil-military imbalance, none of his party colleagues seconded his views. The senior PML-N leader is not known for political correctness, and has even spent a few years behind bars during Gen Musharraf's regime for bringing to light matters that the powers that be preferred should remain hidden. He has rubbed military and civilian leaders alike the wrong way by his bluntness. Monday's actions however, constitute a new low in the ongoing vendetta against opposition figures. According to reports, the family was given no advance notice of the operation, which took place on the first working day after Eid holidays, and was thus unable to approach the courts for a stay. Moreover, the buildings were razed on a technicality that, if applied without discrimination, would lead to a vast number of constructions being torn down in many urban centres in this country.

No honour in sight

RECENTLY, a woman and man were shot dead in Mansehra by another man who fled the scene after reportedly confessing to the crime to the woman's husband. Though few other details about the case are known at this point, the murder was classified as an 'honour' killing, in a long list of similar acts of violence.

Despite the inclusion of harsher punishments in the anti-honour killing law of 2016, such murders are pervasive in Pakistan. One only needs to scan local newspapers, filled with horrific acts of violence each day, to get a sense of the scale of the sickness. Such killings are rooted in an entitled and deeply patriarchal culture, which attempts to control women's bodies and agency at every turn, with little accountability or access to justice for victims, as conviction rates continue to remain low.

As long as conviction rates remain low, it is unlikely any law that is passed will act as a deterrent. According to human rights organisations, around 1,000 women are killed each year under the pretext of 'honour', although this figure is indefinite, as many cases are never reported. This includes a 16-year-old girl

who was stabbed to death by her father in August 2020; a 24-year-old woman from Jamshoro, who was pelted with stones and beaten to death by her husband and brother-in-law in June 2020; and two teenage sisters in North Waziristan, who were shot dead by their relatives in May 2020.

The home is meant to be a sanctuary, but for many women, it can start feeling like a prison. Exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns enforced in different parts of the country, domestic violence cases increased by 200pc, according to data collected by domestic violence helplines last year. Hearing a jail petition in September 2020, Justice Qazi Faez Isa remarked that the word 'honour' should be dropped when referring to such acts of violence, to remove justification. Unfortunately, a woman's life is cheap in Pakistan.

Water disputes

WATER shortages for the Kharif crop are growing. So are tensions between Punjab and Sindh. The national shortages for the summer crops are now estimated to have jumped from earlier projections of 10pc to nearly 30pc with the drop in temperature in the catchment areas. This is forcing Irsa, the sole arbiter of water disputes under the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord, to release water from Mangla for Sindh's cotton crop as the provincial government accused Irsa and Punjab of cutting its water share. Punjab is unhappy with Irsa's move, arguing that the failure to fill the reservoir could augment water scarcity for both Kharif and Rabi crops in the province. It says Irsa should adjust water distribution among the provinces in accordance with the new estimates of shortages and available river inflows. Besides, Punjab has accused Sindh of under-reporting water availability for irrigation in that province.

This is not the first time the two provinces are bickering over how to share water. Accusations have been flying around for more than a century. The 1991 accord was expected to help bridge interprovincial tensions. But it hasn't. Sindh stills feels aggrieved because the accord didn't guarantee a minimum environmental flow of river water through the province into the sea. It is concerned that the construction of dams upstream would strip it of its share of water. The accord allocates water to provinces on the basis of their historical use. Its ambiguous wording also allows different people to interpret it differently. For example, the accord assumes availability of 117.35 MAF of water in the Indus Basin system for

distribution. In reality, this exact quantity was never available nor will it ever be. Therefore, Irsa has been distributing water shortages for the last 30 years, with Sindh demanding its share on the basis of the assumed availability of water. Consequently, the provinces have been accusing each other of stealing water and Irsa is blaming them for misreporting. Likewise, the accord suggests that provinces with water storage capacity will have a prior right to surpluses, which is a big concern for Sindh and hence its opposition to large reservoirs.

Pakistan's water stress is projected to increase in the next few years. Climate change resulting in prolonged droughts in some regions like Balochistan, erratic weather patterns, frequent flooding, a shrinking winter season and heatwaves in cities like Karachi is aggravating the situation. Dams may be important to trap floodwaters for future use in years of scarcity. But they are not the solution to our stressed water economy. Pakistan remains one of the top three water-intensive countries in the world. This means we can overcome water shortages significantly by conserving this depleting resource through reduction in its wasteful use, especially by farmers, who are the largest users of water. Additionally, the water accord needs to be renegotiated to secure the independent buy-in of all provinces.

PSL set to resume

THE remaining matches of the Pakistan Super League's sixth edition are all set to begin in the first week of June. The 20 games will now be played at the Sheikh Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi. PSL-6 had been abruptly postponed in March with just 14 out of 34 matches completed after seven people participating in the tournament tested positive for Covid-19 amid reports of gross violation of the bio-secure environment by players, officials and franchise owners. The Pakistan Cricket Board deserves credit for PSL's resumption, considering the heavy odds stacked against it. The PCB had come under severe criticism from all quarters for its negligence and poor handling of the event which led to its postponement in March. Serious questions were raised by experts and former players about whether PSL would be able to sustain the shock postponement and the sort of damage it could inflict on its future if the sixth edition remains incomplete.

Though the PCB expressed its resolve to hold the remaining games and vowed to make foolproof arrangements by installing stringent protocols and showing

zero tolerance towards those breaching the SOPs, it was evident that the board had a mountain to climb to make it happen. To begin with, the third wave of the pandemic lashing the country showed no signs of subsiding. There was also another massive challenge: the availability of leading players for the remaining matches was in doubt as most of them had become busy with their respective international commitments. Besides, the players were also reluctant to visit this part of the world at this time due to Covid-19. A neutral venue had thus become imperative and the PCB approached the UAE government and the Emirates Cricket Board for holding the remaining games in the UAE since they had played host to the first three editions of PSL. However, the request coincided with the imposition of visa restrictions by the UAE on Pakistanis and the resumption of PSL-6 appeared a distant prospect. Luckily, the PCB's hectic efforts and the detailed discussion held with the UAE authorities have paid off. Defending champions Karachi Kings, with six points from five matches, will start out as favourites when the contest resumes. Having said that, the Kings will be wary of Peshawar Zalmi, Islamabad United and the Lahore Qalandars who also accumulated six points in the Karachi leg in March but lag behind due to their lower net run-rate.

Suicide prevention

THERE is in Pakistan a fundamentally flawed understanding of suicide. This was glaringly highlighted by the Punjab Police's crude and tone-deaf tweet on Friday warning that anyone who survives a suicide attempt could be liable to one year's imprisonment under Section 325 of the PPC. Ironically, the post was accompanied by the hashtags #BuildingForBetter and #Awareness. True awareness would entail recognising that suicide, or an attempt at it, is not a crime but a desperate cry for help by someone most probably suffering from a mental disorder, such as depression. People with suicidal ideation need support and counselling, but many often do not seek it because of the stigma attached to mental illness. The fact that taking one's own life is deemed a crime in this country only adds to the reluctance. Thus the problems that give rise to the suicidal tendencies in the first place remain hidden, whereas detection and treatment are critical in preventing self-harm.

