

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of September 2019

Note: This is a compiled work by the Team The CSS Point. The DAWN.COM is the owner of the content available in the document. This document is compiled to support css aspirants and This document is NOT FOR SALE. You may order this booklet and only printing and shipping cost will be incurred.

Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

www.thecsspoint.com



10012345678902



BUY CSS BOOKS ONLINE

CASH ON DELIVERY

ALL OVER PAKISTAN

<https://cssbooks.net>

**ALL COMPULSORY AND
OPTIONAL SUBJECTS BOOK
FROM SINGLE POINT**

ORDER NOW

03336042057 - 0726540141

DOWNLOAD

CSS Notes, Books, MCQs, Magazines



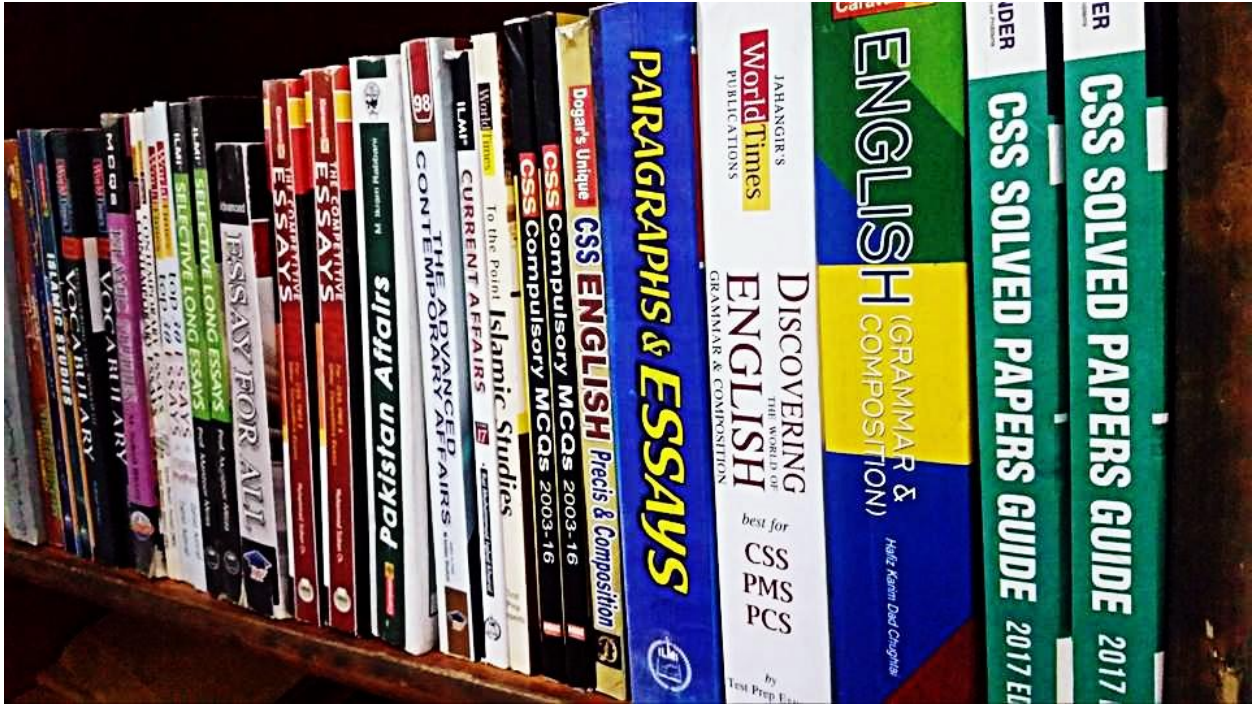
THE CSS POINT
Yes We Can Do It!

WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM

- **Download CSS Notes**
- **Download CSS Books**
- **Download CSS Magazines**
- **Download CSS MCQs**
- **Download CSS Past Papers**

*The CSS Point, Pakistan's The Best
Online FREE Web source for All CSS
Aspirants.*

Email: info@thecsspoint.com



BUY CSS / PMS / NTS & GENERAL KNOWLEDGE BOOKS
ONLINE **CASH ON DELIVERY** ALL OVER PAKISTAN

Visit Now:

