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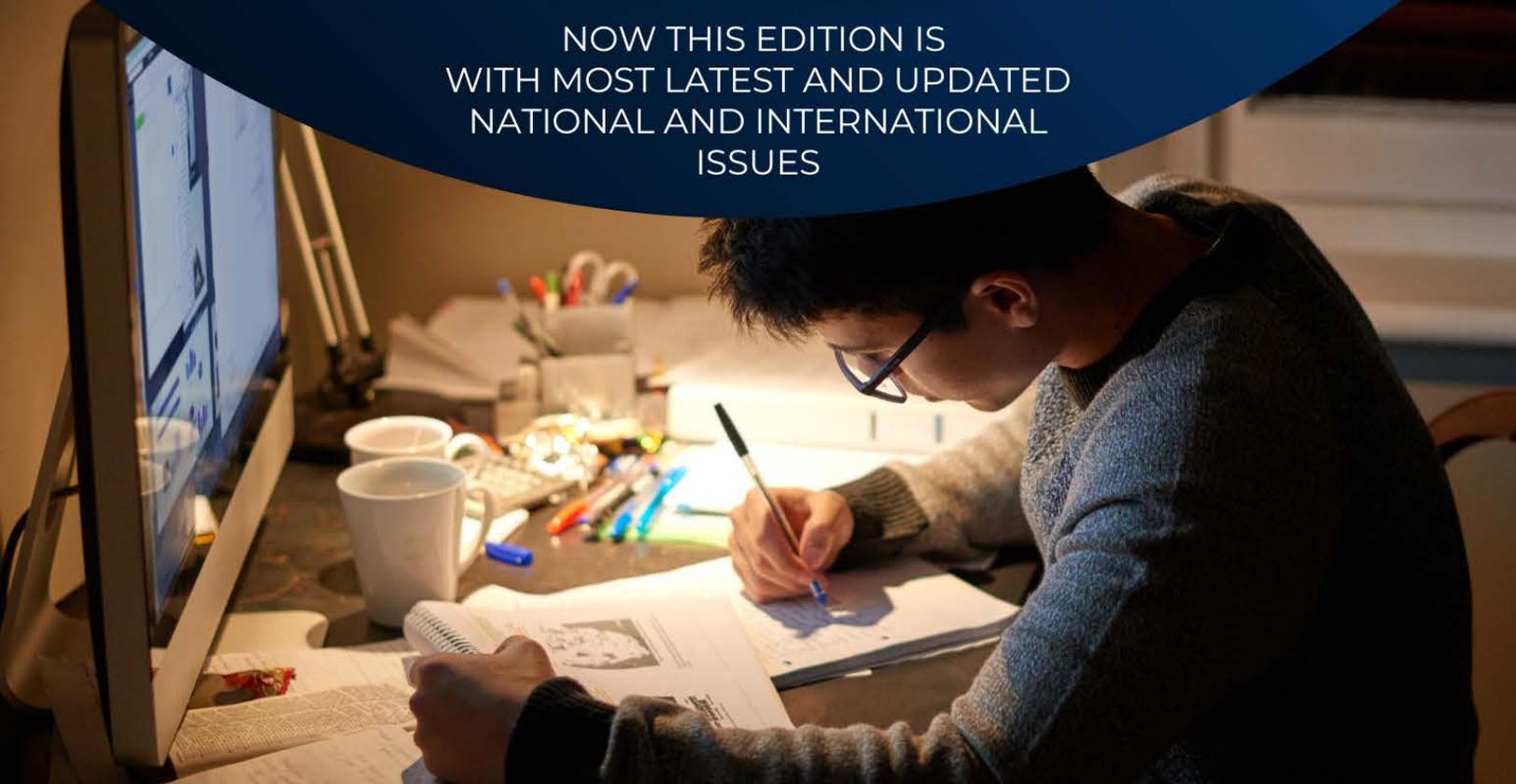
MONTHLY

# DAWN

## EDITORIALS

MAY 2024

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# Wheat protests

THE crackdown on farmers protesting in Lahore and several other cities against the government's 'flawed' wheat procurement policy and delays in the commencement of the grain's official purchases in Punjab is deplorable.

Scores of farmers were manhandled and detained by police across the province on Monday, particularly in Lahore and south Punjab. The protesters appeared to have taken to the streets as a last resort after the authorities ignored their calls for help. Wheat rates have plummeted in the market, and are much below the support price of Rs3,900 per 40kg. The recent rains have added to the farmers' woes.

And yet, the government continues to play down the problem, with its spokesperson dismissing the protests as politically motivated. This is not how governments treat those who grow food for the entire country, and the ruling PML-N may, sooner or later, have to pay a big political price for neglecting the plight of farmers, especially smallholders, who have already announced plans to block highways with the opposition's support.

Indeed, the provincial administration has valid reasons for streamlining its wheat purchases through digitising the process, slashing the procurement target for the current harvest, and delaying official purchases far beyond the date announced earlier.

There are also no two opinions that the existing policy of excessive government intervention in the wheat market by fixing a minimum support price and procuring a larger portion of tradable surplus brought to the market by farmers each year has run its course and become a burden on the government budget. These interventions are ostensibly to support growers, and ensure price stability and food security.

In fact, they benefit only the middlemen, and flour millers, especially those who operate only for a few months, and that too on subsidised wheat quotas from official stocks. This policy must end.

However, a sudden curtailment of the government's role will prove harmful for farmers amid collapsing wheat prices resulting from record production and unseasonal rains that are threatening the crop. The government should withdraw from the wheat trade gradually, replacing the existing market support mechanism with an effective new one over the next several years.

Many believe that the previous caretaker set-up's reckless decision to import over 3.2Mt of grain when the harvest was approaching is responsible for the restricted official purchase target. This is largely true.

If the Punjab government did not have stocks of over 2Mt, it might have raised its procurement target for the ongoing harvest without much fuss to avoid protests. Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal also blames unnecessary wheat imports for the present market volatility. The authorities, therefore, must investigate the motives behind this reckless decision and fix responsibility.

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## Polio drive

THE year's fourth polio drive has kicked off across Pakistan, with the aim to immunise more than 24m children under the age of five. This latest campaign stretches across various districts — 10 in Punjab, 24 in Sindh, 26 in KP, and 30 in Balochistan. Despite concerted efforts, Pakistan, along with Afghanistan, remains one of only two countries, where polio is still endemic. This year, in March, two new polio cases emerged from Balochistan within a mere two days, marking the end of the province's polio-free status since 2021. This resurgence is evidence of the tenacity of the disease and of the hurdles Pakistan continues to face in combating it. The threats are manifold: extremist groups targeting polio workers under the false belief that vaccination drives are foreign conspiracies, parental refusal of vaccines, and the constant movement of populations across the porous Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Recently, the coordinator to the prime minister on National Health Services advocated for a results-oriented dialogue with Afghanistan on polio, given this migration of unvaccinated populations facilitating the virus's spread.

However, achieving a polio-free Pakistan requires more than cross-border cooperation. It necessitates an approach that addresses both vaccination resistance and virus transmission. First, we must ensure the safety of our polio workers. These front-line heroes face significant risks, and their protection is essential for the continuity of immunisation drives. Second, addressing vaccine hesitancy through education campaigns is crucial. Misinformation and distrust have led to a high rate of vaccine refusal, even among well-educated families from Karachi, research has revealed. Overcoming this requires tailored communication strategies that resonate with various demographic groups. Moreover, enhanced surveillance must be implemented to promptly detect and contain virus outbreaks. Poliovirus has been detected in multiple sewage samples across the country, signalling environmental contamination and potential for new infections. While Pakistan's efforts in polio eradication have seen significant progress, the road ahead is riddled with difficulties. The people must be made to understand that polio is a life-changing disease and can only be prevented with vaccines. Hence, ensuring that every child receives the polio vaccine is the only pathway to a polio-free future.

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## **Workers' struggle**

FACED with high inflation and bleak economic prospects nationally, the workers of Pakistan have little to celebrate this May Day. However, the state can at least resolve to improve the lot of the toiling masses, and work with the representatives of the working classes, as well as civil society, to translate lofty promises into reality. Trade unions have historically not been strong in Pakistan, and today the number of unionised workers is negligible.

Moreover, a changing global scenario — starting with the fall of the Soviet Union and continuing with the triumph of neoliberalism and globalised capitalism — has resulted in labour issues falling further on the list of national priorities. In Pakistan's case, questionable laws, such as the Musharraf-era labour ordinance (which has been repealed) as well as infighting and lack of capacity within unions has harmed the workers' cause.

Yet the struggle to secure a living wage — and decent working conditions — for the toiling masses must continue. As labour has been devolved since the passage of the 18th Amendment, the provinces need to pick up the gauntlet and deliver on workers' rights. For a start, each province must enforce a minimum wage that keeps pace with roaring inflation. Tycoons have resisted the enforcement of minimum wage, but the state must stand firm in this crucial area. Moreover, the state needs to ensure all employers meet occupational health and safety criteria.

Far too many labourers work in hazardous conditions, and lack the relevant safety nets should accidents occur. Pressure from international unions and activists has helped change the situation for the better in the textile industry; other sectors must follow suit. The state should also bring all workers into the social security net, particularly those in the informal sector, who form the largest percentage of Pakistan's labour force. And if multilateral lenders prescribe more 'austerity' for the country, the government should protect the working classes from its fallout.

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## Freedom to question

WITH frequently suspended freedoms, increasing violence and few to speak out for the oppressed, it is unlikely that the human rights situation in Pakistan will improve anytime soon. True, the country's policy landscape, replete with weighty legislations and proclamations, presents a different picture. But officialdom has consistently failed to implement its promises. It is essential, therefore, for people to voice inconvenient truths and their concerns regarding usurped rights. The recently concluded fifth edition of the Asma Jahangir Conference, a two-day moot themed 'People's Mandate: Safeguarding Civil Rights in South Asia', has become an important platform for such voices. This year, the conference highlighted repression in the country and called upon political parties to talk to each other, sign a charter of fundamental rights, and refrain from involving unelected quarters in their quest for power. It was encouraging to note that a vast tract of violations was discussed, indicating that those dedicated to civil liberties will persevere. Multiple concerns, such as internet restrictions, military trials of civilians, the need for parliamentary intervention, judicial helplessness in cases of

enforced disappearances, expulsion of Afghan refugees and the oppression faced by minorities, women and trans people, were raised before a young and engaged audience.

Such platforms can play a pivotal role in building robust social development constructs that advance awareness and ensure the law's application. While Pakistan's youth is charged and concerned, it is largely misdirected due to a sociopolitical environment that discourages questions. Fora that encourage diverse opinions and highlight the fight for throttled rights are above politics. Pakistani society needs informed facts and a culture of tolerance to dilute polarisation. This is the path to a just social contract, in which powerful hierarchies can be challenged and public approach and state policies crafted for equal political, economic, civil, cultural and social rights. All aspects of human life and dignity must remain inviolable.

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## Engaging Riyadh

OVER the last few weeks, there have been several exchanges involving top officials and their Saudi counterparts.

At the end of Ramazan, the prime minister flew to the kingdom to visit the holy cities, while also managing a meeting with the crown prince. The de facto Saudi ruler had sent positive signals regarding his country's investments in Pakistan. That mini-summit was followed up by the visit of the Saudi foreign minister to Islamabad last month.

Accompanied by several other ministers, the kingdom's top diplomat once again reiterated his country's desire to invest in Pakistan. During Shehbaz Sharif's latest trip to Saudi Arabia, undertaken in connection with a World Economic Forum event in Riyadh, the prime minister again met Mohammed bin Salman, as well as several Saudi ministers. The vibes during these meetings were also positive, and the message was the same: Saudi Arabia wants to invest in the country.

At a time when the state is trying to resuscitate the economy, news of Saudi money coming to Pakistan can only be welcomed. Riyadh appears to be primarily interested in investing in agriculture, while energy projects were also discussed during Mr Sharif's just concluded visit. As the Saudi commerce minister put it, the crown prince is "prioritising trade and investment in Pakistan".

From here, it is up to us how we use this opportunity. We can either avail these investments to create local jobs and growth, or we can blow this chance just as we have squandered several earlier opportunities due to incompetence and political upheaval.

Thankfully, there appears to be a realisation at the top that we have to change our internal dynamics to attract foreign investment, and make Pakistan an attractive destination for overseas capital. Mr Sharif hinted at the need to cleanse our stables when, at the WEF event in Riyadh, he admitted that Pakistan's revenue sector is "in tatters".

Revenue is not the only area that needs improvement. Ending corruption and red tape, and ensuring a regulatory and administrative climate that prioritises ease of doing business are also important. It is hoped that the Saudi offers materialise soon, while other foreign investors, in the Gulf and beyond, are also invited to explore the opportunities in Pakistan.

However, it must be stressed that to pull in maximum foreign investment, a climate of domestic political stability is crucial.

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## **Punishing evaders**

THE FBR's decision to block mobile phone connections of more than half a million individuals who did not file federal tax returns for the tax year 2022-2023 indicates that the agency is stepping up its campaign against evaders. The FBR has issued a legally binding Income Tax General Order to mobile companies to disable the SIMs of 450,000 individuals who had earlier filed tax statements but did not do so last year. It has identified the remaining more than 50,000 tax delinquents through third-party data on their expenditures and consumption

patterns. The punitive action comes after the tax evaders' failure to respond to notices and repeated reminders. But is this enough to ensure tax compliance? The FBR's action appears to be largely limited to those whose names are already in its database. Many will justifiably ask what is being done to expand the tax base itself. Under the law, any person earning an annual income of Rs600,000 or more, or owning a 1000cc car or a house is liable to file tax statements. However, less than 2pc of the population (4.5m persons) had filed their returns last year, down from 5.9m a year earlier. Besides, a very large number of filers do not show taxable income in their statements.

That the FBR has initiated action against non-filers amid reports that only 75 traders have registered themselves under the recently announced Tajir Dost Scheme, a voluntary tax compliance arrangement for retailers, underscores the difficulty in expanding a very narrow tax base. And yet, despite the tax agency's past failure to execute multiple effective initiatives to increase direct taxation to boost the nation's present tax-to-GDP ratio of below 9pc — one of the lowest in South Asia — we must keep our fingers crossed. Indeed, Pakistan's current political leadership is committed to implementing FBR reforms, digitising the tax system to plug leakages and eradicating corruption and massive tax exemptions to powerful business lobbies. The intentions are sound. But the government would need to go much beyond automation and an anti-corruption drive; a paradigm shift is needed to make the tax system equitable to attract private investment and spur economic growth.

In addition to bringing untaxed and undertaxed sectors such as real estate, agriculture, retail, and overseas remittances into the net, the government will have to curtail the number of indirect taxes and significantly reduce high tax rates if it wants to improve compliance. The abysmally low tax revenue as a ratio of the size of the economy is at the heart of one of the worst financial crises being faced by the country for the last two years. This problem cannot be tackled without broadening the tax net, and making the tax administration and regime conducive to investment and growth.

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## Mass transit mess

THAT Karachi — one of the world's largest megacities — does not have a mass transit system worth the name is no secret. No single party is responsible for this state of affairs. Over the decades, successive governments, at the centre and in Sindh have, through acts of omission and commission, contributed to the situation. Seemingly, the planners 'forgot' that a geographically vast and populous city would one day need a mass transit system of international standards, and that commuters could not depend on a dwindling fleet of rickety buses or private transport to get around. Some remedial steps have been taken, such as the introduction of the Green Line bus system, though the project came quite late in the day, and remains incomplete. The Green Line was, after several delays, inaugurated in late 2021, while the Red Line, another rapid bus system, has yet to see the light of day.

Yet, of late, there seems to be a welcome realisation within Sindh's corridors of power that this chaotic situation needs to be addressed. The Sindh chief minister, while talking to this paper, reiterated his intent to get the Red Line scheme chugging again. The project is at a standstill while University Road, a major city artery, has been dug up for the bus line, creating a hellscape for commuters. Cost overruns, as well as other logistical and technical bottlenecks, are said to be responsible for the halted work, indicating a lack of planning at all levels. Meanwhile, the Karachi mayor has written to the prime minister to help extend the Green Line's route. The service enjoys high ridership, but its route remains incomplete, while a part of M.A. Jinnah Road remains dug up waiting for the scheme's completion. Both the federal and Sindh governments must complete these schemes at the earliest, while feasible plans for other lines — such as the proposed Blue and Yellow Lines — also need to be finalised quickly.

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## Meddlesome ways

AFTER this week's proceedings in the so-called 'meddling case', it appears that the majority of judges comprising the superior judiciary have endorsed the six Islamabad High Court judges' complaint that they are not free to issue their judgements purely in line with legal principles and face routine pressure from

intelligence operatives on how they must decide the cases before them. While it has been a long-held belief among the public that legal outcomes, particularly in political cases, often have little to do with the merits of the case and more to do with where the defendant stands in their relationship with the establishment, it is nonetheless startling that this belief is now being validated by senior judges themselves. It appears that the institution has had enough and wants change. There has been great turmoil within it for the past year or so, but unlike the other branches of state, this turmoil seems to be moving rapidly towards a denouement. All eyes have been on the Supreme Court to see what course it sets for the future. It is hoped that the judges hearing the case realise the weight of this responsibility and proceed accordingly.

The Pakistani judiciary does not rank very high in the public's perception of fairness, and nothing hurts its image more than the judges themselves complaining that officers who are subordinate to the state frequently try to threaten or blackmail them into issuing tailored judgements without any fear of consequences. The meddling case has also thrown into sharp relief the stark imbalances that still persist within the state more than a decade and a half after the lawyers' movement. From the disclosures made by the six IHC judges and endorsed by other high courts, it is clear that the judiciary has been unable to exercise the independence envisioned by those who agitated for it in the Musharraf era. Now that the need has been highlighted, it is imperative for the institution to take steps to protect itself from those who seek to subdue it. The legislature, too, must support the judiciary in its efforts in whatever way necessary. The survival and stability of any nation-state depend on a carefully calibrated balance of power between its different branches. Without this balance, there is chaos — something we are, tragically, witnessing with each passing day.

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## Under siege

JOURNALISTS across the world are facing unprecedented threats — from legal and economic pressure to outright threats of violence — hindering their ability to report freely. The war in Gaza highlights the perils faced by journalists in conflict zones. Since Oct 7, at least 97 journalists and media workers have been killed.

In India, press freedom has seen a marked decline, driven by a political climate that increasingly stifles dissent. Media ownership is concentrated among a few aligning closely with the BJP — slated to win a third straight term in power — narrowing the diversity of voices in the media. Journalists face harassment and legal actions, and purse strings dictate media narratives.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh, ranked lowest for press freedom in South Asia, faces its own challenges. The Cyber Security Act approved last year threatens to deepen the state's control over media, limiting journalistic freedom and leaving room for the arbitrary interpretation and application of the law. Such developments, alongside violence and judicial harassment of journalists, underscore a growing hostility towards independent journalism.

A similar climate prevails in Pakistan, where the media has always been under siege. The battle is dual-fronted: the government and security establishment both assert control, looking to influence editorial policy. This suppression continues regardless of which party holds power. A notable example is the implicit 'ban' on media channels from naming PTI founder Imran Khan. This policy, initiated during Shehbaz Sharif's last tenure as PM, persisted through the caretaker rule and remains sporadically enforced.

Opposition parties, despite their cries for media freedom, often employ similarly suppressive tactics once in power. Whether through direct censorship, withholding advertising, or sinister measures such as harassment, legal intimidation and violence, the press in Pakistan navigates a hazardous terrain.

Making matters worse is a troubling shift within segments of the media landscape, where the lofty ideals of journalism have been sidelined in favour of compliance. Many media houses, once bastions of fearless reporting, now capitulate under the aforementioned twin pressures.

This surrender is often motivated by financial incentives or coercive force, leading to journalism that panders rather than probes. Powerful corporate entities are an additional pressure, some of whom throw money at media houses to campaign against specific outlets. Most recently, four leading publications published an ad in response to an investigative report by Dawn, disgracefully attempting to run it as news.

The need for unity in Pakistan's media has never been stronger, to navigate pressures more effectively, maintain journalistic integrity and push back against attempts to influence editorial content. On this World Press Freedom Day, let us resolve to put up a unified front, to not only safeguard our operational independence but also fortify the very foundations of press freedom in the country.

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## Rigging claims

THE PTI claims to have “all the evidence” against what it asserts was a rigged election this February. The party has released a “white paper” alleging widespread electoral manipulations, specifically the fudging of Form-47, which consolidates polling data. The document highlights discrepancies between preliminary results on Form 45, which showed PTI leading, and the final results on Form 47, prepared without PTI representatives in breach of electoral laws.

It also shows examples of vote count reversals where the alleged manipulation of Form 45 shifted outcomes significantly in favour of PTI's opponents. Furthermore, it cites instances of manipulation in Form 47 itself by Returning Officers who reportedly altered final tallies. The paper also goes into the events that preceded the elections, highlighting administrative actions by the caretaker set-up allegedly favouring certain political factions, media censorship, and internet blackouts allegedly aimed at suppressing the party's reach.

While the PTI's grievances seem genuine, the report itself is little more than consolidation of all that its leaders have been contending for the past three months. Moreover, while the party has called for resignation of the chief election commissioner, demanded that the Supreme Court expedite the hearing of their pending petitions, proposed the formation of an independent judicial commission to probe the allegations and implement sweeping electoral reforms, it would do even better to play a constructive role in parliament and push for the said reforms, rather than be the disruptive force it has historically been. At the same time, while playing their legislative role, the PTI must keep bringing forth such 'evidence', which they have indicated they will in future 'papers'.

The PTI's allegations are not new; most elections in Pakistan have been controversial, and it is almost a given that results will be challenged by the losing side. The legitimacy of the 2018 elections was in doubt as well, when the PTI itself came to power, and of several elections before that. The sad fact remains that whoever is close to the powers that be is given an edge, with the ECP either powerless to act or worse, complicit.

The sole pathway for the ECP to recover the integrity that is constantly being questioned now, is to conduct an audit of the contested election results forthwith. This audit should be conducted immediately, openly, with all relevant stakeholders invited to observe the process. Moreover, there is a dire need for this rigging issue to find a permanent resolution, for all elections to come.

Unless the major political parties realise the need for drastic electoral reforms, and for the ECP to be empowered, the losing side will always kick up a storm after every election and the political stability that the nation so sorely needs, may remain out of reach.