According to figures compiled by WHO eight years ago, an average of 13,377 suicides occur in Pakistan each year. Around 7,000 of them are committed by

women and a little over 6,000 by men. Instances of attempted self-harm are 20 times higher, with women outnumbering men by a ratio of at least 3:1. Indeed, many of those who succeed in taking their own lives have a pattern of self-harm that if brought to medical attention and addressed successfully through therapy could have prevented them from taking the final, irrevocable step. Local studies indicate that suicidal behaviour manifests more often among the under-30s, who constitute a huge segment of our population. That is all the more reason authorities in Pakistan must inculcate a modern and more compassionate understanding of what makes a person carry out an act that is the very antithesis of the human instinct for survival. There are of course significant resource issues. More than 75pc of people with mental disorders do not get help partly because they are simply not enough trained experts in the field. Also, depressive disorders often closely associated with suicidal ideation are inextricably linked with sociocultural factors and the quality of life, which means a holistic approach is needed to addressing this complex issue. Nevertheless, as a first step, Pakistan must decriminalise attempted suicide, as has been already done in several Muslim countries. Secondly, it should scale up e-mental health interventions so people in distress get the support they need.

Missing OIC and AL

THE ceasefire between Hamas and Israel seems to be holding up after 11 days of heavy and indiscriminate Israeli bombing of the Gaza Strip. Estimates vary but some reports say around 250 Palestinian men, women and children have been killed by Israelis and several parts of Gaza have been reduced to rubble.

The ceasefire was brokered by Egypt and the international community has welcomed it. Aid has also finally started to pour into the destroyed area as Palestinians begin the painful process of rebuilding their shattered lives. The ceasefire comes in the wake of the UN Security Council's failure to restrain Israel from unleashing violence on the Palestinian civilian population and targeting populated areas including schools and hospitals.

Most Western governments continue to draw a false equivalence between the two sides and refuse to identify Israel as the aggressor. However, international public opinion favoured the Palestinians and there was widespread

condemnation of Israel raining death and destruction on the unarmed population in Gaza.

What was missing in this entire unfortunate episode was any role played by organisations like the OIC and the Arab League. Pakistan pursued a proactive policy and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi led these efforts from the front by travelling to the UN headquarters in New York to galvanise diplomatic efforts in favour of the Palestinian cause.

He also welcomed the announcement of the ceasefire and said: “This is the power of collective, unified action ... May this ceasefire be the first step towards peace in Palestine.” The minister added: “Israel’s occupation of Palestine must end, and illegal settlements and apartheid-like regime imposed in the occupied territories must be dismantled. Implementation of UN [resolution] for establishment of independent and contiguous Palestinian State, with Al-Quds Sharif as its capital [is] imperative.”

Pakistan partnered with Turkey to raise the issue forcefully and reinforce the just cause of the Palestinians at the global forum. It was unfortunate, however, that many other Muslim nations, as well as their multilateral platforms, chose to soft-pedal the issue. This crisis required the OIC and the Arab League to power up their diplomacy and utilise the collective clout of their member countries to pile pressure on Israel and its supporting countries. Instead, these organisations chose expediency over principles and left countries like Pakistan and Turkey to shoulder the burden.

In the wake of the so-called Abraham Accords brokered by the Donald Trump administration that saw many Arab nations recognising Israel, there has been a visible dilution of support for the Palestinian cause among platforms like the OIC and the Arab League. If this accord was meant to restrain Israel and make it more accommodative towards the Palestinians, Israel has buried this notion under the Gaza rubble. It may be better for the OIC and the Arab League to learn lessons from their failure in this crisis and amend their policy of silence in the face of Israeli brutality.

Low vaccination levels

NEWS that the government is opening vaccinations for people over 30 is indeed welcome, but the greater challenge of millions of unvaccinated citizens remains. Around 3.5m people have been vaccinated in the country thus far — a low and foreboding number given that we have clocked in over 20,000 recorded deaths and frequently see oscillating patterns in positivity ratios in major cities. Moreover, the devastation wreaked by the UK variant in Punjab and the capital has highlighted how inadequate our healthcare infrastructure is in the face of fast-spreading mutations of the Covid-19 virus. In this scenario, a boost in vaccine availability and awareness must be the top priority of both the federal and provincial governments.

The first challenge regarding vaccine access is a serious one. Aside from procurement problems, we know that 3m people who are not registered in the Nadra database will not be able to get vaccinated even if they wished to. The government must recognise this unique hurdle faced by unregistered citizens and find a way for them to be vaccinated. In fact, whole families could be kept out of the registration process because of the requirement of proving their identity through Nadra. The second challenge, and one that is a problem globally, is vaccine hesitancy. The reluctance to be vaccinated is partially rooted in Covid-19 denialism, and has also been amplified by the initial downplaying of the threat of the virus by irresponsible world leaders. Today, there are huge sections of the population who fear that the vaccine will somehow instal a tracking chip in the human body, or that it will cause infertility or death. These conspiracy theories and fears must be addressed by a robust and visible awareness programme. The Pakistani government should mull incentives for hesitant and vaccine-sceptic citizens. Engaging religious scholars, public figures and community leaders, too, could have a positive impact. Without mass inoculation, the threat to life from Covid-19, as well as the damaging effects to the economy and education, will persist.

Rape cases

LAST year, the horrific gang rape of a woman in front of her children on the Sialkot-Lahore Motorway sparked protests across the country, with people

gathering to demand accountability for the survivor and safety for women. This led to two anti-rape ordinances — the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Ordinance 2020 and the Pakistan Penal Code (Amendment) Ordinance 2020 — which expanded the definition of rape, included harsher punishments for perpetrators, and banned the degrading ‘two-finger’ test for victims of rape, which is also a form of assault. Additionally, it called for the establishment of special courts and rape crisis centres. Despite the approval of these ordinances, reported rape cases have risen to 200 in the federal capital, according to a recent report in this paper, with only one additional district and sessions judge authorised to look into such cases. Worryingly, around 80pc of offenders were acquitted due to “faulty investigation, poor prosecution and out-of-court settlements”. While some government ministers were eager to talk about the public hanging of perpetrators, they have not been able to correct the prosecution system for bringing perpetrators to justice.

It is no wonder then that few incidents of rape are officially reported, or pursued legally, as the process can be extremely painful for survivors, who have to relive trauma, and with little hope for justice. Consider the reaction of then Lahore CCPO Umar Sheikh, who engaged in victim-blaming language after the Motorway gang rape incident, and only apologised after considerable public pressure. Such an approach perpetuates the rape culture, which is defined as “stereotyped, false beliefs about rape that justify sexual aggression and trivialise the seriousness of sexual violence”. It is every citizen’s responsibility to challenge and push back against such warped beliefs about the world and society. One instructive example comes from Indonesia where 17-year-old Ain Husniza Saiful Nizam is stirring conversation on the rape culture with her #MakeSchoolASaferPlace campaign, after a teacher made a ‘rape joke’ in the presence of schoolchildren.