WWW.CSSBOOKS.NET

For Oder & Inquiry
Call/SMS/WhatsApp

0333 6042057 – 0726 540316



www.danzoman.com

Kids Clothing Online Shop

Best available Kids Dresses in Pakistan

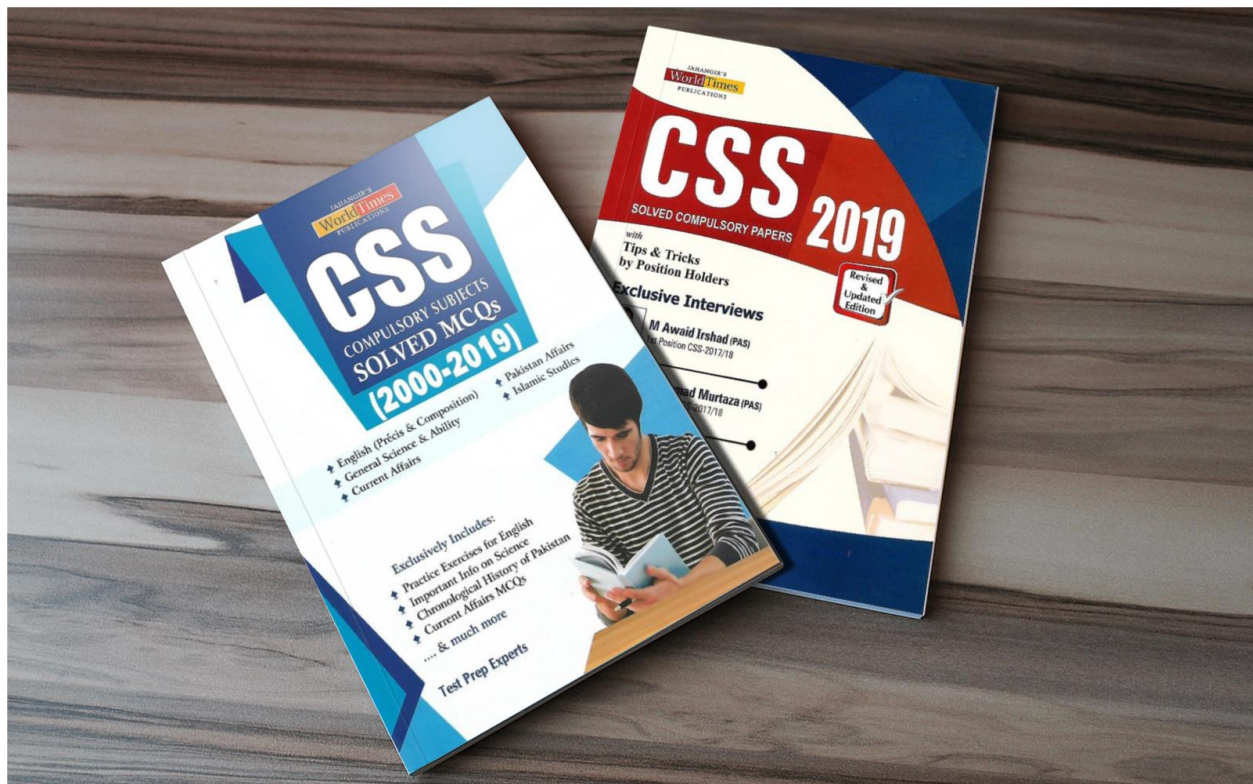


CSS Compulsory Solved MCQs from 2000 to 2019

&

CSS Compulsory Solved Subjective Papers from 2016 to 2019

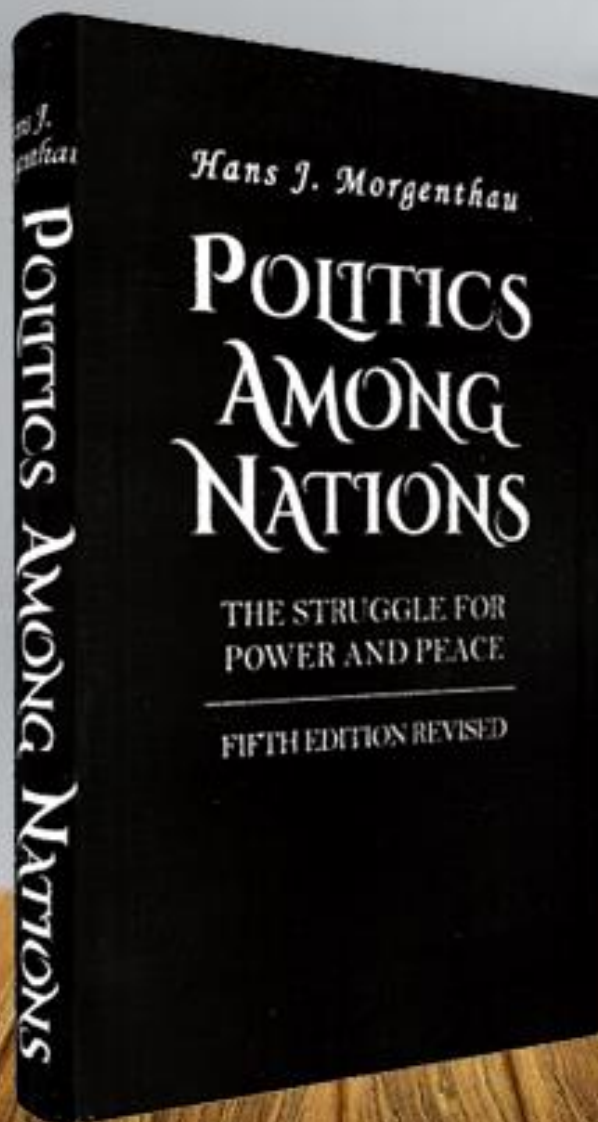
ORDER NOW!



Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power & Peace

By Hans Morgenthau

Order Now



30% OFF

CALL OR SMS
03336042057

Contents

Solidarity With Kashmir	11
Security in Muharram	12
Crackdown on Gutka.....	13
Economic anxiety	14
Leaving the OIC?	15
Human rights cell	16
Growing humanitarian crisis	17
Dengue outbreak	18
Domestic cricket revamp	19
Reality and rhetoric.....	20
Torture in custody.....	22
Preserving history	23
GIDC ordinance withdrawal	24
By ordinance alone	25
Medical waste	26
Keeping Kartarpur open.....	27
Inflation rebasing	28
Misbah's dual role.....	29
Growing tax base	30
Locust invasion.....	31
Population problem	32
Deciding Afghanistan's fate	33
Twin attacks	34
Women workers.....	35
Halting Afghan talks	36
Endangered freedom	37
Above the law?	38
Police brutality	39
Netanyahu's mischief.....	40
Players' pullout	41
Lopsided accountability	42
Battle for Karachi	43

Dengue returns	45
Trade deficit narrows	46
Wages of acrimony	47
Prisoners of injustice	48
Buzdar's new avatar	49
University funding	50
Dress code for girls	51
Focus on Kashmir	52
Domestic violence	53
Need for urban oases	54
The economy in focus	55
Ghotki violence	56
'A'-class accountability?	58
Maryam's place in PML-N	59
Attacks on oilfields	60
Private school regulation	61
Trump on Kashmir	62
Kasur's fault line	63
Heart disease prevention	64
Media courts	65
Khursheed Shah's arrest	66
Nimrita's death	68
Maternal and child health	68
IMF impressions	69
Torkham crossing	70
Regrettable ordinance	71
Climate emergency	73
Beyond cricket	74
Kashmir & militancy	75
From Nepra to NAB	76
Rabies scourge	77
Blocking websites unlawfully	77
Slide in SDGs	79

Digitising history	80
Trump's 'offer'	81
Auto sector woes	82
Literary storm.....	83
Earthquake crisis.....	84
PIA finances.....	85
Dengue again	86
Mediator's role?.....	87
Justice: 18 years late	88
Unsung heroes	89
LNG expansion	90
Police reforms	91
World Rabies Day.....	92
UNGA speech	93
Justice for Qandeel	94
Detaining citizens.....	95
Afghan election	96
Business ease	98
Police excesses.....	99

Solidarity With Kashmir

TENS of thousands of citizens attended public gatherings large and small across the country in answer to the government's call to demonstrate solidarity with Kashmiris on Friday — day 26 of India's brutal clampdown of the occupied region. Where Kashmiris have been denied the right to be heard, Pakistanis collectively lent their voices, in scenes resonant with the support and sympathy they have for Kashmiris and their struggle for self-determination.

Indeed, Pakistan has long been telling the world about India's blatant human rights abuses in occupied Kashmir. But now, despite the fact that Delhi may believe it can continue its odious campaign in the held region with impunity, many independent international voices too are finally noticing that the 'world's largest democracy' is unleashing torture and death on the Kashmiri people.

Read: Stories of torture following annexation by India emerge from occupied Kashmir

As per a BBC report, Delhi's military enforcers in the held region have undertaken a campaign of violence and intimidation, using extrajudicial methods to torture and maim Kashmiris suspected of having sympathies for freedom fighters. One victim who spoke to the British media outlet said he implored his tormentors: "Don't beat us, just shoot us."

The accounts of Kashmiri villagers as documented by the BBC are truly horrifying; they reveal a sordid campaign of beatings, night raids and electric shocks. There are graphic pictures of victims beaten black and blue, while one Kashmiri youth said the Indians threatened to frame him if he didn't become an informant. The Indian military has, predictably, dismissed the report as "baseless". However, it is also a fact that officials and doctors refused to speak to the media, indicating the wave of fear that has gripped the held region.

The BBC report is important for many reasons; primarily, it shines a light into a region that has been under Delhi's lockdown for nearly a month. With such little information coming out of held Kashmir, reports such as these play a key role in exposing India's charade that 'all is well' in the occupied region.

The fact is that IJK has been turned into a giant concentration camp for its inhabitants, as Modi and company seek to subdue the region in classic colonial fashion.

If India claims that the situation is normal in Kashmir, then it should open the held region to international observers to assess matters for themselves. But obviously this will not be done, as the RSS fanatics ruling Delhi have something — in fact plenty — to hide in IJK from the world.

Now, it is incumbent upon the UN, as well as the flag-bearers of democracy and human rights, to ask India to explain itself.

Can a state that claims to respect fundamental rights be allowed to get away with such brutality in this day and age? The Kashmiris who have been tortured and maimed by Delhi's armed goons will certainly want to know.

Security in Muharram

LAW-ENFORCEMENT agencies in the country are once again tasked with the sensitive job of ensuring complete security during Muharram. The system is being fine-tuned at various levels and the calls for alert are accompanied by quick refreshers about the annual assignment. Religious leaders belonging to various sects and particularly those who are going to host religious events during the month are being asked to liaise closely with the police in their area. The participation of these organisers in the security arrangements is absolutely essential to get the critical balance right. Law-enforcement personnel have to be on their toes and one step ahead of anyone with any adventurous ideas in their mind. The arrest of two people in Taxila the other day over an attempt at spreading sectarian hatred is an example of how keen the mischief-makers are to use the relatively new tools easily available to them. Thus social media is another front the police and others on their side must keep a close eye on. Managing public events all over the world is always exacting for law enforcement. The idea is to not intimidate but facilitate the large numbers taking part, providing them with as conducive an environment as possible. In this case, since the Muharram events are going to be spread over many days, in fact over several weeks, this security effort must guard against laxity. The effort has to be sustained by regular monitoring, frequent checks and reinforcements and encouragement, most importantly from the high command.