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## Gaza's wasteland

SINCE the start of hostilities on Oct 7, Israel has put in ceaseless efforts to depopulate Gaza, and make the Strip uninhabitable. While the death toll over the past seven months has crossed 34,000, recent comments by UN officials illustrate the extent of the devastation. As per the UN's Assistant Secretary General Abdallah al-Dardari, Gaza would require a post-conflict rebuilding effort not seen since World War II. The savage Israeli assault has resulted in around 37m tonnes of debris, which is said to be more than the amount of rubble generated in the Ukraine-Russia war, a much wider conflict geographically. This reconstruction effort could cost over \$40bn. UN experts also fear that thousands of bodies are likely buried under the rubble in the occupied territory. Only when Tel Aviv stops its murderous campaign can the true picture of Gaza's destruction emerge.

Certainly, the aforementioned details confirm that Israel's leading lights seek to raze Gaza. If they are allowed by the world to continue — and if the impending

assault on Rafah proceeds — they will have succeeded in their horrific mission. Meanwhile, Hamas remains undefeated, while Israeli captives have yet to be recovered by Tel Aviv. Perhaps to make up for failure on all fronts, the Zionist state's rulers are determined to continue their orgy of violence targeted at the Palestinian people. The talk of rebuilding and its costs is premature; first the Israeli onslaught must be stopped. Ceasefire talks facilitated by regional states continue, but at present there is little hope of success, mainly because many of the extremists inside Israel's ruling coalition will apparently not rest until every Palestinian in Gaza has been exterminated. One way to end Israeli butchery could be through an international arms embargo against the Zionist state, just as apartheid South Africa was penalised by a UN Security Council resolution. But this will be difficult to implement because Israel's Western friends — who are resolutely offering it 'ironclad' support, even as it commits genocidal violence — will do all in their power to block such a move. Perhaps the only hope to punish Israel lies in the actions of brave states like Colombia, which has severed ties with Tel Aviv, as well as courageous students across the Western world who have taken to the streets to protest their respective governments' complicity in the Gazan massacre.

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## Housing scams

THE story of illegal housing schemes in Punjab is the story of greed, corruption and plunder. Major players in these frequent scams are well-connected real estate investors backed allegedly by unscrupulous politicians and facilitated by a corrupt bureaucracy. The victims are middle-class individuals, aspiring for a permanent roof over their heads. However, instead of being able to fulfil their dream and buy a house, tens of thousands have collectively lost billions in hard-earned rupees. A report submitted by the Punjab Planning & Development Department to the Supreme Court reveals that over 1,100 private housing schemes in 11 districts across the province are illegal because they do not have the requisite approval from the authorities concerned. In other words, the sponsors of these schemes cannot advertise their 'projects' that offer plots for sale to an unsuspecting public. Most such schemes exist only on paper; in fact, land for the housing society is obtained only when plots that don't actually exist are sold. To hoodwink potential buyers, it is falsely claimed that the required

regulatory approval has been obtained. There is neither a mechanism nor the will to stop them.

Interestingly, the sponsors of most schemes even secure power connections from distribution companies with the help of dishonest officials. Besides robbing ordinary people of their savings, the greed of real estate developers is annihilating large swathes of fertile agricultural land and fruit orchards around the cities, resulting in unplanned urban growth at the expense of food security and the environment. The Planning & Development Department's report is not the first of its kind. The question is: does the government have any intention of taking measures to halt the architects of such fraudulent projects? For obvious reasons, we have seen promised action against these schemes fall apart even before it gets underway. The preparation of such reports are a waste of time, effort and money if no action is taken.

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## **Not out of the woods**

PAKISTAN'S economic vitals might be showing some signs of improvement, but the country is not yet out of danger. For instance, for the last four months, CPI-based inflation has been on a downward trajectory, as anticipated by the State Bank and multilateral lenders, slowing down to a two-year low of 17.3pc in April. The average inflation for the ongoing fiscal year is predicted to ease to 26pc from 29.6pc last year. Yet interest rates remain significantly high as fears of the resurgence of inflation owing to anticipated fiscal consolidation in the next budget and energy sector reforms continue to haunt the central bank. The current account balance, too, has improved in the last 10 months, with international reserves inching up as the exchange rate remains stable in spite of a strong dollar which has lately battered most Asian currencies. Still, 'unofficial controls' on imports remain in place to prevent a sudden build-up of demand pressure on forex reserves and the exchange rate. Tight financial conditions and the foreign exchange crunch led many large-scale manufacturers to drastically cut production, leading to job losses.

In this context, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's recent declaration of victory against inflation seems premature. The new 'economic stability' remains fragile

and the war against inflation is a long way away from being won. That the government is desperately looking for a medium-term financial package from the IMF is a sign that the economy is not in good shape. Fiscal consolidation and rapid resolution of the energy sector corporate debt under a new IMF programme is likely to keep headline inflation higher in the near future. The last couple of years have been difficult for medium-income households. The next few years will not be easy for the majority either. It is crucial for politicians and policymakers to not misread the economic situation and to avoid any misstep that could worsen people's plight.

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## One small step...

THERE is some good news for the nation from the heavens above. On Friday, Pakistan managed to dispatch a lunar mission in the form of the iCube-Qamar 'cubesat'. The orbiter, which is Pakistan's first deep-space mission, is currently making its way through the cosmos as part of the Chinese Chang'e-6 lunar probe, and is due to be deployed on May 8. The Chang'e-6 mission itself intends to break new ground by obtaining samples from the far side of the moon. Along with Pakistan's orbiter, the Chinese mission is carrying payloads from Italy and France. The Pakistani mission, which seeks to capture images from the lunar surface, was made possible through collaboration between Islamabad's Institute of Space Technology, Suparco, and a Chinese university.

This event should serve as a reminder that despite the considerable odds, Pakistan — with dedication and commitment to education and science — can participate in the exploration of space, and contribute to global knowledge about what lies beyond the confines of our planet. While Pakistan entered the 'space race' early, launching the Rehber-1 rocket, with American help, in the 1960s, it has been a bumpy ride since. Numerous reasons have been attributed to our lack of progress in the realm of space exploration and research. These include bureaucratic disinterest and the induction of non-scientists and unqualified individuals to head our space agency. Resource constraints, too, have hampered our efforts, as Pakistan, unlike states richer than itself, cannot spare the funds for space exploration. There is also the fact that the sanctions the country has faced linked to our nuclear weapons have affected the space programme. But perhaps

the most crucial reason for the limited success of Pakistan's space programme is that the state has failed to promote a culture that prioritises learning and research. Yet as the launch of cubesat shows, Pakistan has the capability to participate in this exclusive domain. What is needed is official encouragement of scientists and promising minds that wish to explore the cosmos, particularly by investing in science and mathematics starting from the school level. Though Pakistan may not yet be able to afford larger projects, such as sending people into space, it can benefit by launching exploratory probes and satellites that can contribute to civilian needs such as communications and remote sensing, as well as scientific research.

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## Hasty transition

OUT of nowhere, the government has launched a new cybercrime authority: the National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency. This move to replace the FIA's cybercrime wing raises substantial concerns about the motive behind it.

The NCCIA is mandated to handle offences under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, which, activists allege, was used routinely by the FIA to silence dissent. Of course, conversely, bad actors use social media to spread disinformation and misinformation, necessitating oversight.

But at a time when digital rights and privacy remain key issues for the state to address, the authorities have opted to forgo any meaningful dialogue with digital rights groups, the IT sector, or even the public. Such an opaque approach fosters distrust and scepticism towards the government's intentions. It has neither presented a clear rationale nor demonstrated the deficiencies within the existing framework that necessitated this move.

The reuse of the FIA's resources — personnel, assets, and existing cases — under a new banner raises a fundamental question: what exactly is the objective of the NCCIA that the FIA could not achieve? If the goal was to enhance capabilities or streamline operations, would it not have been more prudent to bolster the existing framework rather than dismantle it? The abruptness of the move suggests the new rulers are not behind it.

The move will likely create redundancies and confusion, diluting the focus from actual cybercrime threats to the procedural chaos of transitioning to a new agency. Also, such disruptions could hinder ongoing operations and complicate international cooperation under links nurtured by the FIA.

Furthermore, the NCCIA, with its broad and unclear mandate, could potentially lead to increased surveillance and data collection practices, encroaching upon the personal liberties of citizens under the guise of security.

It appears the PML-N government is working in the same manner as when Peca was being promulgated, when no input was taken. The situation has called into question the regulatory environment for the internet in the coming years. Ostensibly, the aim is to exert greater control over social media and to gain more power to crack down on activists, dissidents and journalists critical of state policies.

The government owes the public an explanation of the necessity and aims of the NCCIA. It must articulate how this new set-up will better serve the cybersecurity needs of the nation without compromising democratic freedoms.

It is also crucial that further developments in this area involve a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Engaging with experts in digital rights, cybersecurity, the legal domain, and the public is essential to ensure that the agency's operations are balanced, effective, and respectful of the rights it is purportedly designed to protect. The urge to police social media must be resisted.

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## **Appointment rules**

IT appears that, despite years of wrangling over the issue, the country's top legal minds remain unable to decide by themselves what criteria must be followed when making appointments to the superior judiciary. They have chosen, instead, to delegate the matter to the federal government.

According to reports, a recent meeting of the Judicial Commission of Pakistan was adjourned without a debate on the matter after the law minister revealed that the federal government was considering amending the Constitution to alter the process through which superior court judges are appointed. The discussion was put off because the committee's deliberations would prove futile in case Article 175A, which sets down the rules for judicial appointments, was successfully altered by the government. This would seem like the logical step to take: the only question that remains is, who has the government involved to advise on the legislative changes it intends to make?

It is worth highlighting that there has been a long-running dispute within the superior judiciary over whether judges ought to be appointed based on the 'seniority principle', or purely on consideration of merit. It may be recalled that in the summer of 2022, a major dispute had broken out within the JCP over the nomination of several judges by the then chief justice, Umar Ata Bandial.

In several letters and statements addressed to the chief justice, the legal fraternity had demanded the formalisation of some objective criteria under which judges' merit could be assessed, and for the seniority principle to be followed till such time as these criteria could be agreed to. This past December, the incumbent CJP finally formed a committee to deliberate on the matter and make its recommendations. It was this committee's recommendations that were supposed to be discussed at the recent meeting, which ended up being adjourned without debate.

It would appear that the government has now been invited to use its powers and make changes to the Constitution in order to more permanently do away with the existing imbalance of power within the JCP, and also enforce a more universally acceptable mechanism for the elevation of judges. As long as such an intervention is aimed solely at making the current appointment system more equitable and giving elected representatives greater say, there appears to be no harm in welcoming it.

However, the judiciary must remain wary. If it had the power to self-regulate, it ought to have exercised it instead of involving the legislature. There have been rumours that the government is also considering making certain changes to judges' tenure, which could prove controversial. The superior courts cannot

afford more drama. It is therefore hoped that the legislative process will remain transparent, and involve all stakeholders in Pakistan's judicial system.

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## Terrains of dread

KARACHI, with its long history of crime, is well-acquainted with the menace. For some time now, it has witnessed unbridled street crime, robberies, narcotic-related offences and police encounters. Street criminals prey on people freely — outside banks, in traffic jams and markets, even killing citizens when they resist muggings.

Recently, President Asif Ali Zardari instructed the Sindh chief minister to initiate extensive action against street outlaws in the metropolis, drug traffickers, and bandits in the riverine areas of upper Sindh and southern Punjab with the cooperation of other provinces. Some crime control measures by the police were reported to him, such as the Shaheen Force revival, an overhauled Madadgar-15, e-tagging of repeat offenders, and the Sindh Smart Surveillance System project for 40 toll plazas fortified with facial recognition cameras. In addition, a list of minor gains by the police department was put forth in figures.

Out of the 103 kidnappings, 47 went unreported and the force recovered 104 people, while 19 were still missing; street crime cases declined from 252.32 per day in January to 166.2 daily incidents in April; and of the 48 incidents that took 49 lives, 27 were identified, resulting in 43 arrests and 13 police encounters — the last often having controversial implications. But the president's intervention is shockingly delayed and the provincial government continues to treat a deep malaise with cosmetic touch-ups.

While the aforementioned actions rest on reacting to crime, comprehensive evaluation to identify causes, patterns and trouble spots define proactive policing. Thus, long-term socioeconomic and law-enforcement solutions necessitate multifaceted strategies: training, surveillance, problem-solving and collaborative attitudes among law enforcers.

Moreover, declaring war on the drug mafia often in cahoots with the police and political sanction in Karachi, Hyderabad, Thatta and Sujawal is overdue. Katcha belt banditry, on the other end, is due to the state's abandonment of an impoverished region and its unwillingness to plug feudal gains from arms smuggling, bhatta and other offences. Education, roads, employment and health facilities jeopardise powerful interests who force the poor to survive through illegal means.

Isolated firefighting is not a panacea. Safety and upliftment of urban, rural and katcha areas, a cleansed, bolstered security force and restored faith in the police is unachievable without political commitment and interprovincial support. Finally, rehabilitative methods, not violence, defeat crime.

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## Plugging the gap

IN Pakistan, bias begins at birth for the girl child as discriminatory norms, orthodox attitudes and poverty impede progress. However, Unicef Pakistan recently presented a National Gender Strategy (2024-2027) to generate a transformative shift for multitudes of girls between 10 to 19 years. It believes that effective implementation of the policy in rural and urban areas can tackle inequalities and improve female lives, including those defined by disability. A significant component of the plan is to engage leaders, clerics, boys and men so that existing narratives change and all women have agency. Unicef also highlights the lamentable fact that Pakistan has nearly 19m child brides, 54pc were pregnant before the age of 18, and 88pc of underage girls live in poverty. The UN's 2023 Gender Social Norms Index was not a cheerful read either. It stated that improvement in prejudices against women had been static for a decade. In this scenario, the UN agenda to attain gender equality by 2030 for all countries is a long shot.

There is no denying that several social mores propel gender inequality and deal a blow to women's freedoms. As more people are pushed below the poverty line in a moribund economy, indigence is set to widen the gender gap with reduced access to healthcare, education and profitable opportunities. In these circumstances, perhaps Unicef Pakistan's gender equitable programming ought

to start with areas where the honour of men depends on making women invisible, as in parts of Balochistan and KP. Females in hyper-conservative areas are entirely disenfranchised, trapped in the culture of bride price, the sale of girls for monetary gain or to resolve disputes, and the absence of reproductive rights and socioeconomic liberties. All this must change with schooling, healthcare and employment and cultivating empathy and awareness among men. Closing gender gaps matters because it promises social justice and prosperity. It is a long road but we cannot finish last.

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## Wheat investigation

THE Shehbaz Sharif government is in a sort of Catch-22 situation regarding the alleged wheat import scandal. It is conducting an official inquiry into the large and reckless wheat imports allowed by the caretaker administration of Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, but is reluctant to look too deep into the scandal in case it is compelled to take action against those who were ruling at the time. However, not everyone within the ruling PML-N agrees with this strategy of the government in Islamabad. A report in this paper last week suggested that PML-N supreme leader Nawaz Sharif wants the federal government to take action against everyone involved in the scandal, without regard for their 'political clout', and to refer the matter to NAB or the FIA for investigation to fix responsibility. The reason is obvious: the PML-N leader does not want the debris of the scandal to collapse on his party's government in Punjab, which is being targeted by farmers for failing to commence official grain purchases in spite of the commodity's plunging price in the market amid a record harvest.

With the farmers all set to launch a province-wise protest campaign against delays in wheat procurement and the commodity's plummeting prices on Friday, it is important for the prime minister to broaden the scope of the ongoing inquiry even if he does not wish to involve any anti-corruption agency. A thorough inquiry is vital because the reluctance to dig deeper into the issue is creating suspicions that the decision to allow heavy grain imports was driven by corrupt motives. Thus, it is crucial for the committee probing the issue to determine if the decision to allow imports was based on economic reasons or incompetence or some other

factor, and fix responsibility. If nothing else, the decision has caused an outflow of more than a billion dollars at a time when this cash-strapped country needs to save every single dollar. Indeed, it is not an easy place for the government that is trying to tread this road very carefully. But now that it has started the probe, it has no option but to finish the job in an impartial and transparent manner. If the caretakers have nothing to hide, the government should not be worried about upsetting anyone. Alternatively, it should be prepared to bear the political fallout of the scandal.

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## Impending slaughter

RAFAH, the last shelter for Gaza's hapless people, is about to face the wrath of the Israeli war machine. There had long been talk of Tel Aviv unleashing murderous force on the southern town on the Egyptian border after the devastation of the rest of Gaza. But now, as peace talks involving Hamas, the Israelis, and Arab interlocutors appear to be deadlocked, the Zionist state is set to unleash another round of butchery in order to 'finish' Hamas.

According to media reports, Israel has ordered civilians in eastern Rafah to evacuate, while Tel Aviv has apparently moved several brigades close to Rafah, which is crammed with around 1.5m people. Israel and the US have disingenuously blamed the Palestinians for the breakdown in truce talks, but it is clear that Tel Aviv was never negotiating in good faith. While Hamas wanted a long-term ceasefire, Israel insisted on a temporary truce to rescue its hostages held in Gaza, and refused to rule out the Rafah offensive. Though voices from around the world — including calls from the UN secretary-general and the EU leadership — have advised Israel not to attack Rafah, no one in Tel Aviv appears to be listening.

Meanwhile, the Muslim world's leadership has played its part by issuing a strongly worded statement following the OIC summit, held over the weekend, in Gambia. As per the Banjul Declaration, the OIC states have called upon "the countries of the world to take action to stop ... the genocide committed by the Israeli occupation" in Gaza. Yet the Muslim world's leaders have done little of

substance themselves — even symbolically — to punish Israel for its monstrous crime. Regardless of the economic clout and hydrocarbon riches of many OIC members, Muslim states have not even been able to enforce a trade and energy boycott of Israel and all those that provide it with arms and funds to slaughter the Palestinians.

On the other hand, states in faraway Latin America, including Bolivia and Colombia, have snapped ties with Tel Aviv over its murderous campaign. These states, as well as South Africa, have no religious or cultural ties with Palestine, yet have expressed exemplary solidarity with Gaza, while most Muslim states have limited themselves to issuing verbose statements calling for an end to the violence.

Seven months into the slaughter, there are no signs of hope. In fact, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has said the Rafah invasion would be the “final nail in the coffin” for humanitarian activities in Gaza. From the looks of it, Israel will not rest until the entire Middle East is in flames. If and when that dark omen comes to pass, the self-professed guardians of the ‘international rules-based order’ will have no one to blame but themselves and their Israeli allies.

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## Reserved seats

It is usually best not to presume, but given recent developments, one may tentatively hope that the judiciary has finally woken up to the controversies surrounding the general election. Following a series of widely criticised decisions from the Election Commission of Pakistan — each of which, it seems, distorted or subverted the public mandate — the judiciary has finally checked the electoral body for exercising arbitrary control over the democratic process.

A three-member bench of the Supreme Court admitted a petition this Monday against an ECP decision to give various political parties more reserved seats than they were lawfully entitled to, suspending the decision till further notice. The petition in question was moved by the Sunni Ittehad Council, which has been arguing that the ECP and Peshawar High Court’s denial of its right to a total of 78

reserved seats in various assemblies was unlawful and must, therefore, be reviewed by the apex court.

From the interim order issued by the Supreme Court, it appears that the judges who heard the petition were not inclined to agree with the government and the ECP's logic regarding why the 78 reserved seats denied to the SIC should be allotted to other parties. During proceedings, the court observed that this decision appeared to have distorted the public's mandate. Since there was no legal precedent or clear justification for the ECP's decision, it was agreed that the question would require a constitutional interpretation.

The matter has consequently been remanded to the apex committee of the Supreme Court for the formation of a larger bench. Till the case is decided, the interim order also, in effect, scuppered any government plans to start tinkering with the Constitution thanks to the two-thirds majority it had secured in the Lower House due to the ECP's decision. This may be for the best.

One of the other big questions at the moment is what is to be made of the Senate elections held recently, in which the lawmakers who currently occupy the challenged seats also voted. In case the Supreme Court strikes down the ECP's decision, would that mean that the Senate election could be challenged on related grounds? This could prove to be a major headache for the government, as it would further undermine its already questionable legitimacy. If such a situation comes to pass, those affected will only have the ECP to blame.

The truth is that the entire process — from polls, announcement of results, formation of assemblies and elections to the Senate — has been mishandled. The electoral watchdog has been so busy finding faults in and imposing penalties on one party that it has been unable to reflect on the many disasters it has wrought in the process. It should deal with the consequences itself.

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## **Saudi delegation**

PLANS to bring Saudi investment to Pakistan have clearly been put on the fast track. Over the past month, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has visited the

kingdom on two separate occasions, meeting the crown prince on both, while the Saudi foreign minister was in Islamabad in April, accompanied by other high officials. The latest in this series of top-level exchanges was a two-day investment conference held in the federal capital, which wrapped up on Tuesday. The Saudi side was represented by the assistant minister for investment, who brought with him a 50-member delegation representing 30 Saudi companies. Speaking at a reception on Monday for the Arab visitors, Mr Sharif said the time was near when bilateral business deals “worth billions of dollars” would be finalised. When he met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in early April, it had been reported that Riyadh was looking to invest \$5bn in Pakistan. During the just-concluded conference, the Saudi assistant minister said his country saw Pakistan as a “high-priority economic investment and business opportunity”.

While \$5bn of Saudi money will not turn around the Pakistani economy, such investments will send a signal to the world that this country is open for business. For too long, we have depended on foreign and multilateral loans and financial aid to keep the ship afloat, when courting foreign investment as well as ramping up exports is a far more sustainable model to uplift the economy. Saudi Arabia appears to be a natural choice to spearhead this campaign to attract foreign funds. Bilateral ties are old and deep, and have survived periods of turbulence. Pakistan has for decades exported labour to the kingdom, and benefited from the foreign exchange these workers send home. Moreover, the House of Sharif enjoys a close rapport with the House of Saud, a relationship which can be leveraged for the benefit of both states. But as has been written in these columns earlier, investment from Riyadh or any other foreign partner will benefit Pakistan most when there is internal political harmony, as well as transparency in policies. The Saudi crown prince is due in Pakistan soon — according to some reports, he may arrive in the next few days. The state should use the visit to cement the deals already discussed, so that work on the projects can begin in earnest.