Rendered stateless

AN appalling abuse of power was reversed at the Islamabad High Court on Wednesday. The proceedings pertained to Nadra’s action in October 2019 of cancelling JUI-F leader Maulana Hamdullah’s CNIC — in effect, revoking his citizenship — on the grounds that he was an ‘alien’ and had obtained his identity papers through fraudulent means.

In a 29-page judgement, Chief Justice Athar Minallah wrote: “Citizenship is the most valuable basic right of a human. All other rights, whether social or political, cannot be enjoyed if a person does not have a bond of citizenship with a state.” The court ordered Nadra — that it said had acted in an “arbitrary and reckless manner” — to restore the CNIC of the former senator as well as those of other petitioners who had been subjected to the same on similar grounds. It held that the authority did not have the jurisdiction to initiate such proceedings on the basis of intelligence reports.

State institutions in Pakistan sometimes behave as though they operate in a vacuum where they can bend the law as it suits them. In Maulana Hamdullah’s case, it would be naïve to disregard the fact that his citizenship was revoked shortly before the JUI-F’s Azadi March on Islamabad. To add insult to injury, Pemra, citing Nadra’s cancellation of his CNIC, barred TV channels from inviting the outspoken JUI-F leader as a guest on talk shows because he was not a Pakistani citizen. This added another farcical element to what was already a bizarre situation. After all, there is no restriction on foreign individuals from appearing on TV talk shows. Moreover, the maulana’s papers must have undergone scrutiny each time he has stood for election, first to the Balochistan Assembly and later to the Senate. If any more proof were required that this was indeed an exercise in political persecution, consider that his father was a Balochistan government employee, and that his son is serving in the Pakistan Army.

To render someone stateless is a grave violation of rights, both according to domestic and international law. As the IHC ruling points out “... it virtually brings the life of an affected person to a halt ... In a nutshell, the right to life guaranteed under Article 9 is virtually taken away”. That a government organisation can, on a whim, reduce an individual’s existence to naught in what is lawfully his or her country shows a disturbing escalation in tactics of oppression.

In fact, the fear of being rendered stateless is a very real one for many Pakistani citizens, particularly those born in India or what was once this country’s eastern wing. More often than not, each time they go to renew their identity and travel documents, they endure probing questions as to their credentials, whether they are ‘Pakistani’ enough to pass muster. Such paranoia does not behove a country nearly eight decades old.

Surprising claim

THE new economic growth estimate of nearly 4pc approved by the National Accounts Committee for the present fiscal year has caught almost everyone, including the State Bank and the finance ministry, by surprise. At this stage at least, more detailed information is needed to ascertain how far the figure truly reflects the economic situation. In the absence of an alternative, independent analysis of data and growth estimate, and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic that has caused economies worldwide to slow down, the projection will be seen as overly optimistic. The NAC growth estimate beats the earlier, varying GDP expansion projections of 3pc by the central bank, 1.5pc by the IMF and 1.3pc by the World Bank. Besides, it is almost double the official growth target of 2.1pc. This year's surprising growth rate may be explained — but only to a small extent — by the low-base effect of the last fiscal when the economy contracted by approximately 0.5pc owing to the lockdown and mobility curbs imposed to halt the spread of the infection. But not many seem prepared to accept the government's claim.

There are reasons to be sceptical of the NAC data; it covers only up to nine months of the current fiscal — the projected GDP growth appears to be based on this period of time. For example, agricultural output is said to have increased by 2.8pc despite a 35pc decrease in domestic cotton production. The NAC's projection of the wheat yield at 27.3m tonnes this year is also considerably higher than the Federal Committee on Agriculture's estimate of 26m tonnes. The biggest surprise has come from the services sector, which has been hit the hardest by the pandemic but is claimed to have expanded by 4.4pc against the target of 2.6pc. The pandemic continued to disrupt the entire services industry and yet the latter is reported to have contributed 69pc to GDP growth. There is something amiss about the growth in the services sector — at least anecdotal evidence does not support NAC calculations. The finance ministry's reservation that the 13.8pc growth in gross fixed capital formation wasn't enough to prop up the 4pc GDP growth rate raises more doubts. Therefore, the NAC estimates need to be taken with a pinch of salt until we have more reliable information and independent analyses of the data it has used to make its projections.

Chaudhry Nisar's return

ESTRANGED PML-N leader and former interior minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan appeared in the Punjab Assembly after nearly three years on Monday to take oath for the seat he had won in the 2018 elections. He was unable to do so because the speaker and deputy speaker were not available and the assembly staff said they could not carry on with the oath at the moment.

In his brief talk with the media, the politician said this was no justification for not letting him take oath because any member chairing the session had the speaker's powers. However, he remained guarded in his comments and said he would return to the assembly after a few days to take oath.

Ever since news broke that Chaudhry Nisar was emerging from his political hibernation, there had been feverish speculation about his move. Given the unstable situation of the PTI government in Punjab and constant murmurs of a change at the top, his appearance on the scene was seen by many as part of a larger move in the province. However, it remains unclear what role he could play at this moment and he said so himself that he was not part of any larger game.

What makes his timing significant is the heightened political activity by PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif, which is aimed at lowering the political temperature of his party's politics and creating more space for fresh initiatives. Both Chaudhry Nisar and Mr Sharif have traditionally acted as the bridge between the PML-N and the establishment and therefore the former's re-emergence will obviously be seen in this overall framework. For someone who has been a major political player in the country for more than three decades, Chaudhry Nisar is not likely to have taken the decision to return to active politics without a clear plan. The next few weeks leading up to the budget may reveal the contours of this plan and the role that Chaudhry Nisar sees for himself.

Expanding cities

PAKISTAN ranks among the world's most rapidly urbanising countries. Final census figures show that just under 76m people — or 36.44pc of the populace — lived in cities in 2017 compared to 43m who lived in urban areas back in 1998. However, according to various studies, urbanisation data in Pakistan may not be

entirely reliable. This is because the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics' definition of 'urban' tends to be based on cities' administrative limits, which leaves out 'urbanising' or 'peri-urban' areas that extend beyond the demarcated boundaries. Thus peri-urban areas may exhibit urban characteristics but are considered rural for the purposes of census data collection. This underrepresents the urbanised areas, leading many researchers to argue that nearly half the population could be classified as urban if the PBS definition of a city or urban area were to be interpreted more liberally.

While rapid urbanisation — driven mainly by a high birth rate and the migration of farm labour in search of better jobs and facilities — provides immense opportunities for boosting economic growth, poor urban planning and management is posing serious challenges. A few years ago, a World Bank study described Pakistan's urbanisation as messy and hidden, which is preventing the full tapping of potential and contribution to economic development. It is messy because it is inflating major cities at such a breakneck speed that the government is unable to deliver public services or create jobs. Although the breakdown of city infrastructure is more pronounced in Karachi than anywhere else in the country, other 'better-managed' cities in Punjab, including Lahore, are also feeling the strain of the enormous pressure on their limited public services brought on by rapid population growth. Thus it is not surprising to see a dramatic growth in urban slums, the separation of residential areas on the basis of socioeconomic status, increase in poverty levels, ugly housing sprawls, deteriorating air quality, rising mobility problems for those — particularly women — who cannot afford their own transport, etc. More importantly, the city sprawls — or horizontal expansion of the urban areas — for the wealthy are eating into fertile agricultural land. The gap in the services available to residents of the poorer, disorganised neighbourhoods and affluent urban communities has not only increased, it has also exacerbated crime and other social issues.