The security system set up during Muharram over the last few years has been at its most vigilant. Expectations are high that this year, too, the arrangements will be top-level. One peculiar but understandable recent tendency is to look at violence in Muharram, or the lack of it, as a barometer for terrorism in the country. Now, while there may have been a drop in the incidence of acts of terrorism generally, this must not lead to any complacency in the ranks of the law enforcers out to perform their duty in good numbers. There have been in the recent past incidents obviously aimed at creating sect-based disharmony. No one should doubt the intent of the troublemakers, and let there be no false sense of security just because these attacks have occurred at a distance from 'your home' or 'your city'. The security apparatus must be particularly vigilant during Muharram.

Crackdown on Gutka.

FOR a type of potentially fatal yet easily preventable disease, and one that often causes terrible disfigurement, oral cancer continues to afflict a shocking number of people in this country. According to latest figures by the World Cancer Research Fund, Pakistan ranks second in the list of countries with the highest incidence of this disease. In fact, oral cancer is the most common type of cancer among men in Pakistan. The consumption of gutka, mainpuri and other concoctions of chewing tobacco that is prevalent in certain sections of society — mainly in Sindh — is largely to blame for the statistics. On Wednesday, the Sindh High Court ordered a province-wide crackdown against the manufacturers and sellers of these noxious substances. Interestingly, this was in response to an order by a district and sessions judge who ruled — in a departure from all facts to the contrary — that gutka and mainpuri did not fall under the ambit of sections of the Pakistan Penal Code that deal with acts "likely to spread infection or disease dangerous to life". The SHC has rightly underscored that the sale and manufacture of chewing tobacco preparations is illegal.

However, many such crackdowns have been ordered and proved ineffectual in the past. Several factors impede effective compliance — apathy, ignorance and local financial stakes in a hugely lucrative racket. Local administrations turn a blind eye, or at the very least do not bestir themselves to act effectively. Of course there are periodic raids by police here and there, and a few individuals hauled up every few weeks, but soon enough, it is business as usual. Many

lower cadre cops are themselves 'stakeholders' in small 'factories' situated in low-income localities where everyone, including children, has easy access to these lethal concoctions. The provincial administration must expedite the passage of legislation dealing specifically with the manufacture and sale of gutka and mainpuri, and considerably enhance punishment for those involved in it. Moreover, it must devise an effective mechanism to prevent this game of whack-a-mole.

Economic anxiety

TWO months into the ongoing economic adjustment and there are signs emerging of growing anxiety within the government. The IMF programme that the government signed on to in June carried some of the steepest and most challenging targets ever seen, and the task of meeting them is proving to be a herculean feat. Already there is clamour within industry circles about the rising cost of doing business coupled with collapsing demand, and reports from industry leaders suggest many manufacturing outfits are seeing an approximately 30pc decline in sales. At this rate, it will take three months before inventory levels pile up to a point where production lines could be forced to close, resulting in massive lay-offs across the economy. This comes after the large-scale manufacturing sector posted a near 54pc contraction last fiscal year, the first such massive contraction in a decade, so an intensification of the trend is hardly something the economy can afford. Coupled with this is the aggressive revenue collection drive that the government has no choice but to pursue to meet a historic 30pc hike in the revenue target for this fiscal year. This pursuit has pushed the government into a confrontation with retailers countrywide, as well as vigorous entreaties from industry because the documentation measures are resulting in a severe disruption of their distributor networks.

There are good reasons for there to be anxiety at the highest levels in times such as these, with people reeling from the multiple impacts of exchange rate depreciation, rising inflation, aggressive taxation measures, collapsing market demand, erosion of purchasing power and sales, high interest rates, to name just a few of the elements that mark today's malaise. Meanwhile, the State Bank governor appeared before a large gathering of industry leaders in Karachi to underline the importance of building reserves, stabilising the external sector and to remind them of the pressures that built up in the economy over the previous

five years, pressures that need to be released before there is any talk of growth. And the adviser to the prime minister on finance issued a rare recorded statement trying to reassure the public that some sort of plan is in the works to address people's concerns.

Even as the disquiet in government circles is understandable, it must not yield to panic, nor should it lead to any backtracking from the tough measures adopted for stabilisation. More focus is needed to protect the poor from rising inflation and find ways to better target the adjustment onto those who can afford it. But the government now needs to signal resolve as well as a firm sense of purpose. Better communication is key to this, and the financial adviser as well as the State Bank governor need to ramp up their outreach efforts with the business community as they move forward down this difficult path.

Leaving the OIC?

WHILE founded on the noble aims of promoting fraternity amongst Islamic nations and speaking up for the rights of Muslims across the globe, the OIC has been known more for its inaction where the suffering of the world's Muslims is concerned.

Despite counting as its members powerful sheikdoms awash in petrodollars, as well as those boasting militaries of considerable might, the OIC has mostly remained a spectator in the global arena, issuing meek statements and powerless resolutions in the face of brutal human rights abuses targeting Muslims. The crises of Palestine, Bosnia, the Rohingya and Kashmir, amongst others, are all testimony to this.

However, despite its ineffectiveness, would it be prudent for Pakistan to sever ties with the multilateral body, as suggested by former Senate chairman Raza Rabbani in the upper house on Friday?