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## **Narcotic darkness**

WE have plenty of smoke with fire. Citizens, particularly parents, caught in Pakistan’s grave drug problem are on edge. Despite frequent reports of police

and the ANF busting drug cartels, information about legal actions against peddlers is as scant as the conviction rate. The Organised Crime Unit of Lahore has captured an international ring that provided narcotics and 'party drugs' to elite youth. These criminals — the Jordan Gang — ran a network from Central Asia, Mexico, Canada, the US and other countries, and supplied exorbitantly priced drugs in Lahore and Multan, targeting select students in academic institutions. Their modus operandi — offer deals to youngsters on the internet through fake IDs and in partnership with corrupt GPO and police officials — should be a cause of concern for the authorities. This is not the first attempt at infecting the young: last August, two security officials at the Islamic University of Bahawalpur were caught with crystal meth and offensive videos of teachers and students. The Punjab Police released an alarming report last month: some 234 police officers were involved in the drug trade across Punjab.

Young people are experimental, anxious and restless, keen to dodge routine with a heady hit. Small wonder, then, that public health experts urge policymakers and law enforcement to understand that punishment-driven strategies are counterproductive. Instead, they must weed out rogue personnel and powerful groups who claim a lion's share of the profits from narcotic rackets, so that sealing supply routes, including those along a porous border, is successful. The crisis also demands awareness campaigns and collaboration among parents, NGOs and educational facilities to identify signs of addiction and provide therapy and rehabilitation. Long-term success hinges on restructured narcotic courts so that faster trials can ensure a rise in conviction levels — the latter should, ideally, match the regularity of narcotic seizures. This country cannot allow addiction to rip through society and ravage our future generations.

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## Visa fraud

THE FIA has a new task at hand: cracking down on fraudulent work visas. This was prompted by the discovery of a Pakistani human smuggling network in Romania, which arranged for migrants to enter the EU through such means. The smugglers not only facilitated illegal entry into the EU but also the migrants' further clandestine movement towards more affluent European nations, exploiting

their hopes for a better life. The criminal network requested 509 work permits, successfully acquiring 102, and generating illicit profits exceeding a million euros. The FIA is broadening its focus from traditional sea and land routes to include air routes through Central Asia. Smugglers now use these air pathways alongside the earlier routes from Quetta through Iran, Turkey, and Greece, charging exorbitant rates to transport individuals into Europe. The urgency to address this menace has never been clearer. The government recently organised a conference in Islamabad in collaboration with international bodies to discuss human smuggling. However, this initiative must be part of a broader, more comprehensive strategy to tackle the issue.

The socioeconomic drivers of migration — unemployment, poverty, and lack of security — must be addressed. Traditional pressures and the aspiration to uplift one's familial and social standing also contribute significantly to this risky endeavour. Treating these individuals as criminals rather than victims of exploitation only exacerbates their plight. It is vital to shift this perspective and see them as victims of broader systemic failures. The state's role should be protective and proactive, not merely punitive. Enhanced legal frameworks, increased support for economic development in migration-prone regions, and eradication of corruption in migration processes are crucial. Additionally, enhancing the capacity and integrity of the FIA and related institutions is essential to ensure that these measures are not just temporary fixes but part of a long-term solution. International collaboration should also be harnessed to improve border management and dismantle smuggling networks effectively.

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## **A fresh approach?**

SUCCESSIVE governments have tried to address the problems of Balochistan — particularly the province's precarious law and order situation — with very little success. On Tuesday, President Asif Zardari, during a visit to Quetta, made a fresh attempt to tackle the issues of this tortured land. The president, while presiding over a meeting with top federal and provincial officials, reiterated the need for 'dialogue' between all political forces in Balochistan, while also calling for efforts to address its socioeconomic and law and order issues. A similar

attempt was made by Mr Zardari and his party the last time he was in the presidency through the 2009 Aghaz-i-Haqooq-i-Balochistan package which was, at least on paper, a thorough plan designed to deal with many of the issues that have contributed to alienation in Balochistan. But today, nearly 15 years after the package was announced, separatist violence continues in Balochistan, as the underlying discontent has not been addressed. Other elected governments thereafter also announced various packages and schemes for the province, yet Balochistan's problems remain unresolved.

Unless the key factors that fuel violence and alienation in Balochistan are addressed, this vicious trend will continue. The president is right to suggest dialogue as a way out of the quagmire. But this dialogue must be meaningful, and powerful quarters within the state apparatus need to be on board for it to succeed. On the political front, instead of patronising 'influentials' and those seen to be loyal to the official narrative, popular leaders should be given the space and freedom to operate. The detestable practice of enforced disappearances must be ended permanently, and those suspected of breaking the law produced in court so that their fundamental rights are protected. Where socioeconomic issues are concerned, locals have the first right to the province's resources, as well as to jobs and training. Moreover, the province's dismal health and education indicators need to be vastly improved. This would require the state's attention and investment in the social sector. Unfortunately, for decades, the centre has applied colonial methods to 'tame' Balochistan. These have included carrots — such as 'packages' for the province and support for sardars and feudals loyal to the powers that be — as well as sticks — such as frequent security operations. To permanently end the insurgency and bring peace to Balochistan, a democratic approach is required.

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## May 9 fallout

A YEAR since the events of May 9, 2023, very little appears to have changed, at least from the political perspective.

In fact, there seems to be even more bad blood between the PTI and the security establishment; both sides appear unwilling to reconsider the combative stance they have taken towards each other.

In a press conference on Tuesday, the military's spokesperson made it clear there would be no moving forward without a sincere apology from the PTI and a public disavowal of "the politics of anarchy and hate". In response, the PTI denounced the statement as a "pack of lies" that was "full of contradictions".

It cannot be denied that the violence directed at military symbols and installations in several parts of the country on this day last year, was a direct consequence of the narrative built by the PTI following its ouster.

The party had spent months framing the possibility of its chief's arrest as a 'red line', all the while blaming and shaming the security establishment for its ouster from government in April 2022. This combustible mix, triggered by the controversial arrest of Imran Khan by Rangers personnel from the premises of the Islamabad High Court, exploded in the form of unprecedented, widespread violence by PTI supporters.

The PTI should acknowledge that it acted in an extremely irresponsible manner by leading its supporters towards such an unacceptable reaction. Thousands were targeted in reprisals by the state, and the events of the day accelerated the expansion of unelected forces' influence in the state's legislative and administrative apparatus.

However, the state, too, is not without blame. Rather than acting with restraint and demonstrating that it was only interested in getting justice for the wrong that it had been caused, it responded with extreme measures that seemed to have been taken from the playbooks of past dictatorships.

For example, in seeking 'justice' for PTI supporters' defacement of various installations, the homes of countless civilian suspects were raided and vandalised and their residents allegedly harassed by personnel representing the state. Even women prisoners, who otherwise enjoy special protections and concessions under Pakistan's legal system, were repeatedly denied their right to bail and kept incarcerated without trial in scores of dubious cases.

The PTI-military stand-off has been the root cause of Pakistan's political instability. Since neither side seems interested in a resolution, perhaps the government should step in. It can offer its best resources to prosecute the May 9 cases in civilian courts, thereby ensuring a transparent judicial process.

Done fairly, this will prevent the two sides from engaging directly with each other, which only seems to be perpetuating the tensions between them. It is important that this chapter be closed satisfactorily so that the nation can move forward.

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## Save the witness

THE old affliction of failed enforcement has rendered another law lifeless. Enacted over a decade ago, the Sindh Witness Protection Act, 2013, was a crucial and comprehensive measure to provide foolproof security to witnesses in criminal cases, including accommodation for them, lifetime security, monetary support and compensation for heirs in the event of the shielded person's death. The Sindh High Court was informed on Wednesday that, for eight long years, stakeholders had not responded to the draft of the Sindh Witness Protection Rules, but the law department insisted that the drafted rules had been verified in September 2014. The state's inability to keep witnesses safe even when it is cognisant of threats to their life, family and property has led to abysmal conviction rates, allowing the culpable to walk free. A report released in 2020 revealed that the absence of a witness protection programme impacted at least 1,700 cases at 33 anti-terrorism courts.

There is no dearth of instances where witnesses in prominent criminal and terror cases have been eliminated, or magistrates have dropped murder charges because people stayed out of witness stands. Callous attitudes have to change; rather than tilting towards offenders, the system must facilitate safe depositions against the accused by permitting testimonies to take place via video links. Such a provision allays fears about an individual's protection in court when powerful actors are involved. Indeed, the present scale of militancy and crime does not allow for more primary eyewitnesses to turn hostile. A crumbling criminal justice

system cannot be rescued without foolproof investigations, improved, sensitised policing and a robust witness protection mechanism. With witness protection laws in all provinces, Pakistan can ill afford complacency. Hence, in camera trials, identity protection, economic benefits and decent, discreet and heavily guarded safe havens need to be seen as preconditions to peace. While these aspects pose financial and procedural challenges, they do promise a leap forward.

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## Gwadar outrage

JUST two days after the president, while on a visit to Balochistan, discussed the need for a political dialogue to address the province's problems, terrorists struck in Surbandar, on the outskirts of Gwadar, murdering seven innocent men as they slept. All the victims, who worked at a local barbershop, hailed from Punjab. This is the third incident of its kind in the province over the last few months. Nine passengers were pulled off a bus in Noshki by militants last month and after their papers were checked, the men were later found murdered under a bridge. Meanwhile, six labourers were killed as they slept last October in Turbat. In all these incidents, the victims were originally from Punjab. No cause can justify these ghastly crimes. The political leadership, from the prime minister down, has condemned these barbaric murders, and has vowed to secure justice for the slain men.

The apparent aim of these reprehensible acts is to foment ethnic unrest by targeting individuals of a certain ethnicity or regional background. While locals in Balochistan should be given preference in jobs, there can be absolutely no justification for targeting workers from outside the province trying to make an honest living there. Most of the victims are driven by poverty to leave their homes and families behind just to ensure their loved ones have food on the table. Moreover, citizens of all federating units have the right to live and work anywhere in Pakistan, so targeting people by terming them 'settlers' and 'outsiders' is totally unacceptable. It is a matter of concern that terrorists have struck at a time when the state has raised the need for a political dialogue in Balochistan. The involvement of hostile foreign actors cannot be ruled out either, especially given

the fact that the Chinese are active in Balochistan, while Gulf investors are also considering putting money into schemes in the province. If prosperity comes to Balochistan, and locals are given employment opportunities through foreign investment, the narrative of the separatists will be seriously punctured. Therefore, the grotesque acts of violence could be designed to scare away foreign investors. The state needs to provide security to all Balochistan's people, while those involved in these gruesome crimes must be brought to justice. Sustainable socioeconomic development cannot take place in Balochistan in the presence of terrorist threats.

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## **Enrolment drive**

IN a promising albeit familiar declaration, the prime minister has announced a four-year "education emergency" to eradicate the blight of illiteracy and bring millions of out-of-school children into the classroom fold. While many governments have come and gone and such emergencies have been declared, obstacles to access, quality and equity in education persist, underscoring the need for a renewed commitment. The PM's stated resolve to personally oversee this initiative and to collaborate across provincial and political lines enhances hope but also raises the stakes for tangible outcomes.

Pakistan's education crisis is both deep-rooted and widespread. The statistics are sobering: the country grapples with a literacy rate of only 62pc and educational spending at a mere 1.7pc of its GDP. There are an estimated 26m children out of school and 70pc of 10-year-olds are unable to comprehend basic texts. Add to this the fact that a significant proportion of schools lack basic facilities such as potable water and toilets.

The disparity in educational access between urban and rural areas, and between boys and girls, further complicates matters. The authorities must prepare a solid plan of action if they truly aim to tackle this beast. First, increasing the allocation of GDP to education by the provinces and the centre is non-negotiable. This increase must be used judiciously to improve school infrastructure and ensure all children have access to basic educational facilities. Furthermore, teacher

recruitment, training, and retention strategies must be overhauled to address the gap of 200,000 vacant teaching positions nationwide, as highlighted by Malala Yousafzai.

Additionally, the authorities should implement targeted interventions to bring out-of-school children, especially girls, into the educational system. Initiatives like the school meal programmes, as suggested by the World Food Programme, can be effective in increasing school attendance, while addressing nutritional deficiencies that affect learning.

The curriculum needs to be revamped to focus on foundational literacy and numeracy. Integrating technology can help bridge the gap between different regions and provide remote learning opportunities. Moreover, collaborative efforts with international partners and NGOs should be harnessed to bring best practices and funding to the fore. International organisations are poised to support, but they require a dispensation that is transparent and committed in its approach.

Lastly, the commitment to establish the 'Pakistan Skill Company' and the 'Pakistan Skill Development Fund' is a step in the right direction. It acknowledges the broader spectrum of education beyond primary schooling, which is crucial for economic independence and growth.

With a strategic, well-funded, and inclusive approach, it is possible to transform the educational landscape of Pakistan. It is hoped that the education authorities deliver an actionable plan that will stand the test of time and political change. For once, let this not be a missed opportunity.

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## Taxing pensions

DESPITE the state of the economy, the IMF's demand that the cash-strapped Shehbaz Sharif administration start taxing civil and military pensions exceeding Rs1.2m a year, as well as revoke income tax exemptions for various pension schemes and funds in the next budget, appears unfair.

It is true that the pension tax and withdrawal of existing income tax exemptions for pension funds and schemes is projected to generate additional tax revenues in the range of Rs22bn to Rs25bn per annum, but the move will add to the financial burdens of a class of citizens with few other sources of income. Besides, withdrawing the tax rebate incentive from pension funds will discourage people from saving for their retirement.

The proposal is reported to be part of the recommendations that the Fund has already put forth for the government to recover additional tax revenues of Rs600bn. It is premised on the principle of a fair tax policy: all incomes must be taxed regardless of source.

Unfortunately, Pakistan's taxation structure is inequitable and unfair. If the government has no option but to tax pensions, then it has to ensure that the fair tax principle is implemented across the board and that 'special exemptions' being enjoyed by judges, military personnel and others are stopped. Moreover, the tax must be applied progressively. The suggested threshold of Rs1.2m for taxable pension incomes would create a distortion in the existing income tax scheme, where all personal incomes above Rs600,000 per annum are liable to pay income tax. This anomaly can be removed by doubling the threshold of taxable income for all individuals to bring it at par with the one proposed for pensioners. That would mitigate the burden on the inflation-stricken classes.

Tax reforms must go beyond milking the salaried classes and pensioners, who are easy FBR targets. In spite of multiple tax reform programmes implemented over the last three decades with financial assistance from multilateral lenders, the authorities have failed to achieve their objectives, including raising the tax-to-GDP ratio and bringing it closer to the level of lower-middle-income countries at 15pc to 20pc. The previous 39-month IMF programme had also envisaged boosting tax revenues by 4-5pc of GDP by reforming personal and corporate income taxes.

Yet Pakistan's tax collection as a ratio of GDP remains below 10pc. Tax reforms have failed to deliver because of distortions created by the FBR bureaucracy through SROs, apparently for personal gains. With the size of tax expenditure at Rs2.5tr at the end of FY23, it is clear that some people are being forced to pay

more tax than what they should be in an equitable tax system, while favoured circles enjoy exemptions.

Unless these distortions are removed by implementing fair taxation measures, it will be difficult to increase the tax-to-GDP ratio. Last but not least, the power to levy a tax or allow exemptions should be restored to parliament by eliminating the SRO culture in FBR.

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## Orwellian slide

IN recent years, Pakistan has made several attempts at introducing an overarching mechanism through which to check the strident criticism of the state, its institutions, and their policies, on social media. However, the authorities have repeatedly had to fall back on various extra-legal means to keep the ‘problem’ in check, largely because legislative measures have proven insufficient and because major platform operators remain unwilling to engage with our authorities’ concerns and refuse to entertain their requests for more access to platform users’ information. Meanwhile, social media users seem to have grown increasingly emboldened while directing their opprobrium at the state, protected by the anonymity offered by most platforms. Lately, they have been directing unprecedented vitriol at institutions that were once considered untouchable. Understandably, this has been quite upsetting for those in charge, who seem to be panicking at their inability to control social media as easily as they can the mainstream media operating in the country.

This seems to be the long and short of why the government has introduced two new authorities in recent days: the National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency, to replace the FIA’s Cybercrimes Wing, and the Digital Rights Protection Authority, which is awaiting the cabinet’s assent. The DRPA, whose name seems to follow the nomenclature for government ministries in George Orwell’s 1984, will, by one account, “create a secure and trustworthy digital environment while promoting user protection online and safeguarding fundamental rights”. However, those on the ground believe that this state-defined reasoning for DRPA’s creation is little more than a fig leaf. They say that the authorities have long wanted a

watchdog that can freely hound critics who get too bold online; they refer to the around two dozen cases registered against journalists since the Peca laws came into effect to justify their apprehensions. To be fair, the context in which these changes are being introduced and the speed at which things seem to be moving do not really allow for a more charitable interpretation of the government's intentions. Just a day after the DRPA received the prime minister's approval, the military authorities issued stern words on what was described as "digital terrorism" unleashed by "inimical forces" trying to lure citizens away from the nation's armed forces. Sounds like an ill omen for the freedoms Pakistani citizens have grown used to in the digital age.

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## Terror against girls

ONCE again, the ogre of terrorism is seeking the sacrifice of schoolgirls. On Wednesday, just days after the announcement of a four-year education emergency in the country by the prime minister, unidentified militants blew up a private girls' school in Shewa tehsil of North Waziristan district; the school administration had received multiple threats prior to the attack. Last May, two government girls' schools in Mir Ali were obliterated in a midnight assault. In 2018, the year the KP-Fata merger was signed into law, bomb explosions razed two schools for girls and pamphlets warning residents against sending older girls to schools in various tribal areas were widely circulated. Before Operation Zarb-i-Azb began in 2014 in what was then the North Waziristan Agency, educational institutions in KP and former Fata suffered frequent bomb attacks by militants. According to a report, about 1,500 schools stood decimated over a span of a decade, with enrolment, in many places, virtually grinding to a halt. The message is clear. And as the past is not another country, it cannot go unheeded.

It is obvious that targeting avenues for female empowerment is rooted in the regressive propensities of militant groups, especially the TTP, whose latest action is not only a reflection of its own past but also mirrors the hard-line approach taken by the Afghan Taliban, who have clamped down on girls' education in their country. Hence, it is incumbent upon the Pakistani state to intensify pressure on Afghanistan's rulers to abandon their anti-women policies

and immobilise their ideological brothers. It is a concern that should worry all countries in the region. The tribal belt, ravaged by terrorism, poverty and fear, is crying out for the implementation of an upgraded, comprehensive security policy, including training and resources for counterterrorism units so that effective kinetic responses can dismantle terror networks. However, our security apparatus must understand that the battle against a mindset is harder.

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## Hope after defeat

ON Saturday, having fallen behind Japan in the first quarter of the Sultan Azlan Shah Cup final, Pakistan showed powers of recovery to take the lead. But Japan levelled matters and then Pakistan could not hold their nerve in the penalty shootout, losing 4-1 after the match had ended 2-2 in regulation time. Head coach Roelant Oltmans had said on the eve of the match that it would be a good experience for his youthful side if the final went to a shootout. The hope is that these young men, who have rekindled hopes of hockey's revival in Pakistan, will learn from this and return stronger. Pakistan had reached the final of the Azlan Shah Cup for the first time in 13 years after being unbeaten in the round-robin stage. On their way, Pakistan held New Zealand to a draw. Overall, the team's performance can be a starting point to build upon.

Ahead of the final, Oltmans had spoken about the potential of this current lot, whilst also slamming critics in a pointed message to the country's former Olympians, who have been resentful of a foreign coach being at the helm of the national team. The Dutchman has shown he deserves a longer, more consistent run, instead of being called up tournament after tournament. For that, matters pertaining to the running of the Pakistan Hockey Federation must be settled. The PHF had split into two factions ahead of the Azlan Shah Cup. The government's intervention resolved the dispute at least until the end of the tournament but a final decision is yet to be reached. Pakistan have failed to qualify for the last three Olympics and that woeful run will continue if matters are not resolved. Oltmans and his charges have provided hope, and with the better running of PHF, there is an opportunity for Pakistan to return to its former standing in world hockey. It should not be missed.

# A moral victory

AS the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly voted on Friday in favour of granting Palestine greater rights at the multilateral body, and eventually paving the way for Palestine's admission to the UN, thousands of miles away, in the killing fields of Gaza, the people of Palestine continued to face the brutality of the Israeli war machine. Only nine states voted against granting Palestine greater rights, amongst them the US. America's ambassador to the UN said the vote against the resolution should "not reflect its opposition to Palestinian statehood". This is doublespeak at its finest. Israel's other staunch Western allies Germany and the UK abstained, while France voted in favour of the resolution along with 142 other members of the UN. The message from the global majority is clear: Palestine must join the comity of nations and take its rightful place at the UN. However, the Security Council's recommendation is essential for full UN membership. Here, the US can be expected to torpedo the move, as it has in the past.

However, while Palestine may have scored a moral victory in the hallowed halls of the UN, in the hellscape that Gaza has been turned into, its people have no protection from Israel's campaign of genocidal violence. Despite global calls for Tel Aviv to refrain from attacking Rafah, Israel has refused to listen, and hostilities continue in Gaza's southernmost area. Even a feeble warning from the US to cut off weapons bound for Tel Aviv has failed to dampen Israel's lust for Palestinian blood. Despatches from those in Gaza are heart-breaking. A Unicef official reports witnessing a mass exodus, with "people ... exhausted, terrified". He particularly points to the challenges faced by pregnant women and children, many of whom have lost limbs and suffered "horrific burns". Moreover, famine has spread in Gaza, while Israel has blocked all aid for the last few days. In fact, along with Tel Aviv's military machine, many civilians in the Zionist state have displayed blood-curdling cruelty towards the Palestinians, with protesters blocking aid shipments to Gaza. Many Israelis, as a society, want to treat Palestinians as untermensch, not worthy of human dignity, just as their forefathers were treated by Nazi Germany. And thanks to Israel's powerful foreign patrons, they are succeeding, as Gaza's hungry, bloodied and terrorised people cry out for an end to the nightmare.

# A turbulent 2023

PAKISTAN faced a tumultuous year in 2023 marked by severe economic distress and a sharp erosion of civil liberties. As documented in the HRCP's annual report, the year was nothing short of a human rights crisis on multiple fronts.