The lack of sufficient public investment, the bulk of which is spent by governments to develop infrastructure and facilitate the mobility of car owners, is but one reason for our collapsing cities. Major factors pulling our cities apart are the absence of strong local governments, paraphernalia for effective urban management and planning, and public participation in the policymaking process, as well as the fragmentation of public services and responsibilities that hampers the execution of plans. Unless Pakistan's cities are reshaped to become a source

of economic opportunity and democratisation, they will spawn greater social discontent and crime.

Rebuilding Gaza

AS some semblance of normality returns to Gaza following a ceasefire that ended 11 days of savage Israeli bombardment, efforts of the global community must focus on rebuilding the devastated region. However, while helping Gaza's people rebuild their shattered lives is essential, the international community must also hold the Israeli state to account for its crimes, specifically the indiscriminate targeting of children in Palestine. Some 250 people were killed by Israeli bombs in Gaza, including over 60 children. As of now 800,000 people in Gaza don't have access to clean drinking water while the UN's humanitarian affairs agency OCHA says 6,000 people have been left homeless by the bombardment. The international community must ensure that the people of Gaza are kept safe from disease and hunger, as the coastal strip's infrastructure has been pulverised by Israel. Moreover, adequate psychiatric and trauma care is needed, specifically for children; the international NGO Save the Children says Gaza's youngsters will live with the scars of war "for years to come". Reports emerging from the territory paint a bleak picture of children constantly terrified, in fear of when the next bombs will drop on them. While most members of the Arab League and OIC were conspicuous by their silence or made lame calls for ending the 'violence', the least they can do now is dig into their deep pockets and generously provide help for the Palestinian people.

This is the fourth time Israel has unleashed its brutish, deadly might on the hapless people of Gaza since 2008. It is a sad reality that the world community — specifically the high and mighty of the world order, who go out of their way to shield Israel from censure — sits back and watches the slaughter of Palestinians every few years, and then steps in to 'rebuild'. While the targeting of civilians anywhere is unacceptable, including by Hamas, Israel's response is by no means proportionate, and in many instances very much fits the definition of war crimes. The US keeps upholding Tel Aviv's right to self-defence in the face of Hamas's rocket fire. But does the mass murder of civilians — children, the sick, those with special needs — come under the doctrine of self-defence? The self-declared champions of human rights must answer this question. Bringing Palestinians aid is important, but more important is preventing their mass killing in the first place.

Israel must be held accountable for its murderous forays by the international community.

Intra-party divisions

THE PML-N is once again locked into a battle with itself. Party president and Leader of the Opposition Shehbaz Sharif's gesture of inviting the PPP and ANP to a dinner has triggered derision not from the PTI government but from senior PML-N leaders themselves. First former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi fired a salvo at the PPP saying the doors of the PDM were shut for the party unless it replied to the show cause notice, and then Maryam Nawaz later in the day endorsed Mr Abbasi's statement and took a tough line against the PPP. The result of this intra-party controversy was the rise of renewed speculation that all is not well inside the PML-N and it is falling victim to its own internal contradictions.

This comes at a time when Shehbaz Sharif has turbo-charged his politics and appears to be gradually shifting the PML-N into a more accommodating position. He is representing a body of opinion within the party that wants the policy to be more inclusive towards the opposition and more flexible towards the establishment. The PPP has said repeatedly that it is interested in bringing about an in-house change in Punjab led by the PML-N, and party leader Qamar Zaman Kaira repeated this on Tuesday saying that had the PML-N cooperated, the change in Punjab would have already happened. However, so far there is no clarity about what the PML-N wants in Punjab. In fact, there is little clarity about what the PML-N wants generally, so ambiguous is its strategic outlook.

Mr Sharif's whirlwind contacts with opposition leaders and his high-profile politics in the last few weeks had suggested that perhaps Nawaz Sharif had decided to give the Shehbaz brand of politics another chance. This was premised on the calculation that in order to get a level playing field in the next elections, the party needed some accommodation with the establishment. While there was no official indication that the PML-N leadership was interested in gradually transforming its approach, Shehbaz Sharif's proactive politics and the relative silence of Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz suggested that a shift was underway. This appears to have either not been the case, or the party has once again started to cut the branch it is sitting on.

The PML-N's duality is sowing the seeds of confusion within its rank and file. It is also undercutting its political efficacy at a time when the party should be thinking and planning clearly for the next elections. The PTI is a natural beneficiary. It would be more than happy at this internal bickering inside the PML-N knowing that such wrangling within the House of Sharif provides it enough space to focus on its governance issues. With the PDM dysfunctional and the PML-N hacking away at its own limbs, the opposition appears to be the least of the government's problems.

Women's inclusion

THE success of the Ehsaas Savings Wallets pilot initiative for 7m of the poorest women registered as Kafaalat beneficiaries under the Ehsaas programme, and its future expansion, should go a long way in increasing the access of financially excluded and disadvantaged women to formal financial services. Women, particularly the ones from the marginalised segments of society, form the bulk of the financially and digitally excluded population in the country, and no effort — social or economic — to empower this segment of the disadvantaged populace can bear fruit without closing the widening gender gap in the use of a range of savings, insurance, credit, payment and other financial services.

According to data, only a fifth of the country's adult population is linked up with formal financial services in spite of the early adoption of policies supporting the microfinance sector and branchless banking as well as a national financial inclusion strategy launched by the central bank in 2015. Although the 'enabling environment' points from 5pc to 7pc in these years, showing that men are nearly five times more likely to have an account as compared to women. Studies indicate that the gender gap in financial services' accessibility exists across all demographics — poverty, education, geography, age and marital status. Even wealthy, urban and educated women have reported registering bank accounts less frequently than poor, rural men. Supportive government policies and initiatives like Ehsaas Savings Wallets are rightly considered critical for women's financial inclusion. But, at the same time, we also need to break down the cultural barriers hampering women's access to financial services. It is difficult, if not impossible, to pull families out of poverty without encouraging the financial inclusion of women.

Geneva meeting

THE recent meeting in Geneva between the Pakistani and American national security advisers should give bilateral relations a boost, considering that it is the first face-to-face contact between high officials from both states since Joe Biden entered the White House. There has been a perception that ties are less than cordial between Pakistan and the new US administration as there has been no formal contact between Prime Minister Imran Khan and Mr Biden, while this country was not initially invited by Washington to a climate summit in which other regional states were participating. The foreign minister has been in touch with the US secretary of state, but hopefully the meeting between Moeed Yusuf and Jake Sullivan in Switzerland should help take relations forward. Along with improving bilateral relations, India, Afghanistan and economic cooperation were discussed in Geneva.