"The bubble of an Islamic ummah has burst," said the veteran lawmaker with regard to the OIC's silence on the fresh violence in India-held Kashmir. He very rightly went on to point out the actions of some of the 'stalwarts' of the OIC — particularly the Gulf Arabs — who have awarded, pampered and showered Narendra Modi with multibillion dollar deals in the aftermath of the scrapping of Kashmir's autonomy by Delhi.

While the sad fact is that Kashmiris today stand largely alone in their uphill battle for rights against India, it would be imprudent for Pakistan to leave the OIC in a huff.

The world's — specifically the ummah's — silence on Kashmir is condemnable. However, now more than ever, Pakistan must play a leading role to shake the OIC out of its slumber and realise the gravity of the situation in Kashmir as well as other trouble spots in the world where Muslims are suffering grave human rights abuses.

As stated above, the situations in Palestine and Kashmir, as well as with the Rohingyas and Uighurs, are incredibly grim, and require a concerted and firm voice from the OIC. Moreover, the monster of Islamophobia threatens millions of peaceful Muslims the world over, targeted by bigots due to the actions of a tiny minority of militants. Alone, Pakistan's will be merely a voice in the wilderness. But by remaining within the OIC, it can convince the body to take a clear position to stand with the weak and the oppressed of the world, and respond with the collective diplomatic and socio-political clout of the Muslim world to global crises.

Human rights cell

RECENTLY, the Sindh police established a 'human rights' cell to ensure justice and protection of the fundamental rights of marginalised groups. The stated purpose of the specialised unit is to help the burdened law enforcement forces function more efficiently by overseeing complaints related to women, children and minorities. The move is undoubtedly a welcome one, and a good place to start in creating awareness of the concept of inalienable rights in a country where might is often right. From once being rejected as a foreign-driven agenda, it is a positive sign to see more acceptability of the language of human rights, and this is thanks to the lifelong struggles of many activists, lawyers and lawmakers. A specialised human rights unit would hopefully make it easier for disempowered groups to register their grievances with the police, which already suffers from a public relations problem, due to a lack of sensitivity in their training. For instance, when the family of 10-year-old Farishta, fearing she had been abducted, tried to register a case with the Islamabad police in May, not only were their fears dismissed, but they were subjected to callous questioning, including being asked if the child had 'eloped' with someone. Farishta's mutilated body was found a few

days later. Incidences such as this are the reason why ordinary citizens without connections to power are apprehensive or do not feel safe approaching the police for such sensitive matters.

Additionally, while law enforcement is supposed to uphold the rights of citizens, they are often found violating some basic principles. Thus, the human rights discourse must also extend to policing. Extrajudicial killings, torture, forced confinement (or abduction) without trial, everyday discriminatory practices and corruption are just some of the ways this noble profession to protect and serve others is tainted by mistrust. While it is unfair to categorise all police officials in a negative light, there is a lot more work to be done when it comes to improving the culture they operate in.

Growing humanitarian crisis

THE scale of it is eye-watering: 1.9m people excluded from the final list of the National Register of Citizens in Assam, published by the Indian government on Saturday.

Read: Two million, mostly Muslims, face statelessness as India publishes controversial citizenship list

These are the people — mostly Bengali-speaking Muslims — that have been deemed to be ‘foreigners’ by virtue of being unable to prove that they or their forebears lived or entered India before March 1971, prior to which Bengalis were actively encouraged to migrate to India. Many have been living in Assam for decades, or have known no other home but India.

With the threshold for documentary proof high, and the appeals process long and murky, the process of updating the NRC has been mired in controversy given the BJP’s penchant for stoking anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant sentiment.

Narendra Modi’s home minister has gone as far as to promise that the NRC will be implemented across India, to root out those who he describes as ‘infiltrators’ and has likened to vermin.

Given that discrimination and dehumanisation are often precursors to a potential genocide, it is little wonder that human rights groups are so alarmed. Over 1,100 people are already imprisoned in Assam’s so-called foreigner detention centres.

There are fears that mass internment is impending — or worse, such as forced displacements and genocidal massacres.

If the Rohingya crisis of 2017, when hundreds of thousands were stripped of Burmese citizenship and forced to flee Myanmar into Bangladesh, seemed a colossal human tragedy, what may occur in Assam might well be even more unimaginably catastrophic.

Rendering people stateless is an inhumane practice.

If an individual does not legally belong anywhere, then no nation is responsible for ensuring their rights, survival or even existence. While the 1954 UN Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons does ensure basic protections, denying individuals a national identity effectively denies them the right to have rights, and states have in fact used the revocation of citizenship as a political tool to punish opponents and critics, and even change demographics. This is why even the handful of cases of Western-born IS fighters and collaborators being stripped of citizenship has been so contentious; though it is important to stress that, here, it is the lives of countless entirely innocent civilians that are at stake.

Rendering people of Bangladeshi-origin stateless — at risk of being alienated, killed or shunted about in internment centres and refugee camps — is an incalculable humanitarian crisis in the making.

India's move in Assam will undoubtedly strain its ties with Bangladesh — which has shown no indication it will accept these 'unwanted' humans — but it is incumbent on both nations to negotiate a reasonable and humane settlement to this brewing crisis. Bangladesh must come to some sort of an agreement with India, and soon, as well as reconsider its policies with regard to the status of the stateless Rohingya seeking refuge within its borders.