Economic hardship was pervasive, with back-breaking inflation — nearly 40pc — and low growth hitting the common citizen the hardest. Protests were widespread, ranging from government employees striking against delayed salaries and pension issues to political demonstrations demanding timely elections. The state responded with indifference and sometimes outright violence, underlining its disregard for the people's constitutional rights.

The political arena was no less strained: the year saw unprecedented violence following the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan; subsequent PTI-led riots were met with harsh government crackdowns. This included mass arrests and the controversial use of military courts for civilian trials. Political dissent was stifled and freedom of speech curtailed with internet shutdowns and media gags on reporting of certain political leaders.

Sadly, the government's management of the turmoil involved significant overreach, impacting judicial independence and skewing the electoral landscape. The swift passage of laws granting sweeping powers to intelligence agencies and restricting media freedoms points to the government's alarming propensity to consolidate power at the cost of transparency and accountability.

Human rights violations were not limited to political suppression. The report highlights severe abuses such as enforced disappearances, alleged extrajudicial killings and custodial torture by state agencies. The societal impact of these policies and actions has been devastating. Moreover, marginalised communities, including women, children, religious minorities, and transgender persons, faced increased violence and discrimination.

Notable too was the harsh crackdown on peaceful assemblies like the Baloch Yakjehti Council's protests. On the international front, despite engaging with global human rights mechanisms, Pakistan's selective adherence to

recommendations concerning enforced disappearances and the use of the death penalty reflected a reluctance to fully align with international human rights standards.

Rulers would do well to remember that adhering to those standards will help maintain Pakistan's desperately needed GSP-Plus status and be a more inviting place for foreign investment.

As the year proceeds, it is imperative for the state to reconsider its approach to human rights. The government must ensure the independence of the judiciary, respect for democratic processes, and protection for all citizens against the abuse of power. Laws that infringe on freedom of expression and assembly should be reviewed and reformed.

Additionally, there should be a concerted effort to address the economic inequalities that underpin much of the social unrest. For a stable and prosperous Pakistan, human rights must be more than an ideal; they must be an integral part of governance and everyday life.

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## Climate authority

WITH the authorities dragging their feet for seven years on the establishment of a Climate Change Authority and Climate Change Fund, as envisioned in the Pakistan Climate Change Act of 2017, the Supreme Court has finally put its foot down. On Friday, a three-member bench hearing a related petition asked the federal government to establish the CCA within a fortnight and thereafter operationalise the CCF, reasoning that climate change is an issue that affects all Pakistanis' fundamental rights and, therefore, measures to mitigate its harmful impacts should not be put off any longer. During the proceedings, which saw deliberations on Pakistan's unique vulnerability to the changing climate, the attorney general described it as "the most serious existential threat to the people of Pakistan".

With the memory of the devastating monsoon of 2022 still fresh in everyone's minds and freak weather wreaking havoc in many parts of the country of late, it is understandable why the Supreme Court has attached such urgency to the matter. However, experts have previously pointed out that the establishment of the CCA and operationalisation of the CCF are not such straightforward matters that they can be resolved with a simple order. For example, there are various complexities involved in setting up the authority, as its mandate will likely overlap with subjects in the provinces' domains, and with the work of the Ministry of Climate Change. Little work has been done since the passage of the Climate Change Act to identify the possible sources of friction and eliminate or work around them. Likewise, Pakistan's indigenous climate fund will require engagement with a broad range of domestic and international stakeholders, and its modalities will need to be worked out in detail so as to avoid any conflicts that could arise. These are not issues that the judiciary can resolve. Therefore, while it has provided a much-needed push to the government to get to work, the court will need to be patient. On the other hand, the government, too, needs to demonstrate its commitment. After many years of complacency, a healthy momentum has finally built up in national-level efforts to address climate change. It is time for that momentum to be used to implement the Act in line with its vision. The costs of complacency can be extremely high for a climate-vulnerable country like ours.

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## Spending restrictions

THE consistent contraction in the size of the federal Public Sector Development Programme for the past three years is yet another sign of Pakistan's lingering financial and economic crisis.

New official data shows that the government has squeezed federal infrastructure development to Rs353bn — less than 0.4pc of GDP — during the first 10 months of the ongoing fiscal year to April, as the cash-strapped centre slashes its expenditure to meet the IMF goal of producing a primary budget surplus of 0.4pc of GDP this year.

The total spending for the period under review is 38pc of annual PSDP allocations of Rs940bn, and is 12.3pc less than what was spent on development projects during the same period a year before. That the government does not have enough money for new projects, or even for maintaining existing ones, underlines the costs Pakistan's citizens are forced to pay to survive the country's worst economic crisis ever. The lingering financial troubles also mean that most of the millions of people affected by the devastating floods of 2022 are still waiting to be rehabilitated.

A media report suggests that the IMF wants Pakistan to bring down expenditure by around 163bn to Rs183bn — to make up for a significant revenue shortfall — as the Fund is not willing to make concessions on the goal of achieving a primary budget surplus this year.

The government has hardly any choice in the matter, unless it is prepared to breach the IMF conditions for a primary surplus — which is an indication of a government's borrowing requirements — that was agreed to under the recently concluded short-term \$3bn Stand-by Arrangement. This would jeopardise its chances of getting a longer and larger bailout to stay afloat.

Another report suggests that, with the discussions on the new bailout approaching, Pakistan has committed to the IMF that it would aim for a primary surplus equal to 1pc of GDP in the next fiscal year. The Fund is already believed to have told the government to raise additional revenues of Rs1.7tr, contain its development expenditure, and increase the petroleum levy target by more than 24pc to about Rs1.1tr next year. The country has achieved a sort of economic stability in recent months and economic fundamentals have shown some signs of improvement.

But this 'recovery' remains fragile and any shock at this point can mean a relapse. The IMF, therefore, has been insisting that Islamabad persevere with economic contraction as long as the fiscal and governance reforms suggested under the SBA — and which are likely to be part of the next programme — create enough fiscal space to put the country back on the growth trajectory. In this context, it would be naive to expect the government to bolster investment in public infrastructure development anytime soon.

# Vending organs

IN these cash-strapped times, black marketers in the organ trade are returning to rake it in by harvesting the organs of the desperate. Sadly, recent reports of raids show that the racket is once again on the rise. The Punjab Healthcare Commission, FIA and the Punjab Human Organ Transplant Authority recently arrested three suspects for illegal renal transplants at a private hospital in Lahore, but some of the staff as well as the owner escaped. While officials speculate about the involvement of a large network in the kidney transplant scam, hospital employees confessed to 10 unlawful transplants at the facility. Two raids in March had also unearthed interests of criminal gangs. In one incident, the police busted an organ trade ring, which took poor labourers to Islamabad and removed their kidneys. Another six accused were taken into custody during a separate operation; they were performing an illegal kidney transplant of a female patient at a private medical facility in Lahore.

Pakistan had been the epicentre of organ sales — illicit domestic transplants and transplant tourism — until legislation in 2010 proscribed the practice. But the criminal justice system has, time and again, failed to take stringent action against organised organ trade and corrupt medical practitioners. The courts too should be clear about putting offenders out of business. Without sustained caution and application of the law, the country will relapse into savagery, becoming a global market for organs. Moreover, law enforcement should be brought up to speed on modern protocols to keep one step ahead of vile racketeers. The last thing our fragile economy needs is an organ racket revival. Hence, political parties, NGOs, health authorities and the police have to foster awareness and vigilance to prosecute unethical doctors, traffickers and brokers so that the menace is exterminated. As despicable edifices of exploitation are torn down, advocacy for deceased organ donations and lawful transplantations has to grow louder.

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# Guns and guards

THERE are some flawed aspects to our society that we must start to fix at the grassroots level. One of these is the psychological impulse ingrained in certain

segments to make themselves known in public through vulgar displays of force. Recently, local police arrested five private security guards from Karachi's Defence Housing Authority for violating a ban on the public display of arms. These men, dressed in civilian clothes, were carrying three rifles, one Kalashnikov and one pistol between them, which were seized during the arrest. A case was subsequently registered against them. This development may seem inconsequential in the larger scheme of things, but it should be appreciated. The sight of heavily armed men, often in civvies, zooming around in pickup trucks and pushing ordinary citizens out of the way to make space for the rich and powerful has unfortunately become quite common in our cities. It is a shameful practice that has no space in the civilised world.

While some citizens and their families understandably face greater risks than others owing to their work or personal background, acquiring a posse of intimidating-looking private guards has also become a status symbol for the nouveau-riche. This has to be strongly discouraged, and Karachi's DHA is right in attempting to disincentivise it by banning public displays of arms within its jurisdiction. It is unseemly for private guards openly wielding weapons to be lounging outside restaurants, shopping malls and educational institutes, where their presence can cause various inconveniences and also make people feel unsafe, especially as there have been many incidents involving private security acting irresponsibly with their weapons, thereby jeopardising the lives of others. The provincial governments also have an important role to play in this regard. They must strengthen the police and focus on eradicating violent elements from society so that everyone can feel safe without being surrounded by guns.

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## **AJK protests**

SINCE last week, Azad Jammu & Kashmir has been roiled by protests, fuelled principally by a disconnect between locals and their administration, as well as the government of Pakistan. Strikes and marches have been held in different parts of the territory, led by the Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee, with the situation turning ugly on Saturday when a police officer lost his life during the protests. On Monday, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif attempted to quell the

discontent by announcing the transfer of Rs23bn to AJK on Monday, along with meeting many of the protesters' demands, such as increasing the wheat flour subsidy and revising power rates. AJK's people had taken to the streets mainly due to inflation, as well as wheat flour and power rate issues. Moreover, many protesters feel that the AJK government is oversized, and that the small territory does not require an army of ministers and bureaucrats to run its affairs. They are of the view that very few funds are left for development after costs of running the AJK government are subtracted. Meanwhile, there is also criticism of local lawmakers, many of whom, observers say, rarely visit their constituencies after being elected. It remains to be seen whether the government's steps satisfy the people in the long term.

At the heart of the protests appears to be lack of service delivery on the part of the AJK administration, as well as Islamabad's apparent indifference to the local people's complaints. The centre and the government in Muzaffarabad should have addressed these long-festering issues before the people's anger led them to the streets. Sadly, it is the norm across the country to address issues only when they have ballooned into a full-blown crisis. In Gilgit-Baltistan, only a few months ago, the local population had staged protests along similar lines. The AJK prime minister said the changes made on Monday regarding wheat flour and power rates are "permanent" arrangements. Similarly, the AJK administration should trim its expenditures and focus only on essentials, while allocating enough funds for the people's welfare. Lawmakers and ministers also need to make themselves available to constituents to resolve outstanding problems. Good governance demands that the administrations in both Islamabad and Muzaffarabad keep an ear to the ground and address AJK's legitimate issues in a democratic manner.

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## Privatisation divide

WITH Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar having clawed his way back to the centre of economic policymaking, a tussle between two competing viewpoints — one represented by him, the other by Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb — was inevitable.

Mr Aurangzeb believes that Pakistan's economy can no longer bear the burden of state-owned enterprises, which need to be privatised as early as possible. On the other hand, Mr Dar, who is foreign minister and a confidant of Nawaz Sharif, fears that all-out privatisation could deplete his party's already dwindling political capital. Hobbled by high inflation, recent blunders in wheat procurement and rising energy costs, the party can ill-afford any agitation against privatisation.

Hence, no matter what the finance minister says, the two are not on the same page as evident in his outright rejection of Mr Dar's concept of "strategic and essential SOEs". "There is no such thing as strategic SOEs," Mr Aurangzeb told a pre-budget conference. All SOEs, regardless of their categorisation, he asserted, would be handed over to the private sector. His stance on the 'strategic' SOEs is the opposite of what Mr Dar, who was previously finance minister and heads the important Cabinet Committee on Privatisation, had stated recently. Removing seven profitable public companies at the disposal of the Pakistan Sovereign Wealth Fund from the privatisation list, Mr Dar reportedly said that the government would restrict its concerns to "strategic and essential SOEs", whose number — 40 — would be decreased after scrutiny.

The final decision on which the entities are to be categorised as strategic or essential is to be made by the Cabinet Committee on SOEs headed by Mr Aurangzeb. It might not be easy for him to have his way on their privatisation, despite support from the powerful circles that signed him up for implementing taxation, energy, and SOE reforms along with privatisation under the IMF's tutelage. Mr Dar's economic ideas are acceptable neither to the IMF nor to these circles. Under these circumstances, his transfer to the foreign ministry and later his elevation as deputy prime minister were perceived as major concessions from PM Shehbaz Sharif, although under pressure from Nawaz Sharif.

Put simply, the differences between Mr Aurangzeb and Mr Dar reflect the tensions within the ruling party as well as the compulsions of an economy that cannot pick up momentum until it has undergone drastic and politically unpopular changes. The disagreement between the current and former finance minister on privatisation has emerged at a time when the government is all set to start talks for another IMF bailout facility in order to revive the economy. How this disagreement within the government will sit with the lender, which is already wary

of the risks attached to the execution of the economic stabilisation policies, is anybody's guess.

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## Plague of rape

FLAWED narratives about women — from being weak and vulnerable to provocative and culpable — have led to escalating sexual violence against them. Two disturbing cases were reported recently: a woman committed suicide five days after she was gang raped in Sheikhpura, while five men brutalised a girl from Jhang in Lahore. The former was abducted from a Lahore hospital where she was visiting a relative and raped by three security guards; the latter was lured by a job offer, taken to Sattokatla and violated. A series of incidents highlight the need for concern and action: last month, two men were booked and one arrested for gang raping two girls trapped through online jobs. In 2023, Lahore logged some eight rape cases against suspects who ensnared victims with prospects of employment. Sadly, while no province is free of gender-based violence, the numbers cited for Punjab have been particularly distressing.

Despite legislation to thwart the scourge of rape, over 80pc of suspected sex offenders in the country are acquitted because of deficient investigation, weak prosecution, out-of-court settlements and pending cases in the lower courts. Moreover, apathy and corruption in the police force creates repeat offenders. Often, members of law enforcement themselves indulge in victim blaming. It is no wonder then that in 2022, the gender equality index showed a 'rape epidemic' — a rape every two minutes — owing to a pathetic 3pc conviction rate. The state must step forward to uphold the ideals of justice; it must censure misogynistic mindsets, support victims and enforce the law. Women have to be made aware of defensive measures, and advised on how to ensure personal safety. However, little will change for women in Pakistan unless legal and procedural anomalies and societal prejudices are addressed. Perverse proclivities drive rapists — criminals who commit an offence of dominance and vengeance. There should be no space for either out-of-court settlements, payments to poor victims and families, or victim blaming.

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# Secretive state

THERE is a fresh push by the state to stamp out all criticism by using the alibi of protecting national interests. Monday's post on X by Defence Minister Khawaja Asif only strengthens this impression, though the irony of a government representative using a platform blocked by his own administration to convey the message is quite bizarre. Mr Asif said that those who leak official secret documents could be tried under the Official Secrets Act, while those who share such information could go to jail or be fined. He specifically mentioned that material on social media, which could harm Pakistan's "strategic and economic interests" or hurt its ties with "friendly and brotherly countries", would not be tolerated. Other high officials have of late also criticised 'harmful' matter on social media. The Punjab government, meanwhile, is reportedly considering a defamation law to counter 'false' news.

The aforementioned efforts are indicative of a state apparatus, which is used to controlling the flow of information and narrative, unable to cope with the flood of information and opinions — some of it indeed inauthentic — unleashed by social media. The defence minister's threat to haul up those exposing state secrets appears to be an overreaction. Genuine matters involving national security — especially material that may put lives and identities of state operatives in danger — can and should be withheld or redacted. But imposing a blanket ban on releasing all information the state is privy to smacks of censorship. This would effectively be a death sentence for what remains of investigative journalism in Pakistan, while whistle-blowers seeking to expose corruption within the corridors of power will be silenced. The minister's mention of 'strategic and economic' interests is also overly broad. For example, will columns, tweets and posts quoting official sources discussing privatisation or other key economic matters be deemed liable to 'punishment' under the new information regime? Instead of bulldozing such laws, the administration needs to consult stakeholders and civil society to ensure that the right to freedom of information, and the right of the state to hold back genuinely sensitive details, are balanced. Checks need to be in place, while the government must jettison opacity by making citizens' right to access information more transparent. Enforcing blanket bans will only add to disinformation, as conspiracy theories and half-truths will be promoted in the absence of facts.

# Reserved seats

AFTER the Supreme Court took exception to its decision to hand over reserved seats claimed by the Sunni Ittehad Council-PTI alliance to its rival parties, the ECP has suspended the notifications of 77 lawmakers belonging to the different assemblies. Following the development, any plans that the ruling coalition had about tinkering with the Constitution without seeking the opposition's buy-in lie dead in the water — at least for the time being.

Also in question is the fate of the senators who were voted in in the most recent round of elections to the Upper House. The 77 lawmakers who have been suspended from office had participated in the senatorial election, thereby colouring its results. Given what is at stake and the consequences for Pakistani democracy, it is hoped that the apex court will not dally on the matter.

Since it has taken up the case as one which requires constitutional interpretation, a bench comprising at least five judges has to decide how the Constitution intended for reserved seats should be divided. The court must announce a bench at the earliest so that the functioning of parliament is not affected for any longer than is absolutely necessary. It is a shame that more than three months after the general election, we still do not have a clear picture of where things stand politically. The stability which, it was hoped, the exercise would bring remains a pipe dream. Though some leader or the other regularly appears on TV to assure the people that the nation has turned a corner and better days are not too far off, it is difficult to put much faith in such words, especially since it is clear that the various institutional conflicts that have shaped our polycrisis are far from being resolved.

The role played by the ECP in perpetuating this sorry state of affairs, in particular, deserves strict scrutiny. Despite being vested with all the powers it needed to responsibly steer the country through a democratic transition, it could only manage an election that fell far short of the promise of being 'free, fair, impartial and inclusive'. It then bungled the management of election results, which gave rise to serious controversies regarding the 'fixing' of final results. Since then, the ECP has been either unwilling or unable to address the deluge of post-election complaints: for example, it defies understanding why it refuses to

notify more election tribunals for Punjab despite being in receipt of nominees from the Lahore High Court. Its decisions and actions clearly need to be reviewed in light of the country's laws, and its controversial decision regarding reserved seats seems to be a good place to start. The nation deserves to understand what its motivations have been thus far.

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## CTDs' shortcomings

WHILE threats from terrorist groups need to be countered on the battlefield through military means, long-term success against violent extremists requires action by civilian LEAs. Yet as a recent report points out, the provincial counterterrorism departments lack the capability to adequately address the terrorist threat. The document, published by the Islamabad-based Pak Institute for Peace Studies, points to several inadequacies in the performance of CTDs. The think tank says that CTDs "lack clarity" on the dynamics of militant groups, and have few skills needed to analyse relevant intelligence. Moreover, apart from the Punjab CTD, departments in other provinces face funding constraints.

It should be noted that 'capacity building/ strengthening of CTDs' is amongst the points mentioned in the revised National Action Plan. Moreover, many law-enforcement professionals, especially those who have worked in CT, advocate a greater role for the police, specifically in CTDs, in order to uproot militant groups. Also, the federal interior minister has spoken of 'restructuring' Nacta, which is supposed to be the nation's premier CT body. This cannot be achieved without addressing the deficiencies of the provincial CTDs. The departments must be revamped so that they can defeat the terrorist threat. The lacunae that experts have highlighted — shortcomings in training, procedural issues, funding bottlenecks, etc — need to be addressed. The CTDs should be able to block funding sources of terrorist groups, and bust cells through intel operations before militants can strike. The current wave of terrorism that gained momentum after the collapse of the ceasefire with the banned TTP, has resulted in a high toll amongst the security forces, with the militant threat particularly acute in KP and Balochistan. Before these threats transform into a full-blown insurgency, requiring military operations to quell, the state must empower the CTDs with the

tools, training and funds needed to stop militants in their tracks. We cannot afford to neglect our civilian CT bodies.

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## In good faith

THE 'P' in PTI might as well stand for perplexing. After a constant yo-yoing around holding talks, the PTI has now set preconditions for engaging in dialogue with the government. This has come after leaders of the party — including Imran Khan — initially ruled out any deal with anyone. Some leaders signalled the intent to only talk to the 'real' power brokers, while others insisted Mr Khan had never refused talks. Most recently, the party has demanded the release of all political prisoners and the withdrawal of all cases against its members. The demand for the 'stolen mandate' of the party in the Feb 8 polls to be returned has also been put forth. This is not how productive dialogue is conducted. In a democracy, negotiations are a fundamental process for resolving conflicts and reaching consensus. However, entering talks with rigid preconditions undermines the process. Dialogue should begin in good faith, with parties presenting their demands and being open to negotiating terms. Preconditions set in stone create additional barriers to the already challenging task of reconciliation. The recent statements of PTI leaders in the National Assembly have further muddied the waters. While signalling a willingness to engage, the insistence on prior concessions reveals an uncertainty within the party about its approach to dialogue. This inconsistency will harm progress towards a resolution.

That said, the government, having the upper hand, must take the lead and initiate dialogue to ease tensions. It must consider facilitating bail to key leaders, including Mr Khan, to enable direct talks and mitigate the disparate approaches to negotiations among various PTI mouthpieces. Ensuring the presence of central figures in the talks is crucial, as their participation will lend credibility and direction to the negotiation process. Further, ordinary workers arrested after the May 9 riots must be released as part of confidence-building measures. The PTI, on its part, must dispense with its rigidity and recognise that it must deal directly with the government. The persistent proclivity to involve unelected quarters in political matters detracts from the essence of democratic dialogue and

undermines civilian supremacy. All parties must recognise that. Political parties must resolve their differences through democratic means, reinforcing the authority of civilian institutions. Only through dialogue, in good faith, can we hope to end the current political impasse.

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## Uncalled for pressure

THE recent press conferences by Senators Faisal Vawda and Talal Chaudhry, where they demanded evidence from judges regarding allegations of interference by intelligence agencies in judicial affairs, reflect a troubling disregard for the judiciary's sanctity. Their outbursts are unjustified, as the SC is already addressing the matter. The six IHC judges collectively addressed their concerns in a letter to the Supreme Judicial Council and Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa has taken suo motu notice of the issue. It is up to the judiciary to investigate and decide on such serious matters internally. External pressures and public demands for evidence compromise the integrity of the process and create undue controversy. Moreover, singling out Justice Babar Sattar, as Senator Vawda did, is egregious, at a time when the judge and his family have already been subjected to a vilification campaign. Such personal attacks are not only malicious but also detract from the substantive issues at hand. It is essential to remember that the allegations were not made by a single judge in isolation but were a collective expression of concern from multiple judges. Therefore, targeting Justice Sattar undermines the collective voice and courage of the judiciary.