Clearly, the US-Pakistan relationship is a difficult one, marked by mistrust on both sides. America's main concern at this juncture is to use Pakistan's influence with the Afghan Taliban to ensure an orderly withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. Pakistan, on the other hand, wants to be accorded the same standing as India where the American regional approach is concerned. The fact is that the Biden administration must apply a fresh approach to Pakistan to bring down the mutual mistrust. For the past over four decades, the bilateral relationship has been shaped by Afghanistan, and before that America's Cold War exigencies. What is needed now is for the US to delink Pakistan from Afghanistan and deal with this country on its own merits. By all means Pakistan can and should help stabilise Afghanistan to all extent possible, but this country should not be used as a geostrategic tool to be abandoned when the mission is accomplished, as was done after the Soviet defeat in the Afghan 'jihad'. Pakistan, on the other hand, is in a difficult position as it tries to balance its ties with China and Russia on one end, and the US on the other. Islamabad's strategic, economic and political ties with Beijing are deep, while relations with Moscow are also improving. Moreover, relations with Washington are also a key pillar of Pakistani foreign policy, and cannot be taken for granted. Thus the challenge before Pakistan's foreign policy establishment is to cultivate relations with these important capitals equally, and not be pressured by other countries in its choice of friends and allies.

Attack on journalist

IT is a matter of concern that yet another journalist has been attacked in the capital city, which has been described as the most dangerous place for mediapersons in the country. Asad Ali Toor was attacked by unknown assailants, who thrashed him inside his apartment in Islamabad's Sector F-11. Mr Toor later uploaded a video in which he said that the attackers had demanded information about the "source" of his "funds". In recent years, the modus operandi of those intimidating journalists has become more brazen. There might still be warnings, calls for explanations or threatening messages but now, the quarters who want critical voices silenced have gone one step further and demonstrated that they have no qualms about 'disappearing' journalists or subjecting them to brutal assault in broad daylight outside their homes or in some other part of the city.

According to the latest report put together by the media watchdog Freedom Network, there has been a 40pc increase in attacks on journalists over the past year. Only last month, senior journalist Absar Alam was shot at while strolling outside his house in the F-11 sector of the capital. Last year in July, senior journalist Matiullah Jan was kidnapped from outside his home in G-6 in broad daylight. He was lucky to be released 12 hours later after vociferous protests from the journalist community and human rights bodies. All this is happening under the watchful eye of a democratically elected state and its law-enforcement apparatus. Why is the government so hesitant to issue regular warnings that silencing criticism in this way will simply not be tolerated? It is appalling that the latest attack should have occurred soon after the detailed Protection for Journalists and Media Professionals Bill, 2021 was tabled in the National Assembly. The provisions aim to ensure the independence of journalists and let them work without fear of intimidation and harassment. Once the bill is passed, will the government ensure the law's enforcement in letter and spirit?

Sindh's dacoits

EVERY few years, Sindh's dacoit problem becomes too big to ignore, the violence too egregious to overlook, and the impunity with which the outlaws operate too shocking to brush under the carpet. Once again, action is being planned against their hideouts in the riverine forests of upper Sindh. Precipitating

this sense of urgency is the bloody encounter that took place between law-enforcement and dacoits in Shikarpur district's Garhi Tegho area on Sunday.

The clash left two policemen, an SHO's private guard and a police photographer dead. Seven cops were wounded in the operation to rescue six kidnap victims. On Monday, Shikarpur police along with local police claimed to have arrested a tribal chief and his two sons in Karachi for allegedly patronising criminals in the katcha areas along the Indus. Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah told the press yesterday that an 'operation clean-up' is being finalised against the dacoits and their abettors in Kashmore and Shikarpur districts.

The dense riverine forests provide excellent cover for the outlaws where they can disappear after committing their crimes, which run the gamut from murder and extortion to kidnapping for ransom. While that is true, there is also a political dimension to the perennial law-enforcement problem. In the 1980s, Gen Ziaul Haq gave a free hand to the outlaws in order to counter the resistance movement, which had its primary support base in Sindh, against his military regime. Later, the PPP's political opponents in the province were said to have patronised the dacoits so as to keep parts of interior Sindh in a perpetual state of lawlessness, which of course reflected poorly on Benazir Bhutto's government. However, a report by former SSP Shikarpur Dr Rizwan Ahmed that came to light last year contained explosive allegations about a nexus between certain Sindh cabinet members and notorious criminals of the area leading to a complete breakdown in law and order. The episode ended without a credible investigation into the charges by the senior police officer, who was himself then subjected to an inquiry and transferred out of the province.

Now, matters have again come to a head, as they were bound to do. It is high time the Sindh government dealt with this menace comprehensively without fear or favour. If the dacoits have no support within influential segments of the area, how are they able to evade capture time and again, and how do they get their hands on sophisticated weaponry like anti-aircraft guns that can kill policemen inside their APCs? Law and order cannot be sacrificed to political expediency. If the government's actions cost the support of some tribal leaders, so be it. At the same time, the centre is chomping at the bit to get involved in what is a provincial subject. It must refrain, unless the Sindh government itself asks for its assistance in what is bound to be an ugly denouement.

Assets unfrozen

THE decision of the High Court of Justice in the British Virgin Islands to unfreeze PIA properties Roosevelt Hotel in New York and Scribe Hotel in Paris is a victory for Pakistan. The court reversed its earlier orders to attach the properties in a case initiated by the Tethyan Copper Company that was seeking enforcement of the \$6bn Reko Diq award. The court also removed the receivers from the two properties. Yet the fact remains that withdrawal of the attachment orders does not affect the status of the award given by the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes against Pakistan for unilaterally revoking the mining contract in Balochistan's Reko Diq. The liability will continue to stand unless Pakistan's request for the annulment of the award is granted by the ICSID or the government succeeds in striking a negotiated deal with the mining company. Though the government has vowed to vigorously pursue the proceedings initiated by TCC in "any jurisdiction" in order "to protect national assets", it may only be able to delay the inevitable, not avoid it. The award is equal to about 2pc of the nation's GDP and the money borrowed from the IMF to support a weakened balance-of-payments position.

Pakistan's decision to cancel TCC's mining licence in Reko Diq, famous for its gold and copper reserves, underscores the crisis of governance as well as the bureaucracy's incompetence, and the general inability to protect the country's economic interests while negotiating large contracts and agreements. This is not the first time we have failed to honour our contractual obligation and faced embarrassment by reneging on our commitment to global investors — sometimes witnessed after a change of government. More importantly, it is a major reminder of how unsolicited judicial interventions in complex commercial contracts for public approval can have an adverse impact on the country's image as a safe destination for foreign investment. The fact is that when the apex court began in 2012 to hear civil and criminal petitions challenging the agreement between TCC — an Australian firm — and the Balochistan government, there was full awareness of Pakistan's responsibilities under international law and the country's bilateral investment treaty with Australia to protect the mining company's investments. We should be worried about payment of the massive fine. But we should be more worried about how to address poor governance to avoid such embarrassment in the future.