Dengue outbreak

ONCE again, Peshawar is infested with disease-carrying mosquitoes. In the past month alone, 1,200 cases of dengue have been confirmed in many rural parts of the district, with hospitals seeing patients on a daily basis. Following recent rainfall in the country and rising temperatures, which provide an ideal breeding ground for dengue larvae, experts had been warning of the potential for an

outbreak. In order to mitigate a health catastrophe, officials had to ensure district-wide cleanliness and drain out stagnant rainwater from low lying areas. Peshawar is particularly vulnerable and struggles with containing the spread of dengue each summer. Several cases of the disease were detected in a Peshawar village back in July, when 15 people were admitted to hospital, complaining of bloody vomiting, headache and fever. However, all warning signs were ignored, and a lack of coordination between the various district departments to ensure cleanliness, water supply to residents who had resorted to storing it, and fumigation efforts, have led to the current situation. This is not the first time the city has witnessed such a health disaster. In 2017, over 50 deaths were recorded after thousands of residents were admitted to hospital, and hundreds were diagnosed with the illness. Peshawar's Khyber Teaching Hospital alone recorded 831 patients. Many of the areas that have reported dengue cases this time around are the same that were struggling with the outbreak two years ago.

Back then, KP reached out to the Punjab government to help it control the crisis. Health officials from Punjab informed physicians how to take care of ailing patients and stop the spread of the disease. The Punjab government, under then chief minister Shahbaz Sharif, had effectively combated its own dengue epidemic in 2011, aided with the knowledge and expertise of Sri Lankan medical teams, and enacted new laws to prevent such a health emergency from recurring. Indeed, such interprovincial initiatives are the need of the hour, but politics and pride often get in the way of public health concerns. For instance, when Sindh was struggling with a similar outbreak in 2015, it refused assistance and knowledge from the centre. Now, 235 cases of dengue have been reported in Karachi, which bizarrely seem to have largely affected Chinese nationals working at a nuclear plant site near Hawke's Bay beach. Perhaps it is time for both KP and Sindh to work at 'Punjab speed', at least in the campaign against dengue.

Domestic cricket revamp

CRITICS and knowledgeable fans have taken the Pakistan Cricket Board's recently unveiled, comprehensive plan to revamp domestic cricket with a pinch of salt. Every PCB chairman during the past two and a half decades attempted the same. However, each ended up making the problem much worse, primarily because they lacked a definite vision of how to go about it, or did not know how to implement something that requires considerable investment and massive

restructuring. The current PCB regime too has started off on the wrong foot by abolishing departmental cricket and reducing the teams from 16 to just six — a preposterous idea on all counts.

PM Imran Khan, the board's patron and a cricketing legend himself, has always admired Australia's domestic cricket set-up — in which six main teams compete — and made no secret of his wish to see it replicated in Pakistan. However, the two countries are vastly different from each other. Australia's total population is around 25m and cricket is just one among several major and equally popular sports played there. In Pakistan, with its massive population of over 220m, cricket hugely overshadows all other sports, even to the extent of their growth and viability. Former players and experts have often considered even the existing 16 teams as too few, and balked at the PCB's recent drastic reduction in their number. Having said that, there certainly appears to be more method than madness in the PCB's recently announced revamp plan, as factors such as the trickle-down effect and nitty-gritty of such an overhaul have been carefully looked at. More importantly, the players stand to earn a handsome amount at the end of the domestic season due to the retainer and match fees, allowances and prize money; that will surely attract the young and talented in droves. However, the board must revive club cricket which produced so much new talent in the past, and reorganise the game at the grass-roots level to ensure the revamp yields handsome results.

Reality and rhetoric

PRIME Minister Imran Khan's statement in Lahore on Monday must signal the start of a campaign that needs to be conducted on a war footing.

The premier said that Pakistan would not start a military conflict with India — his words providing some much-needed relief to the ears amid weeks of nonstop sabre-rattling rhetoric churned out by commentators of various hues and intensity.

To Mr Khan's credit, this was not the first time he has spoken of the dangers of imposing a war on the subcontinent.

In his latest remarks about how war was more a problem than a solution, he has only reiterated previously expressed views about the evils that a military conflict

between the two nuclear-armed countries could let loose in the region and beyond.

This has been the gist of his diplomatic drive to make the world pay attention to the Kashmir crisis and the tensions it has sparked in the region.

In contrast, the general thrust of pro-war opinion in India, and also in Pakistan, is itself an urgent reminder to the international community of just how easily a group of people can be made to yield to agents that promote violence as a means of deciding a question.

Experts are warning that Pakistan and India have never appeared closer to a war than when they confirmed their respective nuclear capabilities in 1998.

The credit or blame for this impression can be squarely placed on the shoulders of the unabashed promoters of boyish bravado.

Vividly imagined scenarios — of a limited skirmish, of a conventional battle involving fighting on several fronts, and of a full-blown, devastating nuclear climax — have all been paraded before our eyes ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarked on his latest adventure in Kashmir.

The total annihilation of fellow human beings that warmongers build their grandiose delusions of triumph on ought to be enough to leave any reasonable soul wary of violent confrontation.