The timing and nature of these pressers are highly questionable. The matter is sub judice, and it is inappropriate to publicly question the integrity of the judges while the court is still reviewing the case. Senators Vawda and Chaudhry have politicised a judicial issue, making one question the motive behind such stunts. In addition, Senator Vawda's call for 'institutions' not to be targeted rings hollow in light of his own actions. By publicly criticising the judiciary and demanding evidence in such a confrontational manner, he is guilty of the very behaviour he condemns. If the judiciary's history and performance are to be scrutinised, it should be done through proper legal routes, not through media spectacles. The politicians' outspokenness has reportedly drawn the attention of the SC, which is expected to hear the matter today. It is vital for Pakistan's institutions that each

respects the role and jurisdiction of the other. The judiciary must be allowed to operate independently, free from external 'demands'. Public trust in the judicial system is paramount, and it is damaged when political figures exploit sensitive issues for their own agendas.

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## **Dangerous law**

OUR political leaders never seem to learn from their mistakes. The Punjab Assembly is due to vote on a new defamation law for the province, which, its government says, has been designed to 'stop fake news'. Speaking at a press conference on Wednesday, the provincial information minister sought to assure the media's growing apprehensions regarding the proposed law in the following words: "[Only] a person who lies under the guise of a journalist with a specific agenda will face the music under this proposed law."

Her choice of words is telling. The PML-N, which leads the government in Punjab, has had a rough few years as far as its image-building efforts are concerned. Even though it has returned to power at the centre and Punjab, its public image has proven extremely difficult to rehabilitate. The minister's words merely reflect the frustration her party feels at those who have been making the job more difficult.

The PML-N's first attempt at putting a muzzle on this new class of 'influencers', which set the narrative on social media platforms like X, Facebook, TikTok and others, took the form of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 — a law that was widely criticised for placing draconian limitations on Pakistanis' digital rights. Later, the PTI, too, tried to build on Peca to make its worst aspects more 'effective' in silencing critics. Thankfully, both efforts were largely neutralised, owing to the efforts of journalists and rights activists who identified the severe consequences for freedom of speech and expression that such legislation would entail. Unfortunately, the PML-N has now returned with what seems to be an even sharper weapon to silence criticism.

Much more detailed than the Defamation Ordinance, 2002, it will replace, the new Punjab Defamation Bill, 2024 goes even further than the dictatorship-era

regulations laid out in the original law. With a dangerously loose definition of defamation, much higher financial penalties and blanket restrictions on commenting on ongoing cases, it seems to have been drafted with the sole purpose of striking fear in anyone who may be contemplating criticising or expressing their frustrations at those currently in power.

Worst still, the law has been finalised without seeking input from civil society, journalists' unions or even the political opposition. Already, several media organisations and journalists' representative bodies have denounced the proposed law and intend to fight it.

The Punjab government would be well-advised to put the brakes on this bill till it can get key stakeholders on board. It must remember that the same law can be weaponised against it one day, just as Peca was when the PTI took power. Online defamation is a growing problem, but one cannot cut off the nose to spite one's face. This issue must be handled with utmost care.

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## **KP tussle**

THE growing war of words between KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur and Governor Faisal Karim Kundi is affecting governance in the province and vitiating the atmosphere at a time when combined efforts of the provincial administration and the centre are needed to address KP's myriad issues. The latest development in this exchange has been the provincial government's decision to bar Mr Kundi from using KP House in Islamabad. Moreover, Mr Gandapur has threatened to take over the federally run provincial power distribution company over the issue of excessive outages. The CM, who belongs to the PTI, is not known for his political sangfroid and has hardly had a smooth relationship with the PML-N-led federal government. But his spat with Mr Kundi, who is a PPP member, is taking an unsavoury turn, with the governor also at times using intemperate language.

Testy relations between the centre and provincial administrations are part of this country's political history, especially when different parties are running Islamabad and the provinces. For example, during Benazir Bhutto's first stint in PM House,

ties with the Nawaz Sharif-led Punjab government were often frosty. Similarly, when the PPP government was in power after the 2008 polls, relations with the Shehbaz Sharif-led Punjab administration could get downright toxic, with the centre imposing governor's rule in the province in 2009. Yet there are also positive examples in this regard. For instance, during the PDM's tenure, the prime minister and then president Arif Alvi maintained a working relationship, even though the PDM had ousted Mr Alvi's party from power. Therefore, both constitutional officeholders in KP need to adopt the path of dialogue rather than confrontation. Both men belong to different parties, and hail from the same district — Dera Ismail Khan — and localised political rivalries are likely having an impact on their relationship. But the KP CM and governor need to take the high road, shun petty differences, and maintain working relations.

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## Ominous demands

THE cash-strapped government opened talks with the IMF this week in search of a larger and longer bailout. Nobody expects ongoing engagement with the IMF to be easy, even if the discussions are anticipated to go smoother than before.

However, the reports about the demands being made by the Fund and alternative proposals being put forward by the authorities sound quite ominous for the average Pakistani household and salaried classes. A report in this newspaper, for example, says the government is considering a “move to introduce ‘carbon tax’ on petroleum and similar products”. The new levy will be in addition to the petroleum levy of Rs60 per litre on fuel. The report quotes anonymous sources trumpeting the proposed carbon levy as a means to access global green finance, and cheaper loans and grants from multilateral institutions.

The reality is that the levy is being considered to raise revenues for the federal government just like the petroleum levy that was initially introduced in 2009 to modernise the petroleum supply chain and refineries. Likewise, there are other revenue proposals that aim at further squeezing salaried classes by lowering the highest taxable income limit.

These proposals are part of the government strategy to meet an IMF goal of raising tax revenues by about Rs2tr — above what is expected to be collected by end FY24 — in the next fiscal year. Moreover, pensions above Rs100,000 a month and income from pension funds are also likely to be taxed in the next budget as the IMF wants the authorities to increase the tax-to-GDP ratio by at least 3pc to around 12pc during the three-year life of the next programme. Although the government is reported to have plans to expand the tax net by ‘transforming’ GST into real value added tax, the political will to tax all incomes directly and regardless of their source appears to be weakening. The entire focus seems to be shifting to indirect taxes, which are easier to collect despite their inflationary impact.

The federal government’s current fiscal position is unsustainable and it desperately needs to boost its revenues to reduce future borrowing and pay back its existing debt. Yet it allowed tax concessions of Rs2.24tr during the last fiscal year or equal to 36.4pc of the total FBR collection in FY22. This figure did not cover loss estimates emanating from provincial tax concessions. And there’s no sign of revoking these exemptions to powerful lobbies, including businesses.

With low- to moderate-income households already at breaking point due to the heavy direct and indirect tax burden and their purchasing power eroded by high inflation, it is time the government rethinks its tax policy, and focuses on taxing those who aren’t paying anything or contributing far less than what they ought to.

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## Heat warnings

STARTING next week, the country must brace for brutal heatwaves. The NDMA warns of severe conditions with temperatures soaring 6-8°C above normal, reaching 45°C or higher in Punjab and Sindh. The past few years have seen alarming climate trends. A new study reveals that last year’s northern hemisphere summer was the hottest in 2,000 years, with 2023 overall being the hottest year globally since records began in 1850. Last month, too, was the hottest April on record. These patterns underscore the reality of global warming, exacerbated by human activities. In Pakistan, the consequences are dire:

Karachi has already witnessed deadly heatwaves, with over 1,200 deaths in 2015 and 65 deaths in just three days in 2018. Such extreme weather poses significant health risks and challenges, especially for vulnerable populations, such as children, the elderly and expectant mothers.

We must take urgent action to mitigate the impacts of these heatwaves. At the government level, establishing cooling centres in urban areas can provide relief for weary travellers. Ensuring a steady supply of water and preventing power outages is crucial. Public health advisories should be disseminated widely, educating citizens on how to stay cool and recognise signs of heat-related illnesses. Community-level initiatives are equally important. Local organisations can mobilise volunteers to check on elderly and vulnerable residents, ensuring they have access to necessary resources. Schools should consider adjusting schedules or temporarily closing during peak heat periods, as seen in Bangladesh and the Philippines, to protect students from the adverse effects of extreme heat. Punjab has announced early school closures. Sindh must consider a similar plan. Moreover, long-term strategies must be adopted. Enhancing urban planning to increase green spaces can reduce the urban heat island effect. Investing in renewable energy sources will mitigate climate change, reducing future heatwaves' frequency and intensity. The writing is on the wall. Heatwaves will become more frequent and severe. We must build resilience against the increasingly unpredictable monster that is climate change.

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## Property leaks

THE leaked Dubai property data reported on by media organisations around the world earlier this week seems to have caused quite a stir. Even though some individuals — including the current defence minister — insist that there is 'nothing' in the published information, others, like Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi, have taken strong exception to being named publicly as owners of offshore properties. In a televised press conference on Thursday, Mr Naqvi regretted that an impression had been created by the media that the individuals mentioned in the Dubai leaks had bought their properties through illegal means or hidden them from the tax authorities. Acknowledging that his wife owns properties in Dubai

and London, Mr Naqvi insisted that these assets had been duly declared and acquired with his own resources. His indignation, to some degree, is understandable: it is nobody's business to tell anyone what they should do with their money. However, Mr Naqvi must understand that, as a public officeholder, his transactions will frequently come under public scrutiny, as will the doings and dealings of other politicians. As long as his hands remain clean, there should be nothing for him to worry about.

It is also encouraging that Mr Naqvi has put his support behind calls for an inquiry into the leaked data, which can determine whether any of the identified properties were acquired unlawfully. The government must announce and begin an investigation without further ado, considering how helpful it will be to establish a zero-tolerance policy for tax evasion and money laundering while it negotiates bailouts from international lenders. As mentioned earlier in these pages, the country's authorities have long sought this data from the Dubai administration but remained unsuccessful due to various diplomatic reasons. Now that the data is available, they have an opportunity to analyse it and compare it with their own records. As Mr Naqvi has pointed out, such an investigation should not harass law-abiding citizens who simply made an investment decision to purchase property abroad: its sole purpose must be to determine whether tax compliance regulations were followed and to catch violators wherever they are identified. Unfortunately, the country will continue to be seen negatively by lenders until it is able to put its own house in order. Demonstrating significant seriousness in this matter is a good place to start.

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## **Students in Kyrgyzstan**

BEING stranded on foreign shores is hardly an agreeable experience. And if the environment is hostile — as it appears to be for foreign students, including Pakistanis, in Kyrgyzstan — then the ordeal can take a dangerous turn.

Distress calls, reports and videos from Pakistani students in the Kyrgyz capital and Kant are pouring in thick and fast. Frightened youngsters allege that enraged mobs break into their hostels, pummel them, steal money and destroy personal property.

Talking to journalists on WhatsApp calls, students said that there was a shortage of food supplies because they were unable to leave their rooms. Disturbing visuals circulating on social media show armed crowds breaking doors and beating students.

According to media reports, foreign students in Bishkek, including Pakistanis, were assaulted by locals after their clash with Egyptian nationals on May 13. While the cause of the confrontation remains unclear, some five Pakistanis are reportedly injured. Pakistan has advised students to stay indoors amid violence targeting the international student community.

If circumstances are as rough as the students claim, the government must take action and address the distress faced by its young citizens caught in turmoil.

Mixed messages through media reports and rumours are creating panic and fear. Therefore, the Pakistani mission in Bishkek needs to adopt a hands-on, personable method to tend to students' needs, such as nourishment, medicine, security and even returning to their families. The government ought to navigate these circumstances with a direct approach comprising convincing communication with the students and Kyrgyz authorities.

In addition, the consular staff should be directed to extend adequate support through helplines, which convey regular updates and tackle challenges faced by distraught citizens. Our foreign minister should designate personnel to monitor the situation and establish contact with his Kyrgyz counterpart so that stranded youth have absolute protection.

A worrying story of citizens in extraordinary conditions cannot become another example of state abandonment.

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## **Penalising the dutiful**

DOES the government feel no remorse in burdening honest citizens with the cost of its own ineptitude? With the prices of almost all necessities at backbreaking

levels, even those who considered themselves well-to-do just a couple of years ago now worry about making ends meet. Inflation has wreaked such havoc over the past two years that those merely surviving from paycheque to paycheque are now considered lucky. Meanwhile, most of the citizenry is slowly but surely being condemned to take on debt to keep surviving — all because the country's leadership has proven incapable and unable to manage the historic economic crisis Pakistan has waded into. According to a recent news report, the government is seeking an additional burden on bill-paying customers for its inability to recover dues from defaulters, with a summary seeking to extract an additional Rs52bn from bill-paying citizens presented to the national power regulator. Of course, this is nothing new — the state has made a habit of squeezing those who are dutiful about paying their dues, be it through its taxation policies or utility bills. However, in the present economic conditions, these policies have become too much to bear.

The government must spare a thought for the struggling masses. Two regions — Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir — have already seen mass agitation movements triggered by the surging cost of living. Both saw considerable violence before the government finally caved in to protesters' demands. Does Islamabad have a plan to cope in case the people of Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa also start organising in protest? It must bear in mind that it will have a very difficult time defending increasing the cost of electricity when the people can point out that it is its own ineptitude that is the reason for the added financial burden being shoved onto them. Our authorities frequently run colourful campaigns about the government's 'zero-tolerance policy' towards power theft. Why should the people suffer if they have been unable to translate their words into action? The public cannot afford the government's incompetence anymore. It should make the defaulters pay. There is no way around this.

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## **Border clashes**

THE Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier has witnessed another series of flare-ups, this time in the Kurram tribal district that borders several Afghan provinces. The hostilities indicate the need for better border management from both sides, so

that minor disputes do not descend into armed exchanges. Thankfully a ceasefire was agreed to on Saturday, with the border reopening. Earlier, those living in border villages had moved to safer locales as forces from both states traded fire. Trade activities at the Kharlachi crossing had also been suspended. The trigger for the escalation remains unclear. Though the Taliban remained tight-lipped, Afghan media claimed a number of “civilians” had lost their lives in the clashes, which had been continuing for several days but intensified on Friday.

Pakistan’s cross-border issues with Afghanistan are of two kinds. The first involves direct hostilities between security forces of both nations. The second element is that of cross-border terrorism perpetrated in Pakistan by militant groups that have apparently found sanctuary in Afghanistan. Both these outstanding issues need to be resolved in order to ensure mutual security. While some in official circles had felt that security would improve after the Western-backed government in Kabul fell and the Taliban took over, this has not been the case. Ever since the August 2021 fall of Kabul, cross-border security has remained tenuous. The number of incidents over the past several months is numerous. For example, the Torkham crossing has remained closed for days on end due to various disputes. Sometimes these closures have taken a violent turn, with security forces trading fire. Pakistan has also struck reported terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan; the last major such incident took place in March after a number of security personnel were martyred in a North Waziristan ambush. Meanwhile, a terrorist incursion in Chitral was thwarted by security forces in September last year.

While Pakistan has communicated its “deepest concerns” to Kabul regarding the latest hostilities, there is a need to work with the de facto Afghan government to ensure the western border remains peaceful. Local-level disputes at the frontier need to be resolved by area commanders and officials before they deteriorate into exchanges of fire. Moreover, the Afghan side must realise that the Durand Line is the border, and change in its status is non-negotiable from the Pakistani point of view. The issue of cross-border terrorism is more complicated. While the Taliban authorities may be in denial about the presence of militants on Afghan soil, securing the border — and ensuring no anti-Pakistan terrorists are able to threaten this country’s security from the Afghan side — is the Taliban’s responsibility. While it may appear that Islamabad’s antiterrorism concerns are

not being seriously entertained by Kabul, the state must continue to use diplomatic channels to communicate its views.

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## Wheat price crash

WHAT the government has done to Punjab's smallholder wheat growers by staying out of the market amid crashing prices is deplorable. The majority of farmers were forced to sell their crop to middlemen at throwaway prices.

When some protested against the government for leaving them in the lurch, they were beaten by the police and detained. Their plight was finally voiced by some lawmakers in the National Assembly recently, with PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari calling it 'economic murder' of the farmers. Last Thursday, lawmakers from both the treasury and the opposition raised the issue of the arrests of farmers. PPP's Shazia Marri urged the government to accept the demands of protesting growers, while calling for excesses against them to be brought to an end. PTI's Amir Dogar pointed out that it was for the first time in the country's history that the government had refused to purchase wheat from farmers.

The Pakistan Kissan Ittehad, a body representing small- to medium-sized farmers from across Punjab, claims that wheat farmers had lost Rs1.1tr due to a steep drop in grain prices as they were compelled to sell their harvest at around Rs3,000 per 40kg or even less, which is far below Rs3,900 promised by the government. Indeed, the government could not have purchased the entire tradable surplus of 10m tons this year. However, its presence in the market would have kept prices from crashing.

Punjab's farmers are going through difficult times, exacerbated by policy failure and the import of over 3.4m tons of wheat shortly before the bumper harvest on the direction of the caretaker government. The imports had facilitated traders to make quick bucks at the cost of both farmers and urban consumers who paid higher prices for low-quality imported wheat.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was quick to set up a probe committee to pin responsibility for the decision to import at a time when the country had adequate stocks from the last harvest and authorities were expecting a record wheat output on the back of a significant increase in the area under cultivation. Nonetheless, the media reports suggest, the terms of the inquiry were changed later and it was stopped from looking into the questionable role of the caretaker administration in allowing heavy imports for some inexplicable reasons. The committee's mandate is now limited to investigating imports during March.

It remains a mystery why the premier does not want to probe the role of caretakers in wheat imports despite the negative impact of the 'crisis' on the position of the ruling PML-N among farmers. So far, the formation of the probe committee appears to be an attempt to sweep the issue under the carpet, unless it is allowed to hold a thorough inquiry and pin responsibility for reckless imports.

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## **Afghan corruption**

AMONGST the reasons that the Afghan Taliban marched into Kabul in August 2021 without any resistance to speak of from the Western-backed government was the fact that the regime — and those before it — was notoriously corrupt and inept. While the elite made fortunes thanks to billions of dollars of Western aid pouring into the country, most ordinary Afghans lived miserable lives where poverty and violence were the only constants. And as the Dubai Unlocked investigation has revealed, along with other international high-rollers, a number of well-connected Afghans that were part of the erstwhile power structure scooped up property worth millions of dollars in the emirate, while ordinary Afghans struggled to put food on the table. Amongst the characters that feature in the Dubai Unlocked leaks is a former speaker of the Afghan parliament and his son, who own property in the emirate worth over \$15m. Both these individuals have been slapped with US sanctions for allegedly siphoning off funds meant for reconstruction, yet deny any wrongdoing. Another character is a warlord related to ex-Afghan president Hamid Karzai. He provided security to the Americans in Afghanistan and also owns pricey Dubai real estate, though a US Congressional report says he was using American dollars to pay off the Taliban.

The Dubai Unlocked data related to Afghanistan serves as another cautionary tale against the perils of Western nation-building projects. The fact is that a kleptocratic elite was promoted and funded by the Americans and their allies for two decades, many of whom stashed bags full of cash away in foreign havens as the Afghan people suffered. Iraq experienced a similar fate after the 2003 invasion. This does not mean that the Afghan Taliban are a better alternative; their hard-line administration is responsible for clamping down on civil rights, particularly anti-women measures. But instead of foreign 'saviours' bringing 'democracy' to nations, this process should be organic and owned and led by local people. When foreign forces with little knowledge of local conditions bring 'democracy' and 'progress' by force, the result will be little different to the Afghan tragedy. Today, as per UN figures, over half of Afghanistan's people need humanitarian aid to survive. Meanwhile, many of those who were ruling over them for two decades continue to enjoy the fruits of their ill-gotten wealth, funded by Western states.

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## Volleyball triumph

IN the last week, while Pakistan's cricket team savoured a come-from-behind T20 series victory against Ireland, another national team bagged a share of the spotlight thanks to its sterling performances. Pakistan's volleyball team proved invincible at the Central Asian Championship in Islamabad, romping to the title with victory over Turkmenistan in the final. The volleyball team has made huge strides in the past few years. It finished fifth at the Asian Games last year; its best performance since winning bronze at the 1962 edition. With a global ranking of 51, it is South Asia's best team although it competes in the Central Asian region and emerged as the top team there. Next up for Murad Jehan's men is the Asian Championship. The current lot has shown a lot of potential and while the team has been showered with messages of congratulations, it needs more patronage. Ahead of the final Murad spoke of the need for a professional league in the country. He did not mince his words in stating that Pakistan's national team had improved because most players compete in leagues abroad.

Setting up the league could be the first step. On the same day the volleyball team won the Central Asian title, Minister for Inter-Provincial Coordination Ahsan Iqbal

vowed that the government would do its best to uplift sports. It would do well to start with volleyball and hockey, where the national team recently showed signs of revival by reaching the final of the Azlan Shah Cup. But the government needs to look beyond handing out jobs to players. It should organise competitions, which will enable players to earn on a regular basis. With cricket dominating the headlines and bagging the biggest chunk of whatever is on offer in terms of sports sponsorship, it has been a struggle for other sports. These teams and players have shown that they too need to be celebrated and supported equally.

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## Reproductive health

IT is naïve to imagine that reproductive healthcare counts in Pakistan, where women from low-income groups and rural areas in particular fare poorly as they have limited access to medical facilities and information. The annual report on the State of the World Population 2024, on the theme 'Interwoven Lives, Threads of Hope: Ending inequalities in sexual and reproductive health and rights', released by UNFPA recently, throws up shocking truths about Pakistan. Less than one in three women was able to take decisions about her sexual and reproductive health; physically challenged females were up to 10 times more vulnerable to gender-based abuse and "every 50 minutes a woman died due to pregnancy complications". The forecast is that it will take 93 years to fulfil family planning needs, while the target of zero maternal deaths will be unachievable for 122 years.