Time to move on

THE government has attempted to file a petition in the Supreme Court, invoking an unheard of legal remedy, to challenge the apex court's judgement on the review petition in the Justice Qazi Faez Isa case. Now the petition, filed under the term 'curative review petition' has been returned by the Supreme Court registrar office on the grounds that a second review petition could not be filed to challenge a decision that had come on a review petition.

This petition was moved on behalf of the federation but the attorney general has distanced himself from the pleas saying he was not in the picture. A spokesman of the law ministry, however, said the petition would be filed again after addressing the registrar office's objections.

Senior lawyers have also opined that such a petition does not hold much legal weight once the Supreme Court has already issued a judgement on the review petition of Justice Isa. It is therefore surprising that the government is insisting on pursuing the matter against Justice Isa when the court has clearly stated that the case built by the government against him has no legal standing.

Since the court took up the case almost every aspect of the allegations against him have been dissected threadbare and every feasible piece of evidence has been examined in great detail. Justice Isa and his wife have presented whatever paper trail was required of them while the government's legal team also got full opportunity to build a case against the judge.

These exhaustive proceedings have finally led to a decision in Justice Isa's review petition by a 10-member bench. The judgement clearly exonerates the judge of all charges. This should be the end of the matter, not just because it brings to a close the legal process, but also due to the fact that it has exacted a heavy cost on the institution of the judiciary itself.

It is heartening that the highest court in the land opened itself up for accountability, but now that the decision is final, the sad chapter should stand closed.

This is why it is inadvisable for the government to rake up the matter. The move smacks of desperation, whereas it is now time for acceptance. The government

should let the matter rest and move on. No one benefits if the judiciary is dragged back into a public controversy that has run its legal course.

Food insecurity

THE increase in the numbers of food-insecure people in this country speaks much louder than official claims of economic growth. According to the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement, 16.4 out of every 100 households surveyed during the fiscal year 2019-2020 reported moderate to severe food insecurity. The number was slightly higher than the 15.9pc food-insecure households a year before. Apparently, the latest PSLM was carried out by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics before the country went into lockdown for a few months towards the end of March 2020 to halt the spread of Covid-19. Or the findings could have been more dismal. Thus, it is safe to assume that the survey is reflecting only the impacts of job losses, income reduction and IMF-mandated economic stabilisation policies on the lives of the poor and marginalised communities across the rural-urban and provincial divides. However, the fact that almost 30pc of Balochistan's population had reported food insecurity underlines the effects of climate change on agriculture and different food security levels in different regions. There is no doubt that intermittent periods of drought over several years have not only pushed up poverty levels in various regions of Balochistan but have also increased the size of the food-insecure population.

Food insecurity is not just about food shortage in the market. It also signifies the absence of sufficient money to buy food, let alone nutritious, wholesome food. It's not surprising that the high food inflation experienced during the last two years has played a major role in increasing the numbers of the food-insecure population. The survey mostly gives only a sketchy picture of the situation without listing details about or profiling food-insecure households and individuals. Yet we know from anecdotal evidence that food insecurity does not affect all members of a family or household equally; women and children are more prone to suffer hunger than adult male relatives. It is also seen that those living in poorer districts, regions or neighbourhoods face greater food insecurity for longer periods than others. That also explains the increasing migration of the rural labour force to cities and peri-urban areas for better incomes.

The issue is connected to not just economic growth and agricultural performance but also the growing regional economic and development gap, which has increased gender inequalities in the access to education, health, public facilities, and generally equal opportunities in life. Indeed, it is important to grow the economy for creating jobs and bridging income gaps so that the maximum number of people can access healthy food. But the kind of growth our economic and financial policies produce have only widened social and economic inequalities and increased the food-insecure numbers. With the budget around the corner, there is an opportunity for the government to tweak its policies for slightly more equitable economic growth and wealth distribution.

Anti-tobacco award

SOMEHOW there are gaps in the picture. The WHO award to Pakistan for undertaking an effective campaign against tobacco has come as a pleasant surprise to many in a country where smoking is rampant. However, it is fair to ask in what manner the country has benefited from the anti-tobacco drive and to what extent has the consumption of the noxious substance been curtailed. As the Ministry of National Health Services receives its award on May 31, which is celebrated as World No Tobacco Day, it would do well to mull over the situation and not rest on its recent laurels. For instance, it has been estimated that tobacco consumers in the country number 30m and cost the exchequer Rs615bn in terms of the health burden — by no means a small amount for a country whose healthcare facilities are already overstretched. However, the government has been lauded for, among other steps, making Islamabad a ‘tobacco-smoke-free city’ by designating 304 localities and parks as smoke-free in 12 districts. Tobacco sellers have also been registered under this project, while the health ministry has prohibited all kinds of advertising, promotions and sponsorship of tobacco products on point of sale as well as on social media.

And yet the reality on the ground points in another, troubling direction. Access to smoking products is easy and the availability of the ostensibly banned single cigarettes is especially tempting for students and other young people. Meanwhile, anti-tobacco activists have rightly criticised the authorities for their lax tax policies towards the tobacco industry that help the latter earn huge profits. Indeed, there have been no increased taxes on tobacco products in the past four years whereas the price of other basic commodities has surged. In such a

situation, how can the government's goal of cutting the number of tobacco users by 30pc by 2025 be considered realistic? A rethink is needed on how to act on its intentions and enforce the measures that the government says will curb the use of tobacco.

Health cards in Punjab

AFTER the launch of the Sehat Sahulat Programme last November in KP, and its extension in February enabling free medical treatment for all 6.7m families in the province, the PTI administration in Punjab has formally introduced the service in Sahiwal and Dera Ghazi Khan divisions. At a ceremony for the launch of these cards on Wednesday, the prime minister said that the health insurance scheme would meet the needs of the poor. Residents can avail free medical treatment of up to Rs720,000 at all public and private hospitals in the province, with the possibility of families obtaining additional treatment worth Rs300,000 if required. This is a game-changing initiative by the PTI government and the response so far in KP has been positive. Hospitals, both public and private, are reporting a larger inflow of patients who want to avail the facility of free medical treatment. There is a small difference though — in KP, families can avail treatment of up to Rs1m every year, more than in Punjab. While the discrepancy in the amounts should be explained, one hopes that the facility will soon be expanded to cover the entire province, and that the Sindh and Balochistan governments follow suit for the benefit of their populations who have had little access to proper healthcare, for lack of either facilities or money.

For decades, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children in the country have ended up either losing their life or their health only because they have not been able to access the required medical treatment. While one must laud the PTI's initiative to lessen the financial burden on the general population, going forward, the authorities must also invest in equipping and improving existing facilities, especially in areas detached from large cities, so that the maximum number of patients can be catered to without overstraining the system. In this regard, the Punjab government's decision to upgrade basic health units in underdeveloped areas and build a maternity hospital are steps in the right direction.