But these tales have been spun with quite a lot of pride, with sections of the media in India as well as in Pakistan skilfully playing the role of agent provocateur, egged on at times by the careless and even reckless remarks of public officials.

There have been attempts to neutralise such vitriol by reminding all of the ugly face of war — but these have, by and large, been drowned out in the din of pro-war rhetoric.

Mr Khan's statement could go a long way in combating the war hysteria generated in the name of patriotism.

Theoretically at least, all that is now required is a reciprocal message from an unfortunately bellicose India.

It must provide reassurance that the two countries are as capable of avoiding an armed conflict as enthusiastic groups of people in their respective jurisdictions have unfortunately been at beating the drums of war.

Torture in custody

DIFFERING only in a few particulars, suspicious custodial deaths continue to occur in a sickening, never-ending loop. Three cases have again surfaced of individuals dying during their detention by police — the Punjab force in all these instances. In Rahim Yar Khan, a man suspected of theft died on Sunday allegedly as a result of custodial torture. Three cops have been booked for murder. Yet another death allegedly on the same grounds occurred on Sunday in Lahore when one of nine men, found detained a few days ago in a secret torture cell, succumbed to the terrible injuries he had sustained during his ‘interrogation’. Several policemen have been booked for murder. Then on Monday, yet another unfortunate man died in similar circumstances; an FIR has been filed against six cops. That these deaths occurred despite the IG Punjab having issued express instructions against custodial torture, and conducted surprise visits to some police stations to gauge the situation there, speaks to a much deeper malaise.

Changing mindsets rooted in custom and/or privilege can be exceedingly difficult, even when backed by the law. Custodial torture is one of the many ways this challenge is starkly illustrated in Pakistan. Punjab police is governed by the Police Order, 2002 (amended in 2013), which stipulates up to five years’ imprisonment for officers found guilty of inflicting “torture and violence to any person” in their custody. Earlier, the provincial law-enforcement agency worked under the Police Act, 1861. This was a colonial relic, designed to bring the ‘natives’ to heel; consider that it includes the word “torture” only in the context of enabling an officer to arrest anyone inflicting cruelty on an animal. Nevertheless, despite a more modern law, the old ways continue — and torture remains the primary tool of investigation. This is partly because accountability mechanisms stipulated in the 2002 legislation have not yet been established; and continued political interference reinforces the culture of impunity, precluding the Punjab police from evolving into a more neutral, democratic force. A year-long National Commission for Human Rights inquiry found that government authorities themselves documented at least 1,424 cases of torture by the police between 2006 and 2012 in Faisalabad district alone. The Punjab law minister in January

disclosed that the government is considering changes in the police act to make it more 'people-friendly'. One substantial step towards this objective would be to punish, as per the law, any cop guilty of torturing people in his custody.

Preserving history

SITUATED in Karachi's Soldier Bazaar neighbourhood, the Shri Panchmukhi Hanuman Mandir is believed to be 1,500 years old — one of the oldest temples in Pakistan, holding special religious significance for the Hindu community, as well as for all history and archaeology enthusiasts in the country and beyond. In its recent history, the temple has stood tall against land grabbers, battled encroachments and endured extreme weather conditions. It underwent a partial facelift a few years ago, funded by the donations of the Hindu community and other members of the public, after its roof began caving in. Now, recent construction at the site has unearthed several artefacts, including statues of idols, which might help shed new light in determining the temple's provenance. One can only hope that the federal and provincial governments understand the significance of such relics and will make efforts to preserve them, or eventually shift them to museums, with the help of experts. The present government has frequently spoken about its desire to facilitate religious tourism in the country, even amidst worsening ties with our neighbouring country. The restoration and preservation of ancient temples — particularly this mandir, which hosts an eight-foot-tall statue of Hanuman that according to lore sprang from the ground some time after Ram passed through the land during his exile — would certainly help towards those efforts.

Unfortunately, Pakistan's history — and particularly its pre-Islamic history — is often neglected due to the absence of state interest in preserving history and making it more accessible to the public, and perhaps also in part due to a lack of intellectual curiosity on the part of the public. Perhaps the most glaring example of this is how one of the world's oldest settlements, Mehrgarh in Balochistan, a precursor to the Indus Valley and Harappa civilisations, is a virtual no-go zone for tourists, with little work being done on it. Most museums in the country are in a state of neglect, largely empty, with only the ghosts of the past for company.

GIDC ordinance withdrawal

AFTER approving the draft of the Gas Infrastructure Development Cess amendment ordinance in a cabinet meeting, then sending it to the president for signature, the prime minister decided on Monday to “take notice” of the benefit that might accrue to various large stakeholders because of the ordinance, and announced on Wednesday that he was withdrawing it altogether. The whole matter now reverts back to the status quo, with the GIDC law before the courts, various stay orders in place, while farmers and power consumers continue to pay the cess which in some cases is being deposited with the government and in other cases being retained by the producers pending the court decision. In short, we now have an even bigger mess on our hands, because the government’s weakness has been exposed and those contesting the cess in the courts have smelled blood.