These appalling numbers outline the drastic impact patriarchy and prejudice have had on women's progress by hindering the right to contraceptives, safe birth facilities, maternity care and necessary sexual and reproductive health services. Experts believe that girls and women will be a wasted opportunity for Pakistan's fiscal health and social framework. The exclusion of sexual and reproductive health from political agendas and educational curricula is seen as a primary reason for this, alongside censorship of sexual health knowledge in a conservative culture. For matters to improve, the media should play a constructive part in birth control programmes and disseminate information regarding family planning and choice. The population authorities must engage

female health personnel so that contraceptive use increases in remote communities. The question is: why has the state failed to recognise preventative practices as an integral facet of economic well-being? Family planning is a fundamental human right; its absence erodes resources, adds to healthcare expenditure and results in high infant mortality rates.

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## Circular debt woes

THE alleged corruption and ineptitude of the country's power bureaucracy is proving very costly. New official data shows that the government has failed to keep the power sector's circular debt under Rs2.31tr as agreed with the IMF, with the debt stock soaring by Rs325bn to Rs2.64tr in the first seven months of the current fiscal. The circular debt's unceasing surge, in spite of multiple rounds of electricity price hikes and fuel adjustments, shows that the authorities are yet to begin fixing the actual problems — poor recoveries, widespread theft, high system losses, generation costs, etc — that are dragging down the power sector. The situation belies the power ministry secretary's claims of a 'successful' drive against power theft and defaulters that commenced last September. The growth in the debt stock has forced the government to commit to the IMF an increase of Rs5-7 per unit in the base tariff from July to restrict the circular debt growth in the next fiscal.

Residential customers, especially middle-income households, are the major victims of the power sector's inefficiencies as they are forced to pay for theft, system losses, subsidies for powerful business lobbies and the like, on each unit they consume over and above the higher tariffs. According to a media report, the effective per unit electricity price for domestic consumers is Rs62, which is already double the existing base tariff thanks to various kinds of price increases and taxes built into the electricity rates over and above the base tariff, making power unaffordable for the vast majority. Now the government wants the citizens not only to pay a higher base tariff from July but also bear the costs that would result from significant reductions in industry tariffs. This cannot go on forever. Recently, we have seen violent protests over power prices in Azad Kashmir. Any further increase in electricity prices may ignite unrest in various parts of the

country, as the income of ordinary people is no longer sufficient for their needs, because of elevated inflation and erosion in real wages. Power theft is also expected to increase with the rise in the cost of electricity. Price hikes are counterproductive as past experience and circular debt growth have shown. The solution to our power woes lies in implementing real reforms to fix the drivers of power price and debt growth.

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## Iranian tragedy

THE tragic helicopter crash on Sunday, in which Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi, foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and several other officials lost their lives, comes at a critical time for the Islamic Republic. While internally, Iran is faced with significant economic challenges, externally,

Tehran is in the midst of an undeclared war against Israel, with the Zionist state's savagery in Gaza the key trigger of this conflict. However, a power vacuum within Iran is unlikely, as an interim president has been named, and elections are due within 50 days. Raisi and his delegation were returning from Azerbaijan when his copter went down in a mountainous terrain, apparently in bad weather. The deaths of all on board were confirmed early on Monday.

Raisi oversaw a truncated but eventful term. He took the reins in 2021. One of the most formidable internal challenges to his administration came in the form of the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, after a young woman died in controversial circumstances, reportedly while in the custody of the 'morality police'. Anti-government protests shook Iran, and the state responded by cracking down on demonstrators.

On the foreign front, Raisi had reopened channels with Saudi Arabia, thanks to Chinese mediation last year, a process in which Amir-Abdollahian also played a crucial role. But perhaps the late president's most difficult foreign policy moment came in the aftermath of the Israeli attack on Iran's diplomatic facility in Damascus last month, killing a number of high-ranking Iranian military men.

Tehran responded with an unprecedented drone-and-missile strike on Israel some two weeks later.

With regard to Pakistan, under Raisi's watch, efforts were made to improve bilateral ties. While there was an ugly exchange of missiles in January over alleged militant hideouts, the late leader's state visit to Pakistan last month indicated that Tehran wanted to deepen ties with this country. It is hoped the incoming Iranian president continues on this trajectory.

Due to Iran's regional and geopolitical influence, the world will be watching the power transition carefully. While some Western observers dismiss the Iranian system as a totalitarian dictatorship run by the supreme leader, the reality is more complex. While the supreme leader does exercise a key veto over state policies, the president and other centres of power are not without agency.

Iran's new leader will have to confront economic woes and political polarisation internally. On the other hand, the Middle East presently resembles a powder keg, principally due to Israeli atrocities in Gaza.

Iran has a major role in regional dynamics, as it is a vocal supporter of Hamas, Hezbollah and other armed groups fighting Israel. Therefore, much will depend on how the incoming Iranian president and the Islamic Republic's establishment choose to respond to continuous Israeli provocations.

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## **Holding Israel accountable**

ALTHOUGH the International Criminal Court's prosecutor wants arrest warrants to be issued for Israel's prime minister and defence minister, as well as three top Hamas leaders, for possible war crimes, it is unlikely the move will lead to justice for Gaza's bloodied people. This is the second major effort in the global legal arena to hold Israel to account for its atrocities after South Africa initiated genocide proceedings against the Zionist state at the International Court of Justice. While Hamas officials have said that warrants against their leaders amount to equating the "victim with the executioner", Benjamin Netanyahu has

rejected the ICC's move "with disgust". US President Joe Biden has termed it "outrageous", adding that there can be "no equivalence between Israel and Hamas". The latter part of Mr Biden's assertion is actually true — although it is not precisely what he intended to convey. While excesses against civilians cannot be condoned, Palestinian groups have fought for their land and freedom. Israel, meanwhile, has been waging a war of extermination against the Palestinians since the Nakba, with the Gaza carnage the latest chapter in this saga. So a comparison is indeed unfair.

The ICC has previously issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and former Sudanese strongman Omar al-Bashir, with neither leader brought to court. It is unlikely that Mr Netanyahu and his defence minister — with their powerful patrons shielding them — will ever end up in The Hague to answer for their crimes. But the list of barbaric acts unleashed upon Palestine's people and neighbouring Arab populations by the Israelis and their Zionist forbears is a long one. The Nakba, Deir Yassin, Sabra and Shatila, Qana, and the ongoing genocidal campaign in Gaza are just a few of the massacres involving Israel. While the international legal system may not be able to punish their tormentors, history has already passed judgement in favour of Palestine's children.

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## Out of the abyss

ENFORCED disappearances remain a persistent blight on fundamental human rights in the country. Recent exchanges between the judiciary and government during Islamabad High Court hearings have once again brought the issue to the forefront, highlighting the need for accountability and reform. On Monday, Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kayani delivered a stern rebuke to intelligence agencies for their alleged involvement in the abductions of individuals such as Kashmiri poet Ahmed Farhad Shah. Justice Kayani's insistence that intelligence agencies shed the perception of culpability in such 'disappearances' underscores the judiciary's frustration with the practice. Following Monday's hearing, Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar described the remarks as "inappropriate", arguing that courts should dispense justice in accordance with the law and the Constitution without "sensationalising" issues. Mr Tarar's argument reflects a broader reluctance

within the government to hold state institutions accountable. This attitude not only undermines the rule of law but also perpetuates a culture of impunity.

Regrettably, political parties in Pakistan exhibit a Janus-faced approach to enforced disappearances. When in opposition, they vocally support the families of the missing, visiting protest camps and promising justice. Yet, once in power, they make excuses like “the issue is complex” and “cannot be resolved overnight”. This duplicity perpetuates the cycle of impunity and suffering. The case of Mr Shah is a stark example. Despite assurances from intel services and the defence ministry, Mr Shah remains unaccounted for, with his family left in anguish. Justice Kayani’s call for clear working procedures for intelligence agencies and his insistence on their adherence to legal boundaries are steps in the right direction. However, these steps must be backed by concrete actions and genuine political will. This includes ignoring a section of hawkish politicians who insist that missing persons are “terrorists”. If individuals are suspected of wrongdoing, they should be tried in accordance with the law. Enforced disappearances not only inflict immense suffering on the families of the victims but also erode public trust in state institutions. The judiciary’s recent observations are a reminder that the state’s duty is to protect its citizens, not to instil fear through unlawful abductions. The authorities must shed this dark legacy of enforced disappearances and help the country emerge from the abyss. The agony has lingered for far too long.

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## **Bulldozed bill**

WHY is the Punjab government so keen on imposing dangerous legislation that would be unacceptable to any self-respecting society? The forced passage of the Defamation Bill 2024 over the protestations of both journalists and opposition lawmakers in the Punjab Assembly on Monday is a troubling reminder of how the PML-N has abandoned its principles ever since it returned to power.

Where once the party was championing the people and their voices, it is now devising new means to silence them. It has been said before but needs to be stressed again: this new law will likely come back to bite it. The party had

previously introduced the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, which became a noose around its neck once it fell out of favour with the establishment. Those who were urging the Punjab government to get all stakeholders on board merely wanted it to avoid repeating that mistake.

In a demonstration held after the Monday session of the Punjab Assembly, the Lahore Press Club president recalled that Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz had joined the protests when the PTI had been attempting to strengthen Peca to make it more effective in suppressing public criticism. But here she was now, going ahead with equally condemnable legislation “aimed at gagging the media”.

Was her earlier position based merely on political expediency? Has her party considered what the consequences of such a law would be in case it once again runs afoul of the powers that be? The last time this happened, its leadership was still able to vent its frustration and publicly name those whom it held responsible. The ability to do so kept it alive politically. The next time it happens, the party and its leaders would be condemned to suffer in silence thanks to the law they have just passed.

Defamation is a societal problem, not something that concerns the Punjab government alone. The journalists’ community had merely asked the Punjab government for a week to reconsider the law and arrive at a consensus. Meanwhile, the opposition had suggested certain changes to the law, some of which, it seems, could have improved it considerably.

By involving these two stakeholders in its deliberations, the government in Lahore would have had the opportunity to make the law fairer and acceptable to everyone. That it chose to push them aside suggests a disinclination to honour the democratic principles of the legislative process and, instead, a tendency to impose its will on the people.

This disregard for the opposition and other dissenting voices — now seen in multiple successive governments — is the primary reason why the Pakistani political process seems unable to deliver. The Punjab government must withdraw this dangerous bill and engage with other stakeholders. There is still time.

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# Flooding threats

WITH temperatures in GB and KP forecasted to be four to six degrees higher than normal this week, the threat of Glacier Lake Outburst Floods and flash floods looms large. GLOFs, triggered by the sudden release of water from melting glacial lakes, can lead to widespread destruction, including loss of life, damage to property, and the disruption of essential services. The increasing frequency of these events, driven by climate change, necessitates urgent action. The immediate response must focus on ensuring the safety and preparedness of regions likely to be affected. Timely and accurate dissemination of warnings is critical. Local administrations should activate evacuation plans, prepare temporary shelters, and mobilise emergency services. Residents must stay vigilant, avoiding travel to high-risk areas and preparing emergency kits with essentials. Given that summer is in full swing and GB is a popular tourist spot, the authorities should ensure that visitors are well-informed about potential hazards and safety protocols.

In the long term, a comprehensive disaster management strategy is essential. The Scaling-up Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOF-II) in Northern Pakistan project by UNDP and the Green Climate Fund is a laudable initiative. It includes constructing protective infrastructure, slope stabilisation measures, and early warning systems. However, more is needed. As has been described in these pages, continued investment in infrastructure is crucial. Building flood barriers, improving drainage systems, and regularly monitoring glacial lakes with satellite technology can mitigate the impact of GLOFs. Pakistan should collaborate with international climate bodies for technical expertise. Sustained community involvement is equally vital. Local groups and leaders must foster awareness and preparedness through campaigns, drills, and forming disaster risk reduction committees. Establishing emergency response teams within villages can ensure swift action. By fostering a culture of preparedness, we can protect lives from the mounting threats posed by climate change.

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# Culture of violence

WHILE political differences are part of the democratic process, there can be no justification for such disagreements translating into violence. Unfortunately, in Pakistan — where political violence has never been far from the surface — these negative trends have only been amplified over the past few years. Both social and mainstream media platforms have been used to pillory opponents, and promote a culture of toxicity. The attack on PTI information secretary Raouf Hasan in Islamabad on Tuesday appears to be linked to this woeful environment of intolerance. Mr Hasan was attacked in a parking lot after leaving a TV channel when a group of individuals closed in on him. The CCTV footage of the episode is disturbing, and police say the politician was attacked with a blade. In a statement on social media, PTI founder Imran Khan has pointed a finger at “powers that lurk in the shadows”, while the federal information minister has called for a probe.

Though an investigation has been initiated, the PTI seems dissatisfied with the transparency of the probe. These reservations should be addressed and the perpetrators punished. It is an unfortunate reality that when parties fall out of favour with the powers that be — like the PTI has currently — such mysterious attacks, disappearances and detentions targeting their leaders and workers grow in frequency. This culture of victimisation has had a chilling effect on Pakistani politics. While on one hand, there have been positive developments, such as the release on bail of PTI leader Parvez Elahi on Tuesday after nearly a year in jail, many other party leaders and supporters remain in detention following the events of May 9. The political class, instead of applauding the victimisation of opponents, must speak out against such targeting for political affiliations. Equally important is the need to change the toxic narrative that has begun to dominate politics. The PTI, sadly, particularly through social media, has contributed to this toxicity. To prevent further deterioration and restore a sense of civility to politics, all parties, whether in power or in opposition, must shun venomous narratives, and only target the policy weaknesses of their opponents. More urgent is the need for all political actors to condemn the use of violence against rivals. Those who profess a belief in democracy should either speak up now, or prepare to face an even more repressive atmosphere.

# Energy inflation

ON Tuesday, the Oil & Gas Regulatory Authority slashed the average prescribed gas prices of SNGPL by 10pc and SSGC by 4pc in view of the revenue requirements of the two public utilities for the next financial year. On average, SNGPL consumers should pay Rs179.17 per mmBtu less during the next fiscal year, while SSGC customers should get relief of Rs59.23 per mmBtu.

However, that will not happen where SNGPL customers are concerned, because the government intends to recover from them the tariff differential of Rs581bn not passed on to them during the last six years. A report in this paper estimates that the Ogra determination of SNGPL's financial losses on account of average price increases from FY19 to FY24, which were not passed on to consumers in full by the government for fear of a political backlash, provides the authorities room for a hike of up to 87pc in the company's gas prices next year. Chances are the government might not recover the entire amount from inflation-stricken gas consumers in one year and may spread it over a few years. The authorities have already shared their plans to raise both gas and electricity prices from the new fiscal year.

Energy inflation has been a major cause of the surging cost of living over the last couple of years. Even though headline inflation came down to just above 17pc last month from its peak of over 38pc last May, the planned hike in energy rates could again push up prices during FY25.

With the government trying to secure yet another loan from the IMF to preserve the country's new-found economic 'stability' and improve its credit rating, the authorities have also shared with the Fund their plans to raise gas prices from August and the base electricity tariff from July. In addition, the government would be required to increase taxes to boost its revenues by 1.5pc of GDP. These measures will again drive up inflation, burdening the people with even more costs. The household budgets of the majority, especially those in the low- to moderate-income bracket, are already stretched thin; further erosion in their purchasing power and reductions in real wages will thrust them far beyond breaking point.

The upcoming budget and the financial measures accompanying it will determine who will bear the ever-increasing burden of IMF-mandated adjustments: the elite classes, or the hapless majority. The widening gap between the haves and have-nots is already tearing apart Pakistan's social fabric.

Unless the government can plug this gap, matters will spiral out of control, and it will be difficult for politicians and policymakers to deal with the ensuing chaos. Protests against economic policies and high prices are growing and are not likely to subside without financial relief.

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## **App for GBV survivors**

GENDER-based violence is caught between two worlds: one sees it as a crime, the other as 'convention'. The latter world has accepted lethal forms of GBV: sexual exploitation, 'honour' killings, intimate partner violence and domestic abuse. Last year, research by Pakistan's Demographic and Health Survey and the UNFPA showed that 39pc of women in Pakistan, between 15 and 49 years, faced abuse, and 80pc of married females endure domestic violence. Statistics show that shouting is most prevalent at 76pc, with slapping at 52pc, pushing 47pc, and kicking 40pc in physical abuse. In this dire scenario, the launch of a mobile application to assist survivors of gender-based brutality can prove invaluable. Humqadam, developed by Shirkat Gah — Women's Resource Centre in partnership with the National Commission on the Status of Women, will help women who cannot turn to their families, and bolster the capacity building of law enforcers and health departments. In addition, national and provincial resources and operational services in 16 districts are also listed for victims, alongside data for policymaking.

But the high volume of incidents — over 63,000 reported GBV cases in the past three years — reflects that the app will struggle to succeed if it functions in isolation. As all provinces are equipped with laws for domestic violence, far-reaching structural reforms, which focus on a societal shift through comprehensive training, sensitisation, recruitment of female police, and resources for law enforcement and officers of the court, are essential. Moreover,

awareness drives must evolve so that people can challenge customs. It is only then that Humqadam can help battle the curse of GBV and actually make a difference. It has the potential to facilitate a timely response and build deterrence and security measures through vigilant execution. The state must make good on its promise to Pakistan's women — a life of protection and dignity, where girls and women have nothing to fear.

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## Belated recognition

WITH Wednesday's announcement by three European states that they intend to recognise Palestine as a state later this month, the Palestinian people have achieved another symbolic, moral victory. Though Norway, Ireland and Spain may have made the move a bit late in the day — Palestine is already recognised by 143 states, the global majority in fact — it is welcome nonetheless, particularly in the midst of the Israeli campaign of extermination in Gaza. It shows that even those states that may have had reservations previously about supporting the Palestinian struggle for recognition and dignity are today clear in their minds that this is what justice demands. Yet there remains a powerful US-led minority in the international community that is doing all it can to prevent Palestinian statehood. But the comity of nations overall has spoken: Palestinians have a right to a sovereign state as per the pre-1967 border status. Of course, it is a matter of debate whether the long-dead two-state solution can still be revived, as Israel has, over the decades, dealt it several mortal blows, with its savage forays inside the occupied territories, and the building of settlements on stolen land. Tel Aviv has feigned great outrage at the fact that three more states have endorsed the idea that Palestine has a right to exist.

The move indicates that there are those in the Western bloc that have broken from the pack, by daring to criticise Israel's atrocious behaviour. Most of the Global South had accorded recognition to Palestine when Yasser Arafat proclaimed Palestinian statehood in 1988, with the numbers growing over the years. Today, only the US, Canada, Australia, and a few others, have yet to recognise Palestine. It is strange that these states, many of which claim to be champions of fundamental rights, do not believe these rights should be given to

the Palestinians. It is hoped that those in the Western bloc that have extended recognition now apply pressure on their allies to ensure that the remaining obstacles standing in the way of universal recognition of Palestinian statehood, and Palestine's admission to the UN, are permanently removed. The sacrifices of the Palestinian people cannot be allowed to be wasted, while Israel must realise that its attempts to erase the Palestinian people and their centuries-old identity is bound to fail.

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## IMF's unease

THE first round of 'engagement' between Pakistan and the IMF over the former's request for a larger and longer programme appears to have concluded — with some bumps still visible. Both sides are believed to have reached an understanding on the reform measures that Islamabad must include in the budget for the next financial year and get approved by parliament before an agreement on a new bailout facility is signed.

A report in this paper has quoted a government official as saying that the IMF mission is leaving the country without announcing a formal staff-level agreement, because the "Fund wants a stamp of approval from parliament for the reforms and policy actions [to be implemented as 'prior actions' for the new programme] given the unpredictable political environment".

This is not a new condition in Pakistan's context, nor is it surprising, considering the endless political instability roiling the country. The IMF had recently noted that high political uncertainty and the resurgence of social tensions could undermine economic stabilisation.

"Downside risks remain exceptionally high. While the new government has indicated its intention to continue the [Stand-by Arrangement's] policies, political uncertainty remains significant," the IMF had said in its staff report on the conclusion of the second and final review of the \$3bn SBA. It added that "the resurgence in social tensions reflecting the complex political scene and high cost of living could weigh on policy and reform implementation".

Despite its concerns that the political situation might create obstacles in the way of parliamentary approval of the new budget, the IMF has also expressed its confidence in the present political administration.

“The return of the outgoing government to power after the elections means continued commitment to the reform agenda agreed at the time of the SBA. This not only means a higher likelihood for the continuity of reforms but also political stability for the next five years. The current coalition government consists of almost the same political parties, which despite heavy political cost implemented all the actions committed under the [Extended Fund Facility] programme and approved all the prior actions under the SBA,” it said.

It is thus anticipated that the Fund will conclude a new loan latest by early July. However, a new arrangement is the least of the common man’s problems. The real issue for most is the additional financial burden in the shape of new levies — such as a hike in the petroleum levy, an increase in indirect taxes, more taxes on salaries — and enhanced energy prices that they will have to bear as the cost of the new loan. Going by the just-concluded engagement with the IMF mission, it is clear that the next phase of economic stabilisation will be very tough for most of the population.

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## Enduring threat

THE death this week of journalist Nasrullah Gadani, who succumbed to injuries after being attacked by gunmen, is yet another reminder of the perilous state of journalism in Pakistan. The country remains one of the world’s most dangerous places for journalists. Ranked 152 out of 180 countries by Reporters Without Borders and 11th on the Committee to Protect Journalists’ Global Impunity Index, our record on press freedom and journalist safety is appalling. This month alone, three other journalists were murdered: Mehar Ashfaq Siyal was gunned down in Punjab, and Muhammad Siddique Mengal was killed by a bomb in Balochistan, while Kamran Dawar, a citizen journalist, was shot dead in KP. The impunity with which these crimes are committed reflects a persistent failure of the state to

protect journalists. Sindh, where Gadani was attacked, is particularly hazardous. According to Freedom Network, Sindh accounted for 33pc of the total number of violations against media in Pakistan from May 2023 to March 2024. This includes murders, attacks, injuries, kidnappings, threats, and legal cases. The regional safety commission, established under the Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Practitioners Act, 2021, remains ineffective due to lack of resources, office space, and staff.

The government's inaction perpetuates a cycle of bloodshed and impunity. To break this cycle, it must take decisive steps. This includes fully activating regional safety commissions with adequate resources, ensuring prompt and transparent investigations into attacks on journalists, and prosecuting those responsible. Capacity building for journalists, particularly in safety protocols, and fostering partnerships between journalists and lawyers for legal recourse are crucial. Until these measures are implemented, Pakistani journalists will continue to work under the shadow of fear, and the state will remain complicit in the erosion of press freedom. The protection of journalists is not simply a legal obligation; it is also a moral imperative. It is high time Pakistan took this responsibility seriously.