UNGA chief on Kashmir

BY all definitions, the Kashmir issue is the major stumbling block to peace in South Asia, and until a judicious solution acceptable to the people of the region is reached, the subcontinent is unlikely to see stability. The UN General Assembly's president Volkan Bozkir, on his arrival in Pakistan on Thursday, gave some constructive advice to the state on how to raise the issue at the world body. What is more, the UN official made a very pertinent point when he said that the parties to the conflict must not change the status of the disputed territory till the matter is resolved.

Mr Bozkir was making an obvious reference to the events of August 2019, when India moved to make constitutional changes paving the way for the illegal annexation of India-held Kashmir. This has allowed Indians to move into the occupied area; according to one estimate, 430,000 new domicile certificates have been issued to outsiders.

As and when the Pakistan-India peace process moves forward, the situation in held Kashmir must not be lost sight of. By all means both sides must try and work on 'softer', less contentious issues that can play the role of confidence-builders, helping solidify the peace process. Yet India cannot be allowed to manufacture 'facts on the ground' in Kashmir by settling outsiders and changing the demographic make-up of the occupied territory. This concern must be included in the dialogue process, for if it is ignored it may affect the judicious settlement of the Kashmir issue.

The other very relevant point the UN official made about the Kashmir question was the need for this country to work harder to raise the issue internationally, specifically to "bring it to the United Nations platform more forcefully". Mr Bozkir added that the Kashmir dispute lacked the level of world support the Palestine question enjoyed, though it must be mentioned that even the Palestine issue only appears on the global agenda after Israel launches a bloody attack against the Arab side.

After India's unilateral move to annex Kashmir in 2019, Pakistan's foreign policy establishment did activate itself and world capitals were lobbied to bring the plight of the Kashmiris to the international stage. However, the UN representative is absolutely correct that more can be done to highlight the issue. For example,

he has suggested Pakistan can initiate a debate on Kashmir at UNGA supported by other states. Indeed, there is much work ahead in this regard, and Pakistan should liaise with Muslim states as well as other countries sympathetic to the Kashmir cause to ensure the issue is brought to the fore. The Kashmiris' cause is righteous and their struggle just. Therefore, Pakistan must give all the support it can to ensure the voice of the occupied valley reaches the hallowed halls of the UN, and other multilateral forums.

Rising exports

EXPORTS from Pakistan continue to show an upward trend as overseas shipments jumped significantly by 13.6pc to \$20.9bn during the first 10 months of the present fiscal year from \$18.4bn a year ago as per Pakistan Bureau of Statistics data for the July-April period. The rebound in the nation's exports is a positive development as it suggests economic recovery in spite of the challenges from the countrywide resurgence of the coronavirus. Simultaneously, imports are also increasing — and faster than exports. The encouraging part is that the demand for imported raw materials and capital goods has seen substantial growth this year owing to improved economic conditions in the country as domestic industry upgrades technology and expands production capacity. Yet the increase in wheat, sugar and cotton imports, because of the poor performance of agriculture, should be a cause of concern for policymakers in Islamabad. Encouraged by this year's growth trend, the commerce ministry is proposing an export target of \$28bn for the next fiscal, which is more than 16pc greater than the expected export revenues of around \$24bn from Pakistan this year. Thus, Pakistan could almost double its exports to around \$42bn over the next five years if the present growth trend is sustained.

For Pakistan it is critical to boost its exports rapidly to ward off a balance-of-payments crisis in future. At present, the country has one of the lowest levels of exports in the world as a percentage of its GDP — around 8pc. According to the World Bank's World Development Indicators, the same ratio averaged 24.7pc for low-middle-income nations, 17.5pc for the South Asian countries and 24.4pc for highly indebted poor states back in 2019. Even though the rapid jump in remittances sent home by Pakistanis living abroad has cushioned the current account, the abysmally low exports-to-GDP ratio should worry policymakers as poor export performance has been the chief driver of balance-of-payment crises

in the past. The present growth trend in exports is encouraging. But it also underscores the need for ensuring that it continues for a longer period. That will not be possible without producing more exportable surpluses, diversification of export products and markets, and improvement, in fact sophistication, in product quality. More importantly, the government needs to support the exporters in the quest to be internationally competitive, and increase productivity through skill and technology upgradation instead of doling out subsidies in different forms at the expense of taxpayers.

Turning the corner?

FINALLY, some light at the end of the tunnel. New cases of Covid-19 are falling in Pakistan, clocking in at 2,455 on Friday, the fifth consecutive day they remained below 3,000. The positivity rate detected during the same period was 4.42pc, the fourth day running it was less than 5pc. This is reason for hope, a validation of the measures taken thus far — and perhaps some as yet unknown factors — that have helped us evade the devastation that the pandemic has wreaked in India. However, there is a development of concern, which was inevitable despite timely and appropriate action to prevent it. The National Institute of Health announced on Friday that it had detected the first confirmed case of the Indian strain of Covid-19 in the country. That underscores how in this evolving saga of the novel coronavirus, letting one's guard — or mask — down is not an option. The vaccines do not prevent infection, but they are to varying degrees — often 100pc — successful in preventing serious disease and death.

The vaccination campaign is also moving along, though given our massive population we have inoculated only a miniscule segment of it. Total number of vaccinations across Pakistan on May 27 was 284,975, bringing the tally of people who have received at least one dose to 6,709,848. The National Command and Operation Centre recently announced walk-in vaccination for those 30 years and older. It has also opened the registration process for individuals 19 years and over, which means almost the entire adult population of Pakistan can now get itself inoculated, depending on the availability of vaccines. So far, over 11m doses of vaccines against the novel coronavirus have been received, with 100,000 doses of Pfizer vaccine the most recent to arrive under the Covax facility. Of course, soon the supply will exceed demand: vaccine reluctance is a reality even in advanced countries with high literacy levels. The recent

apocalyptic scenes of people dying from the disease on the roadside in India and smoke from funeral pyres darkening the skies in parts of its urban centres likely contributed to convincing many here to get themselves inoculated. But the tendency towards vaccine scepticism is bound to resurface again and a robust campaign to counter it is important.

At the same time, there are millions of Pakistanis who do not possess CNICs, making them ineligible for vaccination. There are also an estimated 3m legal and illegal Afghans and people of other nationalities living here. While the NCOC has decided that those with valid documentation of refugee status will be vaccinated, the authority is still considering how to inoculate the rest. The case of illegal aliens is particularly tricky for they would avoid presenting themselves to the authorities for fear of harassment or deportation. Nevertheless, a way must be found. None of us are safe, until all of us are safe.

Balochistan violence

THE authorities have justifiable reason for their growing concern about the law and order situation in Balochistan. An intelligence-based operation early Wednesday in a Quetta locality killed four suspected members of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, including a commander. On April 21, the banned militant outfit had claimed responsibility for a deadly suicide bombing in the parking area of the high-security Serena Hotel in Quetta. The attack claimed the lives of at least five people and wounded a dozen others. A resurgent TTP, amidst the turmoil in Afghanistan next door, was a very real possibility — especially after a breakaway faction, Jamaatul Ahrar, and JuA's splinter group Hizbul Ahrar both merged with the umbrella organisation last year.

However, the last few months have seen a flurry of IED explosions of low and medium intensity for which no militant outfit has claimed responsibility. Last Monday, at least five people were injured in Quetta when a roadside bomb exploded. That came on the heels of another attack in which seven people were slain and 14 injured in a bombing that targeted a Palestine solidarity rally in the border town of Chaman. In April, an IED wounded 14 people at a football match in the town of Hub. The bombings were seemingly random occurrences, with soft targets for the most part. Balochistan has been the theatre of some horrific acts of terrorism, often resulting in large-scale casualties. In January, 11 Hazara coal

miners were slaughtered in an attack claimed by the militant Islamic State group. In the run-up to the 2018 polls, a massive suicide bombing at an election rally left over 130 people dead. There was a brazen assault in May 2019 on a five-star hotel in Gwadar, the coastal city believed to be fortified against terrorist attacks. The province has long been perceived as 'troubled', almost by default. While most of the recent comparatively low-casualty IED explosions may give the impression that the security situation is now 'under control', the picture as a whole is extremely disquieting. All indications are that the province is once again becoming a staging ground for militants of various stripe. The TTP is revitalised, possibly even more so because the impending US troop withdrawal across the Afghan border affords it more operational space. The Baloch insurgents too will certainly exploit the situation to their advantage. The law-enforcement authorities cannot afford to let down their guard for even an instant at this critical juncture.

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Olympics uncertainty

THE Tokyo Olympic Games, set to commence on July 23, have drawn major controversy since last year. Uncertainty still surrounds the Games as the host country Japan, like the rest of the world, remains in the grip of the coronavirus pandemic. Originally scheduled to be held in 2020, the Games were postponed as infections surged globally. This year, Japanese officials, Olympics organisers and the International Olympic Committee have pledged to hold a ‘safe and secure’ event. Though strict virus-prevention measures are being put in place for the Games, which have already seen foreign spectators banned from Japanese shores while a decision on domestic audiences is awaited, tens of thousands of athletes and officials, mediapersons and others will be descending on the Japanese capital thus exacerbating the risk of infection. Such concerns have not been ignored. Recent polls conducted by newspapers and environmental and

social welfare organisations show that as many as 70pc of the public in Japan is angry and want the Games either scrapped or postponed again.

To make matters worse, the head of a doctors' union in Japan warned last week that holding the Games in Tokyo this summer could lead to the emergence of an 'Olympic' coronavirus variant that would be hard to contain. A number of countries including the US have advised their citizens against travelling to Japan but Olympic organisers say this will not affect the event. The bigger issue for them are the billions of dollars at stake as the Games involve major international sponsors who cannot afford the risk of the Olympics being delayed again. For thousands of athletes, too, who have been preparing for the extravaganza for many months now, further delay could mean the loss of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Olympic glory. The head of the IOC insists there is no Plan B and that the Tokyo Olympics will go ahead as planned — a precarious route indeed. What price Japan will have to pay will be evident soon enough.

PML-N's dilemma

IT has become fairly clear after Saturday's meeting of the PDM that the opposition is now going to be operating from two separate platforms. With the PPP and ANP no more part of the alliance, as was made amply clear by both Maulana Fazlur Rehman and Maryam Nawaz in the media briefing, and Shehbaz Sharif rallying them for unified action inside parliament, a hotchpotch arrangement appears to be taking shape.

The PDM will initiate a public movement after the budget, but the PPP will not be part of these rallies, while Mr Sharif as the leader of the opposition will mobilise parliamentary opposition to the budget and the PPP will participate in it. While this dichotomy may illustrate the absence of any tangible options for the PDM at this moment, it also reflects the difference of approach within the PML-N leadership. In a TV interview earlier last week, Mr Sharif had said categorically that he wanted all stakeholders to work together to resolve Pakistan's deep-rooted problems. He had said he would try his best to convince Nawaz Sharif to adopt this course of action. However, on Saturday, Maryam Nawaz said equally clearly that she believed only an aggressive approach towards rivals could pave the way for greater reconciliation. Therein lies the dilemma for the PML-N.

The party has experienced its fair share of highs and lows of power and adversity in the last few decades. It had suffered its first major blow when a bloc was carved out of it during the Musharraf years and named the PML-Q. However since then, the PML-N has shown remarkable resilience under pressure. It is to its credit that it has retained its rank and file these last few years despite facing the brunt of political, legal and other pressures. At the same time, it has consolidated its base and has shown in the recent by-elections that it still packs a powerful electoral punch.

The problem today is that the leadership of the party appears unclear in its approach. Fight or talk? The answer is hazy and often ambiguous. To add to this dilemma, the differences in the approach of the two Sharif brothers have become more pronounced and are spilling over into the public domain. Despite the hard-line stance of Nawaz Sharif against the establishment, the party as a whole has never burnished its anti-establishment credentials.

A large number of influential people in the party do not want a confrontation with the establishment and may be supporting the younger Sharif brother in his attempt to steer the party back towards greater accommodation in order to create space for itself in the next elections. Matters are now coming to a head and the leadership will have to decide which strategy it wants to adopt. For now, Shehbaz Sharif's narrative appears to be gaining traction both inside his party and outside.

Broken planet

SHORTLY after taking office, Prime Minister Imran Khan planted a deodar sapling in Haripur to inaugurate his government's ambitious '10 billion tree tsunami' plantation drive in 2018. To counter the threat of climate change, the PTI government announced that it would plant 10bn trees within five years. Three years later, the prime minister returned to the site he launched his campaign from to inspect progress and speak to the media about his government's commitment to protecting the environment. Even if the figure is contestable — 10bn trees means planting millions of seeds a day over a five-year tenure — there is little denying the importance of large-scale tree plantation drives, as sea levels rise and the planet warms at an alarming rate. Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our times, and a transnational one, and yet not many governments around the world treat it with the urgency it deserves, prioritising

short-term economic growth over the planet's well-being. The previous year saw record high temperatures, melting glaciers, flash floods, wildfires, and a host of other disasters, which can only be described as apocalyptic, especially when combined with a global health crisis. Several cities across the United States experienced their hottest summers in recorded history, while Siberia went through a six-month-long heatwave, with temperatures rising up to 38°C. Bushfires raged through Australia, exterminating billions of animal species, destroying thousands of buildings, and taking at least 34 human lives. In Brazil, the Amazon rainforest saw its worst fires in a decade. Here in Pakistan, Karachi was paralysed under record-breaking monsoon rainfall, receiving 223mm of rain in a single day, while several parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa experienced flash floods, and Gilgit-Baltistan was shaken by a massive landslide following heavy rain. At the end of the year, in his State of the Planet speech, UN Secretary General António Guterres put it bluntly: "The state of the planet is broken." Can it be repaired?

According to FAO's Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020, 440m acres of forest has been lost in a span of one decade — "an area about the size of Libya". Pakistan is said to have one of the highest rates of deforestation in the world, and it is also one of the most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change, so it is encouraging to see the government put the environment on top of its agenda.