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## **Pemra overreach**

IT seems, at best, a misguided measure and, at worst, an attempt to abuse regulatory power to silence the media. A Pemra notification restraining the media from reporting on court proceedings, issued earlier this week, has been challenged in the Lahore and Islamabad high courts by two separate representative bodies of journalists, who have described the gag order as an attempt to interfere in the independence of the judiciary. "Pemra has no legal authority to prohibit the reporting of court proceedings," reads a joint statement issued by the Press Association of the Supreme Court and the Islamabad High Court Journalists Association, which further notes that "Article 19 and 19A of the Constitution give the right of access to information to the public." The bodies have condemned the Pemra notification as a "flagrant violation" of the Constitution. It remains to be seen whether a court of law will also interpret it to be so. From journalists' perspective, while a case can be made for the need to

prevent any intentional or unintentional attempt to influence the outcome of ongoing cases, the answer lies not in enforcing a blanket ban on reporting of courtroom proceedings but in the regulator ensuring that media regulations and ethics regarding sub judice matters are fairly enforced.

What seems clear from the wording of the Pemra notification is that the regulator has imperilled the work of courtroom journalists, who dutifully report the statements made by various actors in cases of public interest and national importance. The context cannot be ignored. The Pemra notification has followed on the heels of the apparent 'grief' caused to the law minister over remarks recently made by a judge on the role played by intelligence agencies while hearing a missing persons case. Separately, the courts have taken strong exception to ad hominem attacks against judges and a high-profile complaint on interference in judicial affairs and begun proceedings. Additionally, the 'leaking' of a picture of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan from his appearance via video link in a court case seems to have greatly irritated the authorities. Have all of these become reasons why it has been decided to keep the public in the dark about what's happening inside the courtrooms, where the tensions within the state have lately been on full display? The authorities must explain themselves.

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## More pledges

THE administration's campaign to bring Gulf investment to Pakistan continues apace, with the prime minister wrapping up a one-day trip to the UAE on Thursday. Shehbaz Sharif spent a busy day in the Emirates, meeting UAE ruler Mohamed bin Zayed, addressing a conference on tech collaboration, and exchanging notes with other Emirati officials and businessmen.

The meeting with MBZ apparently went well, with Emirati state media saying \$10bn had been allocated for investment in "promising economic sectors" in Pakistan. Mr Sharif has mentioned IT, renewable energy and tourism as fields that may attract UAE cooperation. The government has also been courting Saudi Arabia, with the prime minister making two trips to the kingdom over the past two months, while Saudi ministers and delegations have visited Pakistan to reiterate

Riyadh's commitment to invest here. The Saudis have reportedly promised investment worth \$5bn.

The pledges from our friends in the Gulf are reassuring, but the multibillion-dollar question is: when will they materialise? Perhaps the Saudis and Emiratis are waiting for the IMF to green-light the next loan to Pakistan before releasing their own funds. Though the IMF loan has yet to be approved, Fund officials have described discussions with the government as "fruitful", saying that "significant progress" has been made towards a staff-level agreement. Hopefully, once the loan is approved in the near future, the investment agreements signed with Gulf partners will start taking firmer shape.

Unfortunately, due to our past financial profligacy and indiscipline, even traditional allies are wary about putting their money in this country, and await the nod of international financial institutions. On their part, IFIs also monitor our financial dealings with our foreign partners before writing us a cheque. The government must change this negative perception through better financial management, moving the state towards a sustainable economic model.

The prime minister, during his brief UAE trip, addressed these unpleasant issues when he announced that the "begging bowl" had been "broken". Over 240m Pakistanis are hoping this is actually the case. To truly break free from the shackles of financial dependence, we must put the projected foreign investment to good use, tax the untaxed internally, and learn to live within our means.

Decades of living large — with the elite of this country primarily culpable — has brought us to this sorry pass, and the current opportunity to set our house in order should not be wasted. We must keep pursuing foreign investment, and give the investors a business-friendly climate free of bureaucratic obstacles. Profit repatriation should also be eased to attract foreign money. There needs to be continuity in economic policies, while development must be focused on bringing prosperity to the masses. Moreover, internal harmony, and undisturbed representative rule, are essential for real stability in Pakistan.

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# Hot spells

WITH Pakistan already dealing with a heatwave that has affected 26 districts since May 21, word from the climate change ministry is that this is merely the beginning. This wave, set to last until May 30, will be followed by two more in June, intensifying an already dire situation. Temperatures are expected to soar 5°C to 6°C above normal, with the second heatwave occurring from June 7-8 and the third in the last week of the month. Unsustainable environmental practices have contributed to the increased frequency and intensity of heatwaves. These harsh conditions not only threaten human lives, they also accelerate glacier melt and heighten the risk of forest fires. The government, recognising the gravity of the situation, has taken several measures. Comprehensive guidelines and early warnings have been disseminated, aiming to prevent casualties similar to the catastrophic 2015 heatwave. Public awareness drives are ongoing to educate people about health risks and necessary precautions. Additionally, the NDMA is coordinating with provincial departments to ensure timely responses to natural disasters.

These efforts, while commendable, must be bolstered. The authorities must prioritise expanding green cover through aggressive reforestation, crucial for mitigating the long-term impact of climate change. Boosting urban infrastructure to better withstand extreme heat and ensuring uninterrupted water and electricity supply during peak heat periods are imperative. There is also an urgent need to enhance disaster management capabilities. Developing and promoting the NDMA's mobile application for real-time alerts and advisories can significantly improve public preparedness. Establishing more cooling centres and enhancing healthcare facilities to treat heat-induced ailments should be expedited. Workers who toil under the open sky must be given due consideration, with water breaks and summer-friendly timings. At the community level, people should avoid unnecessary outdoor activities, especially during peak heat hours. Vulnerable groups like children, the elderly, and those with health conditions need special attention. Simple measures, such as staying hydrated, wearing loose clothing, and keeping homes cool, can prevent heat-related illnesses. Communities should also play a role in preventing forest fires by avoiding the disposal of flammable materials in open areas. Additionally, joint efforts to plant and care for trees can

help reduce temperatures. With a collaborative approach, we can mitigate the impact of these extreme weather events.

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## ICJ rebuke

MATTERS are not going well for Israel where world opinion regarding its murderous activities in Gaza is concerned.

On Friday, days after the International Criminal Court called for arrest warrants to be issued for the Israeli prime minister and defence minister — as well as three Hamas leaders — the International Court of Justice ordered Tel Aviv to halt its bloodthirsty rampage in Rafah. The Israeli response to the world court has not been surprising, with the Zionist state calling the order “morally repugnant and disgusting”.

Furthermore, Israel has continued its campaign of genocidal violence in Gaza after the court order. While Hamas has called for a cessation of hostilities across Gaza, the South African foreign minister — whose country has been instrumental in the legal campaign against Tel Aviv’s atrocities — while welcoming the ICJ ruling observed that Israel doesn’t “care what the global community says”.

The reason for Israel’s criminal behaviour is that it is protected by its powerful Western friends, primarily the US and some European states. The Zionist state knows that it can literally get away with murder. Moreover, while ICJ orders are binding, it cannot enforce them. This requires cooperation of the global community, particularly its most powerful members. But the US and some others have defeated every attempt in the UN to censure Israel, which means that Tel Aviv can effectively thumb its nose at their lordships in the ICJ and ICC.

Nearly two decades after the majority of the international community agreed to the ‘responsibility to protect’ principle to shield vulnerable populations across the globe from violence and persecution, it appears that Palestine’s people are not worthy — in the eyes of powerful global actors — of this protection.

While the efforts of South Africa and other states need to be lauded for trying to bring Israel to justice for its ongoing crimes in Gaza, more practical measures are required to stop the slaughter.

For example, all those states that have supported the bid for Palestinian statehood in the UN — over 140 countries — need to back up these symbolic gestures of solidarity with practical steps to stop Israel's genocidal campaign. One way to do this could be for these states to suspend all commercial links and arms shipments until Israel promises to respect ICJ rulings and UN resolutions.

As mentioned before in these columns, history has witnessed such a successful global movement in the international campaign against South Africa's apartheid. The OIC and Arab League, as well as friends of Palestine in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia must come together to enforce such a blockade against Israel if they are serious about ending the Gaza nightmare.

Otherwise, finely worded legal treatise, and eloquently drafted resolutions will do little to save Palestinians from the Israeli war machine.

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## World Cup team

PAKISTAN waited until the very end to name their T20 World Cup squad. Even then, there was last-minute drama. Four members of the selection committee, including captain Babar Azam and head coach Gary Kirsten, had decided on the combination from England, where the national team is playing its final warm-up series ahead of the tournament in the US and West Indies. But with inputs from the remaining three committee members having apparently not been taken till the deadline set by the International Cricket Council, a virtual meeting was set up to rubber-stamp the final squad. There were few surprises — with almost all the players currently in England, apart from Salman Ali Agha and Irfan Khan Niazi, grabbing a ticket to the World Cup. Five of them — batters Saim Ayub, Azam Khan and Usman Khan, and bowlers Abrar Ahmed and Abbas Afridi — will feature in the tournament for the first time. Babar will lead Pakistan for the third time at a T20 World Cup, his side having finished as semi-finalists and runners-

up in the last two editions respectively. Eight players in the current squad featured in the final of the 2022 edition, where Pakistan lost to England.

Thus, the ongoing series against the defending champions will give a clearer idea of Pakistan's credentials. After the first game was washed out, Pakistan's batters came up short in the chase in the second. The players now have just two more matches to perform better before their World Cup opener. Pakistan experimented with their line-up in their last two series against New Zealand and Ireland, where results were not favourable. They came back twice to draw the series against New Zealand, before falling in the opening game of the series triumph against Ireland. Pakistan, however, have a knack of peaking before tournaments, and with a settled line-up, the team will hope to lay down a marker before the World Cup against England.

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## **Antibiotic overuse**

ANTIMICROBIAL resistance is an escalating crisis claiming some 700,000 lives annually in Pakistan. It is the third leading cause of death, trailing only cardiovascular disease and maternal and neonatal disorders. These alarming statistics, shared recently at the National Antimicrobial Stewardship Summit 2024, underscore a grave situation. Antibiotics, heralded as 'wonder drugs', have saved countless lives. However, their rampant misuse has precipitated a public health emergency. Pakistan, the third largest consumer of antibiotics globally, consumed Rs126bn worth of these medicines in 2023 alone. The consequences of overuse are dire, with bacteria now exhibiting resistance even to third and fourth-generation antibiotics. Many factors contribute to this crisis. Self-medication, 'prescriptions' by quacks, incomplete courses of antibiotics, and substandard production practices are primary culprits. Moreover, the misuse of antibiotics in livestock worsens the problem, contributing to 80pc of antimicrobial resistance cases in this sector. This not only impacts human health but also threatens food security.

The government must aim to increase understanding of antibiotic resistance among both healthcare professionals and the public, through awareness drives,

healthcare professional training, patient education, school and community programmes and the distribution of information material at hospitals, clinics and pharmacies. The government must also enforce strict regulations on the sale of antibiotics, ensuring they are available only through prescription by licensed doctors. Additionally, there should be stringent oversight of drug companies to guarantee the production of high-quality antibiotics. Moreover, investment in healthcare infrastructure is crucial. Strengthening antimicrobial stewardship programmes that promote appropriate use of antibiotics in hospitals can curb over-prescription. These programmes should incorporate lessons from past health crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw a spike in antibiotic use despite clinical guidelines advising against it for viral infections. Also, vaccination programmes can play a pivotal role in preventing infections that might otherwise necessitate antibiotic treatment. The success of the typhoid conjugate vaccine campaign in Sindh demonstrates the efficacy of such initiatives. The spectre of AMR looms large, threatening to render common infections untreatable and reversing decades of medical progress. Only through sustained efforts can we hope to turn the tide against the devastation antibiotic misuse can cause and safeguard public health for future generations.

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## Mercury rising

SHOULD we expect a political heatwave this summer? The climate seems to be rather conducive to it. The two largest parties are once again on the warpath, with a slew of troubling developments precluding any hopes for the long-awaited normalisation of political temperatures.

In Lahore, the chief minister of Punjab has approved the registration of fresh cases against the PTI leadership, this time for “building a hateful narrative against state institutions”. It appears that the PML-N government will rely on the odious defamation bill it recently passed in the Punjab Assembly to go after its chief rival. The provincial information minister, speaking on the matter, explained to the media that the Punjab home department had provided information establishing that PTI leaders were “spreading mischief inside and outside jail”. She claimed that the party was “spreading hate as part of organised propaganda”

to incite the people, destabilise the country and inculcate hatred against its institutions.

Was this anticipated? Unfortunately, yes. Meanwhile, in Islamabad, the PTI has been engaged in a bitter confrontation with the Capital Development Authority, which this week razed part of the party's central secretariat and later sealed the building under an anti-encroachment drive after issuing several warnings. Twenty-six individuals, including a PTI leader, were subsequently booked by Islamabad Police on various charges, including terrorism, allegedly for violently resisting the CDA operation.

Understandably, the party is incensed by its relentless victimisation; disappointingly, it has yet to show any remorse for its own culpability in similar targeting of its opponents in the past. It has also seemed unwilling to mend fences with its opponents, having set strict preconditions for any negotiations that are unlikely to be accepted in the current situation. It seems in no hurry to see matters resolved and appears to be hoping that the crises engulfing the government will eventually bring about its downfall.

These are all worrying reminders that political stability, a prerequisite for the economic stability desperately sought by the inflation-weary citizenry, remains as elusive as ever. With the budget almost upon us and the IMF making it clear it will not consider extending more loans till its painful requisites are met, the months ahead are likely to see civil discontent explode once again as summer electricity bills and new taxation measures land on the largely unsuspecting public.

The country seems to be at the end of its tether. At some point, its leaders need to ask themselves: what is the point of fighting if ashes are all that will be left to rule over after they are done? Each of them is equally responsible for the deep pit Pakistan seems to have fallen into. It is time they stopped digging deeper and started thinking about how to get it out.

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# Attacking minorities

WHILE Pakistan has watched many perish in the cauldron of sacrilege, the state has done little to turn down the flames of hatred. Yet another appalling incident was witnessed on Saturday in Sargodha's Mujahid colony. A Christian man was accused of desecrating religious scriptures and subjected to violence by a pack of fanatics who were bent on lynching him. The mob, which was carrying sticks and weapons, surrounded his home and attempted to break in; electricity meters and outdoor air conditioner units were wrecked and set alight. Although the police arrested 26 people, with a case against 44 nominated and "300-400 unidentified suspects", it also, reportedly, slapped a blasphemy charge on the critically injured victim. The assault is an eerie reminder of the Jaranwala carnage last year when an enraged mob set upon the settlement and razed a Christian man's house. The Joseph colony butchery in 2013 is seared in national memory, when more than 100 homes were ransacked and set alight. But Pakistan's sad truth is that such barbaric episodes will persist without pragmatic solutions to contain vigilantism, leaving scores homeless, robbed of livelihoods and even imprisoned for years as few lawyers gather the courage to fight their case. Those that do can face lethal consequences.

Our past patterns do not offer assurances. The cycle of banal condemnations, arrests for appeasement and token flag marches reeks of the state's inability to confront this psychosis. Sadly, mobs turn into executioners due to the authorities' helplessness before these elements. Thus, accountability for instigators is just as important as making corrupt officers answerable. Perpetrating atrocities in the name of religion is unpardonable and allegations without concrete evidence and due process are crimes of power and greed. Bigoted elements are also empowered by slipshod policing and dismal conviction rates. Besides, the blasphemy laws have been misused to persecute minorities, usurp property and settle personal scores. According to rights groups, predominantly Muslims were targeted by the criminal exploitation of these edicts; Mashal Khan and Salmaan Taseer are prominent names that come to mind. All this necessitates a review to avert malpractice. Political commitment to interfaith harmony, neutralising hate speech and religious manipulation, educational reforms focused on acceptance and appreciation for religious communities are a compelling need. Pakistan's power elite too must break its silence and pledge protection for the persecuted.

# Afghan puzzle

WHEN it comes to counterterrorism cooperation with the Afghan Taliban, we are moving in circles. While the authorities say that anti-Pakistan terrorists have havens in Afghanistan — particularly the banned TTP — Kabul's de facto rulers insist this is not the case.

The Taliban position, however, is difficult to believe in the face of evidence that various militant groups are indeed active in Afghanistan. Once more, the state has raised the issue of cross-border militancy, with the interior minister and Nacta chief telling a presser on Sunday that the TTP, backed by “enemy intelligence agencies”, were responsible for the deadly March attack in Bisham in which five Chinese workers and one local were killed. The military had issued a similar statement a few weeks ago. Mohsin Naqvi called on the Afghan Taliban to prosecute the suspected terrorists, “or hand them to us”. The interior czar did not rule out unilateral action if Kabul failed to act.

Several attempts have been made to take up the TTP issue with the Afghan Taliban, but the results have not been positive. For example, the matter has been discussed using official channels, while delegations of ulema and tribal elders have been dispatched to Kabul to communicate Pakistan's concerns. The state has also taken cross-border armed action after TTP terrorist attacks targeted Pakistani troops.

Yet, none of these measures has resulted in a cessation of terrorist violence. Therefore, different approaches are required. Unfortunately, there are few good options, and the authorities will have to work with the Afghan Taliban.

Expecting the Afghans to crush the TTP is an unrealistic expectation, as Kabul's rulers are not likely to take armed action against their ideological comrades, particularly if the Kandahar-based Taliban leadership has anything to say about it. Pakistan should, instead, demand that TTP fighters be relocated far from the border, and insist that the Taliban should take full responsibility to ensure no terrorist group is able to stage cross-border attacks.

Moreover, the Central Asian states have aired similar concerns about Afghanistan-based terrorist groups. Pakistan should work with these states, as well as China, Russia, and Iran, to pressure the Taliban into taking effective CT moves. The Taliban are particularly keen to attract Chinese investment due to their global isolation. Islamabad should coordinate with Beijing to ensure that investments are made only if the Taliban take concrete CT steps.

While the Taliban should do more to prevent cross-border terrorism, Pakistan must also ensure that internally, no space is available to the militants and their sympathisers. In the recent presser, the Nacta head listed numerous Pakistani suspects who had played a key role in the Bisham attack. Unless these elements are neutralised, it will not be possible to have the upper hand over terrorist groups.

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## Persistent scourge

THE challenge of polio in Pakistan has reached a new nadir, drawing grave concerns from the Technical Advisory Group for polio eradication. In a recent meeting held in Qatar, the group highlighted the alarming resurgence of the virus in Pakistan, a setback that places us in a position worse than even war-ravaged Afghanistan. It has come to be so that polio is not only a national health crisis but an international embarrassment. Travel restrictions imposed on Pakistani citizens are a clear indicator of the global community's scepticism with Pakistan's public health framework. Certification for polio vaccination is mandatory, yet many destinations still administer polio drops upon arrival, reflecting distrust. Despite extensive eradication efforts, we have now reported this year's third polio case, with all three victims originating from Balochistan. The latest is a 12-year-old girl from Killa Abdullah, a district that had remained polio free for three years. Compounding this tragedy, three additional environmental samples have tested positive, bringing the total to 140 for the year.

Polio's unyielding presence in Pakistan is fuelled by a combination of factors: inadequate vaccination coverage, the targeting of polio workers in conflict-prone areas, and, most unfortunately, a general mistrust of vaccines. These obstacles

have turned Karachi, Quetta, and Peshawar into reservoirs of the virus, posing a constant threat to vulnerable children. Addressing this crisis requires a well-thought-out approach. The government must ensure community engagement to address this challenge. Public awareness drives should stress the importance of drops and counter disinformation. Religious leaders must be enlisted to foster trust and encourage participation in vaccination drives. Militancy must also be rooted out. Equally crucial are the availability and accessibility of vaccines, particularly in high-risk areas and the strengthening of surveillance systems to promptly respond to outbreaks. The path to a polio-free Pakistan is not insurmountable. With a collaborative effort, we can overcome this scourge for all generations to come.

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## On a whim

THE sudden declaration of May 28 as a public holiday to observe Youm-i-Takbeer — the anniversary of Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998 — underscores an overlooked national issue: excessive and often late-notified public holidays. Regardless of the significance of the event, the wisdom behind turning such annual observances into public holidays must be reconsidered. Holidays, especially those abruptly announced, disrupt critical services and economic activities. Manufacturing is halted, banking remains shut, trade and retail sectors close their doors, and the entire machinery of daily life grinds to a halt. For a country grappling with economic challenges, each productive day is invaluable. Monday's announcement caused chaos, particularly in the education sector. Matric exams — already delayed due to the heatwave — and intermediate exams were postponed, causing confusion among students, parents, and educational authorities. Such last-minute decisions create unnecessary stress and disrupt plans. Moreover, the timing of this holiday, just before the extended Eid holidays, exacerbates the issue. With Eid typically resulting in a three to four-day break, adding another public holiday so close to this period strains productivity even further.

The government needs to reassess its approach. While it is important to honour national milestones, this can be done without causing disruptions: special

campaigns can commemorate these events without shutting down services and industries. Late-notified holidays also reflect poor planning and communication within government. Employees and employers are left in limbo, unsure whether they need to report to work or not. This uncertainty breeds inefficiency. It is imperative for the government to establish a clear schedule of holidays well in advance, minimising disruption and allowing all sectors to plan accordingly. While the importance of rest cannot be understated — Pakistanis are overworked as it is — the balance between honouring significant occasions and maintaining economic and administrative continuity should be handled with care, not on a whim.

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## Rafah inferno

THE level of barbarity witnessed in Sunday's Israeli air strike targeting a refugee camp in Rafah is shocking even by the Zionist state's standards. Eyewitness accounts of survivors reported by media outlets make for highly disturbing reading, pointing to the fact that a war crime against defenceless civilians — not the first in this conflict — has been committed by the 'world's most moral' army. If anything, Israel's conduct in Gaza since the Oct 7 attacks has been the epitome of amorality. Tel Aviv has had no regrets about the civilians it has murdered, the children it has orphaned, the mass graves it has left, and the forced starvation it has used as a weapon in the Gaza hellscape. At least 45 people were killed in the latest atrocity, with several victims charred. Israel says it struck the camp while pursuing Hamas fighters. Yet the ferocity of the assault can be gauged from the fact that a number of victims — including children — were left dismembered after the attack. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has claimed the Rafah outrage was a "tragic accident"; but these words are meaningless as Tel Aviv's war machine has continued to pound Gaza even after the refugee camp tragedy.

Condemnation of this monstrous attack has been pouring in from around the world, including the UN and EU. US officials, meanwhile, have highlighted the need to "assess what happened", while timidly asking Israel to "protect civilians". 'What happened' is abundantly clear; Israel has unleashed a genocidal war in

Gaza in the name of going after Hamas, and in many instances, has used American money and weapons to ethnically cleanse the Palestinian people. Therefore, those supporting Israel's abominable war should shed the use of euphemism, as this fools no one. Moreover, the time for strong critiques of Israeli barbarism has long passed. If the world is serious about stopping the butchery in Palestine, solid action is needed. Both the brave states that initiated legal action against Israel, as well as the courageous voices in the West condemning their governments for complicity in genocidal violence, must focus their energies on isolating Tel Aviv internationally. People of conscience in the East and West must unite to economically and militarily boycott Israel for its shameless spilling of Palestinian blood. If concrete steps are not taken, then we must await the next atrocity.

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## First steps

IT is, without doubt, a positive development. The chief minister of KP seems to have reached an arrangement that will allow him to stick to his party's politics while he works with Islamabad on matters related to the governance and administration of his province.

In the context of present-day politics in Pakistan, this is no mean feat. There has been considerable tension between the centre and KP — the only province where the PTI managed to seize power and form a government — ever since the general elections.

From reserved seats to provincial funds, an electricity supply crisis and non-invitation to the Special Investment Facilitation Council meetings, Peshawar has clashed bitterly with the government in Islamabad, demanding that its 'rights' be restored and that it be given a seat at the table. However, from recent developments, it appears that the federal and provincial governments have finally managed to break the ice.

On Saturday, KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur finally attended the SIFC meeting to which he had previously not been invited, and it seems to have gone

well. The federal information minister later issued a glowing appraisal of the development, stating, “I think today’s meeting was held in a very cordial atmosphere with great positivity [...] I think the good thing is that a message of unity was sent after today’s SIFC meeting that the centre and the provinces are on one page.”

Mr Gandapur, too, described it as “a very good meeting”, while iterating that his province’s resources should benefit both its residents and the larger country. He promptly apprised his party chief, Imran Khan, of the discussion in a visit to Adiala Jail. Then, on Monday, the KP chief minister also managed to reach an understanding with the ministers of interior and power over his province’s power issues, signalling a shift away from his government’s confrontational stance.

Both parties said they had arrived at a mutually acceptable solution to address prolonged load-shedding in the province, which seems to be rooted in rampant power theft. Signalling his commitment to mobilising his own party to lead the initiative, the KP CM revealed that the federal government, too, would play a part by extending some relief and relaxations. When asked what prompted the sudden thaw, Mr Gandapur deftly explained that his discussion with the two representatives of the federal government was a negotiation between institutions rather than a parley between individuals or the politics they represented.

This is a commendable approach. There is no reason why ordinary people should suffer because of the differences between their leaders. It is mature of the KP government to set aside its differences for the good of its people, and one hopes that this small change will pave the way for bigger things.

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## Foregone times

THE past, as they say, is a foreign country. It seems that the PML-N’s leadership has chosen to live there. Nawaz Sharif’s speech at the ceremony held this Tuesday to commemorate his re-election as party president seemed like a melancholic reminder of how much potential the seasoned politician has squandered in recent years. The occasion was meant to announce Mr Sharif’s

return to business; instead, he seemed unable to let go of the past, which he ought to have realised by now he has no real power to change. His speech, like other speeches in recent months, dwelt at length on the injustices meted out to him seven years ago. He obsessed over people long gone, whom he blamed for spoiling his dreams of a more prosperous Pakistan. He also spoke extensively on a conspiracy allegedly hatched against him some 10 years ago by a military general in cahoots with his main rivals. But was the public listening?

It seems that Mr Sharif has missed the writing on the wall. His party has been in power for more than two years now, either directly or through its proxies. It is widely perceived that he has been running the show from behind the scenes: first via 'remote control' from London and then more directly from Lahore. The public expects a politician of his stature to have some kind of game plan to steer the nation out of the present crisis. It is jarring that Mr Sharif refuses to acknowledge this in his public messaging, nor does he share a vision for the future. Furthermore, Mr Sharif has conceded the moral high ground he took after his forced ouster in 2017 by so far tolerating an expanded role for the establishment in politics and governance. Will his resumption of control of the PML-N change that stance? Unlike his younger brother, the elder Sharif has traditionally sought more power and authority for the civilian government. If he asserts himself again, would this disturb the present equilibrium between the government and the powers that be? These are all questions that will invite much scrutiny of the role Mr Sharif is once again set to play as PML-N president. Lamenting the past won't save Mr Sharif's politics, but motivating the people and giving them hope may inspire renewed faith in his leadership. Is he capable of reinventing himself?

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## Debt trap

PAKISTAN'S debt stock has grown exponentially in recent years. So have debt payments, putting pressure on the budget. With the government running an unsustainably high fiscal deficit that averaged 7.3pc of the economic output in the past five years, it is not surprising that the national debt has already surged to Rs78.9tr — including a domestic debt of Rs43.4tr and external loans of Rs32.9tr.

The country is in a debt trap where it must borrow more to pay back its existing debt — domestic and external loans both. It is thus only natural for annual debt payments to also spike. For example, the authorities had anticipated debt servicing to jump to Rs7.3tr or almost 58pc of the budgeted expenditure for the ongoing fiscal. However, according to a report, they have now revised these estimates to Rs8.3tr.

The finance ministry's Mid-Year Budget Review Report for the outgoing year confirms these concerns. The report shows that the nation's debt payments spiralled by more than 64pc to Rs4.2tr during the first six months to December, an increase attributable not only to the mounting stock of debt accumulated to finance the fiscal deficit but also to the surge in the cost of domestic debt because of a record-high interest rate of 22pc. The report says the expenditure on debt servicing during the six-month period far outpaced tax revenue growth, bringing "spending on development to zilch".

In the report, the ministry has blamed elevated domestic interest rates for our growing debt servicing woes. With the government covering nearly 80pc of its fiscal deficit through commercial bank loans amid drying official foreign flows, the interest rates are of primary concern as domestic debt payments accounted for nearly 90pc of the total debt servicing costs during the first half of the fiscal. The cost of borrowing has proved to be a major shock for the entire economy, and not just for the government, as new private investment has come to a halt and growth has stagnated.

What the report doesn't discuss are the reasons behind this debt trap. While the higher interest rates are a burden, the main challenge is the government's failure to control its fiscal deficit that is forcing it to accumulate more debt every day. Indeed, a reduction in interest rates will provide relief but will not solve the issue of burgeoning deficit and debt accumulation.

The task before the government is to boost its tax-to-GDP ratio to the global average by taxing the economy's untaxed and undertaxed sectors, as well as eliminating wasteful expenditure to cut the fiscal deficit to sustainable levels to minimise its borrowing requirements for financing the budget. Do the authorities realise this and are they moving in this direction? We will know once the budget is announced next month.

# Margalla fires

THE Margalla Hills — the sprawling 12,605-hectare national park — were once again engulfed in flames, with 15 fires breaking out simultaneously on Tuesday. After an intense eight-hour operation, involving over 200 firefighters and three helicopters, the fires were extinguished. The alarming nature of the incident prompted Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi to order a probe and the registration of an FIR. The Margalla Hills endure a perilous fire season from April to June, with incidents often abating only with the arrival of the monsoon rains in July. This year, the frequency and intensity of the fires have been unprecedented. Just a day before this major incident, two significant fires were extinguished after a seven-hour effort. These recurring fires can be attributed to many different factors. Climate change has undoubtedly played a significant role, with rising temperatures creating drier conditions conducive to fires. Human negligence is another critical factor; careless disposal of cigarettes, unregulated barbecues, and the carrying of flammable materials by visitors have repeatedly sparked fires. Additionally, there are reports of disgruntled villagers, excluded from seasonal firefighting employment, deliberately setting fires as a form of protest.

Efforts by the Capital Development Authority and the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board have been commendable yet insufficient. The CDA's recent hiring of over 400 local firefighters and establishment of 38 pickets demonstrates a proactive approach. However, the lack of coordination and persistent turf battles between the CDA and IWMB hinder efficient fire management. A unified command structure, as suggested by experts, is essential for an effective response. Moreover, stricter enforcement of regulations prohibiting barbecues, smoking, bonfires, burning and littering of garbage and plastic, the carrying of flammable items such as lighters, charcoal, matchsticks, bottles of petrol or kerosene oil, and cutting down of trees is sorely needed. With climate resilience, public cooperation, and inter-agency coordination, we can protect this natural heritage from further devastation.

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# Up in smoke

ON World No Tobacco Day, it is imperative that Pakistan confront the creeping threat of tobacco use. This year's theme, "protecting children from tobacco industry interference", underscores the need to shield our youth from the often insidious tactics employed by the tobacco industry. With 37m 13- to 15-year-olds using tobacco globally, the gravity of the situation cannot be overstated. In Pakistan, tobacco use leads to over 160,000 deaths annually. The surging popularity of e-cigarettes among the youth, with companies exploiting child-friendly flavours and digital platforms to hook the next generation, further exacerbates this crisis. Despite all this, tobacco companies argue against taxation, claiming it would spur illicit trade. However, there is evidence taxes reduce tobacco consumption while increasing government revenue. With the budget around the corner, health experts in Pakistan have proposed a 26.6pc increase in FED on tobacco products to deter smoking, particularly among youth and low-income groups. This approach, they say, offers a "triple win": reducing the number of smokers by 517,000, increasing tax revenue by 12.1pc, and recovering 19.8pc of healthcare costs associated with tobacco use. They have also made a case for the introduction of a single-tier taxation system, replacing the current multi-tier one, to streamline collection and combat industry manipulation.

It is equally essential to crack down on cigarette smuggling, which leads to the circulation of non-compliant cigarette packs without health warnings. The FBR has taken steps by seizing illegal cigarettes worth Rs96m, but more comprehensive steps are needed. These include stringent enforcement of anti-tobacco laws and implementation of the track and trace system to ensure all cigarette packs bear legitimate tax stamps. Enhanced public awareness initiatives about the dangers of tobacco use are also crucial. We must act decisively to protect future generations from the deadly grip of tobacco or risk having their health go up in smoke.

Published in Dawn, May 31st, 2024

# ‘Mob justice’ courts

IN order to tackle the plague of ‘mob justice’ that has spread across the country, the Council of Islamic Ideology on Wednesday once again proposed setting up special courts to try such cases. The CII had earlier made this suggestion both after last year’s episode of communal violence in Jaranwala, as well as the Priyantha Kumara lynching in 2021. The latest suggestion comes after violence in Sargodha last week linked to an alleged act of desecration. Two specific strands are visible in the brutal trend of mob justice in Pakistan. The first involves the highly sensitive issue of blasphemy. Often trivial matters or personal disputes are exploited and given a religious colour, and mobs are worked up by extremist elements to take ‘revenge’ against those involved in alleged desecration. Victims of this sort of violence include both Muslims and members of other faiths, and often investigations reveal that the allegations of sacrilege are completely fabricated. Yet the mob waits for no proof, and several innocent people have paid with their lives due to this zealotry. The second strand involves lynching of those accused of committing crime. Because the state has failed to control crime, agitated citizens often take it upon themselves to deliver punishment to suspected offenders. There has been a string of such lynchings in Karachi over the past few months, while the 2010 murder of two brothers by a mob in Sialkot was also the result of spurious robbery allegations.

Ideally, the criminal justice system and the existing courts should have the capabilities to investigate and try cases of mob violence. But because this alarming trend appears to be growing, special courts could be used to deal with the problem. If the state does establish ‘mob justice’ courts, they need to be staffed with regular judicial officials, and not members of the clergy. Moreover, they should deal with cases of alleged desecration, as well as mob violence committed in the name of punishing ‘criminals’. These institutions should not go the way of antiterrorism courts, which were set up to deliver ‘speedy’ justice, yet have failed to live up to their mandate. Legal remedies are just one aspect of the issue. To prevent mob violence from becoming the norm, and stop Pakistan’s descent into anarchy, society needs a long-term deradicalisation programme.

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# Uncertain budget plans

WITH the Shehbaz Sharif-led government still fine-tuning the next budget, it might be too early to speculate upon the contents of the document. We will have to wait for a few more days before the budget proposals are firmed up and their contents finalised.

But what is certain is that in trying to achieve a balance between its political compulsions — providing succour to households no longer able to hold up against backbreaking inflation — and the necessity of plugging a deep fiscal hole in the economy, the government is faced with one of its most difficult challenges.

The confusion in the minds of the party leadership on how to deal with this paradox became even more evident on Wednesday when a PML-N meeting chaired by party leader Nawaz Sharif and attended by the prime minister decided to prepare a ‘people-friendly’ budget while adhering to IMF dictates. Not surprisingly, there was no official word either from the PML-N or the federal government on the outcome of the discussions. However, it is abundantly clear that the prime minister, caught between public expectations and harsh IMF demands, is in a fix.

The confusion in the PML-N over what shape the budget should take is reflective of the country’s volatile political situation. On the one hand, the ruling party is not ready to lose more political capital by taking harsh measures, and on the other, it must swallow the bitter pill of stern IMF demands, if it wants to access international funding, which is crucial for reviving the economy.

At the same time, PML-N president Nawaz Sharif, who resumed his position some days ago after a long hiatus of six years following his disqualification, needs something tangible on the economic front to not just defeat the narrative of his popular arch-rival Imran Khan in Punjab but also maintain his existing public support. His party has already suffered in the February elections due to the extremely poor economic performance of the previous Shehbaz Sharif administration, which saw monthly inflation skyrocket to 38pc and interest rates jump to a record high of 22pc, besides industrial closures and job losses.

It is, therefore, safe to assume that the PML-N will do its best to meet the IMF's macroeconomic targets at the federal level, whilst taking populist measures in the Punjab budget to revive its party network in the province.

The PTI government in KP, which announced its next budget last week — much before the federal budget in a break from convention — has already shown other provinces how they can use their respective budget resources to execute the party programmes to keep their electorate happy without diverging from the IMF's conditions. There is little likelihood of other parties not giving in to this temptation.

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# Dawn Vocabulary

1. **Manhandled:** To handle roughly or with force.  
Sentence: The protesters were manhandled by the police during the demonstration.
2. **Plummeted:** To fall or drop straight down at a high speed.  
Sentence: Wheat rates plummeted in the market due to oversupply and low demand.
3. **Streamlining:** To make a process or system more efficient and effective.  
Sentence: The company implemented new software to streamline their inventory management.
4. **Curtailment:** The act of reducing or limiting something.  
Sentence: The curtailment of government subsidies led to higher prices for consumers.
5. **Reckless:** Acting without thinking about the consequences, often in a careless or dangerous manner.  
Sentence: The reckless driver caused a serious accident on the highway.
6. **Volatility:** The tendency of something to change unpredictably, especially in price or value.  
Sentence: The stock market experienced high volatility during the economic crisis.
7. **Resurgence:** The act of rising or coming back into prominence or importance.  
Sentence: There has been a resurgence of interest in traditional farming methods.
8. **Devolved:** Transferred or delegated power or responsibility to a lower level, such as from the central government to regional authorities.

Sentence: As part of decentralization efforts, certain powers were devolved to local councils.

9. Tenacity: The quality of being persistent and determined.

Sentence: Despite facing numerous setbacks, her tenacity helped her achieve her goals.

10. Equitable: Fair and impartial; ensuring justice and equality for all involved.

Sentence: The distribution of resources should be equitable to promote social harmony.

11. Mandate: An official order or command to carry out a particular action or policy. Sentence: The government's mandate to combat cybercrime led to the establishment of the National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency.

12. Orbiter: A spacecraft designed to orbit a celestial body, such as the moon or a planet. Sentence: Pakistan's orbiter, part of the iCube-Qamar mission, is set to capture images from the lunar surface.

13. Opaque: Not transparent or clear; difficult to understand or penetrate. Sentence: The government's opaque approach to launching the new cybercrime authority has raised concerns among digital rights groups.

14. Encroaching: Gradually intruding or advancing on something, typically in a way that causes harm or annoyance. Sentence: Increased surveillance measures risk encroaching upon citizens' privacy rights.

15. Malaise: A general feeling of discomfort, illness, or unease, often without any specific cause. Sentence: There's a sense of malaise in the city due to rising crime rates and ineffective law enforcement.

16. Cahoots: In collusion or partnership with someone, especially for illicit purposes. Sentence: The drug traffickers were working in cahoots with corrupt officials to evade law enforcement.

17. **Bolstered:** Strengthened or reinforced. Sentence: The government aims to bolster the capabilities of the new cybercrime agency through increased resources and training.
18. **Procedural:** Relating to the methods or processes followed in a particular activity or organization. Sentence: The procedural chaos resulting from the transition to the new cybercrime authority delayed its effectiveness.
19. **Upliftment:** The process of raising someone or something to a higher level, especially morally, socially, or economically. Sentence: The government's initiatives for the upliftment of impoverished regions are crucial for reducing crime rates.
20. **Rehabilitative:** Intended to restore someone to a normal or healthy condition through therapy or training. Sentence: Rehabilitative programs aimed at reintegrating former criminals into society are essential for reducing recidivism rates.
21. **Contraction:** (noun) the process of becoming smaller or less. Sentence: The contraction in federal infrastructure spending has impacted development projects across the country.
22. **Racket:** (noun) an illegal or dishonest scheme for making money. Sentence: The organ trafficking racket preyed on the vulnerability of desperate individuals seeking financial relief.
23. **Inconsequential:** (adjective) not important or significant. Sentence: While the arrest of the security guards may seem inconsequential, it sends a strong message against public displays of arms.
24. **Disincentivise:** (verb) to discourage or deter from taking a particular action. Sentence: By banning public displays of arms, the DHA aims to disincentivize the practice of hiring intimidating private security guards.

25.       Quell: (verb) to suppress or put an end to something.  
Sentence: The prime minister attempted to quell the protests by addressing some of the demonstrators' demands.
26.       Revival: (noun) the act of bringing something back to life or prominence.  
Sentence: The resurgence of organ trafficking calls for immediate action to prevent its revival as a widespread criminal enterprise.
27.       Tussle: (noun) a vigorous struggle or conflict.  
Sentence: The disagreement between economic policymakers represents a tussle over the direction of privatization efforts.
28.       Compulsion: (noun) a strong, irresistible urge to do something.  
Sentence: The economy's need for drastic changes creates a compulsion for policymakers to undertake politically unpopular reforms.
29.       Ostentatious: (adjective) characterized by vulgar or pretentious display; designed to impress or attract notice.  
Sentence: The practice of flaunting heavily armed guards reflects an ostentatious display of wealth and power
30.       Grievances: (noun) real or imagined wrongs or other causes for complaint or protest, especially unfair treatment.  
Sentence: The protests in AJK are fueled by grievances over governance, service delivery, and economic issues.
31.       Defamation: (noun) the action of damaging the good reputation of someone; slander or libel.  
Sentence: The proposed Punjab Defamation Bill aims to address concerns about fake news but raises fears of restricting freedom of speech.

32.        Draconian: (adjective) excessively harsh and severe.  
Sentence: Critics argue that the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, imposed draconian limitations on digital rights.
33.        Neutralised: (verb) rendered ineffective or harmless.  
Sentence: Efforts to expand the scope of Peca were neutralised by journalists and rights activists.
34.        Unsavoury: (adjective) unpleasant, morally offensive, or disagreeable.  
Sentence: The public spat between the Chief Minister and the Governor is taking an unsavoury turn, affecting governance in the province.
35.        Vitiate: (verb) spoil or impair the quality or efficiency of.  
Sentence: The war of words between political leaders is vitiating the atmosphere and hindering efforts to address the province's issues.
36.        Confrontation: (noun) a hostile or argumentative situation or meeting between opposing parties.  
Sentence: The ongoing tussle between the Chief Minister and the Governor has escalated into a confrontation that is detrimental to governance.
37.        Ominous: (adjective) giving the impression that something bad or unpleasant is going to happen; threatening.  
Sentence: The demands being made by the IMF and the proposed carbon tax levy sound ominous for Pakistani households.
38.        Mitigate: (verb) make less severe, serious, or painful.  
Sentence: Urgent action is needed to mitigate the impacts of heatwaves and protect vulnerable populations.
39.        Indignation: (noun) anger or annoyance provoked by what is perceived as unfair treatment.  
Sentence: The Interior Minister expressed his indignation at being named publicly as an owner of offshore properties.

40.       Scrutiny: (noun) critical observation or examination.  
Sentence: The leaked Dubai property data is under scrutiny, prompting calls for an inquiry into potential tax evasion and money laundering.
41.       Cessation: The fact or process of ending or being brought to an end.  
Sentence: Despite numerous attempts, there has been no cessation of terrorist violence in the region.
- 42.
43.       Insidious: Proceeding in a gradual, subtle way, but with harmful effects.  
Sentence: The tobacco industry's insidious tactics target vulnerable youth through enticing flavors and digital marketing.
44.       Exponentially: In a manner indicating rapid growth or increase.  
Sentence: Pakistan's debt stock has grown exponentially in recent years, posing significant economic challenges.
45.       Confrontational: Tending to deal with situations in an aggressive way; hostile or argumentative.  
Sentence: The confrontational stance between the federal and provincial governments has hindered progress on key issues.
46.       Squandered: Wasted in a reckless or foolish manner.  
Sentence: Nawaz Sharif's speech lamented the potential he believes he has squandered in recent years.
47.       Deter: Discourage (someone) from doing something by instilling doubt or fear of the consequences.  
Sentence: Increasing taxes on tobacco products could deter youth from starting smoking.
48.       Perilous: Full of danger or risk.  
Sentence: The recurring fires in the Margalla Hills pose a perilous threat to the national park's ecosystem.

49.       Insinuated: Suggest or hint (something bad or reprehensible) in an indirect and unpleasant way.  
Sentence: The article insinuated that the government's actions were driven by ulterior motives.
50.       Deradicalisation: The process of persuading someone to reject radical beliefs and violent ideologies.  
Sentence: Society needs a long-term deradicalisation programme to counter the spread of extremist ideologies.