The reasoning behind the ordinance is sound, but the route of taking a presidential ordinance to legislate the amendments is problematic. Pragmatism suggests that it is better to break the impasse that has developed around the issue of the GIDC rather than let the issue fester in the courts. Prime Minister Imran Khan has now tasked his attorney general to “move an application for urgent hearing in the Supreme Court”. He also seeks to “inform the nation that going to the courts carries a risk” because the decision could result in no revenue collection at all (as opposed to the approximately Rs220bn the government would have collected under the deal it had offered to industry through the ordinance). Or worse, it could result in the courts giving a verdict that the cess should never have been levied in the first place and all funds collected under it must be returned. That could saddle the government with reimbursement obligations of almost Rs295bn, according to Mr Khan’s own communication.

The reminder of the risks involved in reverting to the status quo should not be directed at “the nation” since the decision has been made by the prime minister and nobody else. The risk is his to bear, not that of “the nation”. It is not clear on whose advice Mr Khan has acted in reversing his own decision, and whether adverse commentary on TV played a role in swaying his mind, but “the nation” should not be blamed for this. Leadership involves taking responsibility for one’s own decisions, and bearing their consequences. With this style of governance, vacillating and fearful, one is left wondering how the government intends to

implement the “tough choices” that have to be made to successfully see the IMF programme through. We are only two months into that programme, and already significant doubts about the seriousness at play are taking root.

By ordinance alone

THE opposition has once again slammed the government over its preoccupation with ruling by ordinances. In the latest instance, the opposition members were up in arms in protest when four ordinances, promulgated by President Arif Alvi, came before the Senate on Tuesday. The controversial GIDC ordinance was not among them, but the omission did little to contain the opposition members. The treasury was severely castigated for bypassing parliament, the protest being backed by a solid argument which termed the bunch of presidential ordinances as unconstitutional. The members duly referred to Article 89 of the Constitution which says the president may promulgate an ordinance, except when the Senate or National Assembly are in session. The Article further says the ordinance shall stand repealed at the expiration of 120 days from its promulgation or, “if before the expiration of that period a resolution disapproving it is passed by the Assembly, upon the passing of that resolution”. The treasury did try to counter this latest attack in the Senate by summoning the old defence. But whereas the point about the opposition’s non-cooperation did make sense, it couldn’t quite dispel the impression that the PTI government was from the outset determined not to ‘unnecessarily’ involve the opposition lawmakers in legislation.

Governments in the past, too, were blamed for resorting to the presidential ordinance. The fundamental question in the present case, however, stems from the ruling party’s obvious contempt for the legislators who occupy the opposition benches. This message is most candidly manifest in the repeated remarks of Prime Minister Imran Khan about the ‘corrupt’ parties and politicians who, regardless of the likes and dislikes of the sitting government, have quite a heavy presence in parliament today. In the Senate in particular, the numbers prevent the PTI government from winning easy passage for any bill it might want to introduce. Hence the reliance on presidential ordinances despite that it has been generally debunked as a dubious means to run the business. The choice of the route is, sadly, hardly surprising after Mr Khan had declared as early as December 2018 — barely a few months into power — that he planned to legislate by ordinance. Entering into a ‘settlement’ with the opposition meant that

corruption cases against their leaders should be closed — an option the prime minister ‘would never go for’. A return to the regular route of legislation through parliament will require a basic change in the PM’s position.

Medical waste

WHEN Karachi resident Shaneira Akram went for a morning stroll along the Clifton beach on Tuesday, she was shocked to discover large amounts of medical waste lying around on the sand.

Along with heaps of plastic bags and other garbage, the tide had brought with it several blood vials and open syringes to the shoreline.

Thanks to her efforts in raising the alarm about the potential public health catastrophe through a series of tweets and videos, the Sindh Police quickly cordoned off the area, while municipal authorities brought in heavy machinery to clean up the site.

The beach may have been cleared for now, but the larger issue of Karachi’s waste disposal and management cannot be buried so neatly.

According to a report published a day after the heavily publicised incident, the vast majority of healthcare facilities in the city by the sea still do not have the necessary equipment to safely collect and dispose of medical waste.

This is an open secret, written about countless times before: hospitals, clinics and maternity centres continue to dump toxic waste in the open, or directly into water bodies, despite being well aware of the danger such actions pose to ordinary citizens.

Of course, Karachi is not alone; healthcare facilities across the country engage in similar irresponsible practices.

A host of infectious diseases are linked to toxic medical waste, while garbage collectors and scavengers, along with those living close to medical centres, are especially threatened.

It is unknown what percentage of the waste actually goes through incinerators, how many of these are even functional, or whether healthcare practitioners are separating highly toxic and non-toxic waste at the source.

Answers to these questions are needed, and the provincial government must do more than just “write letters” to hospitals to ensure that proper procedures of waste disposal are being followed.

It is nothing short of criminal when those whose duty it is to provide healthcare to the people can so casually and callously toy with it.

Keeping Kartarpur open

FOLLOWING the latest round of talks in Atari, Pakistan’s announcement on Wednesday that it was ready to open the Kartarpur Corridor in November is in keeping with its preferred route of engagement with India. It is now the other side’s responsibility to fulfil its end of the bargain and realise the agreement struck between the two countries to create the corridor in time for the 550th birth anniversary of Baba Guru Nanak. Pakistan has also committed to hosting 5,000 pilgrims or more daily at the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Narowal, which this Kartarpur stretch will link with India. The access will be without visa “to pilgrims of all faiths, seven days a week, throughout the year”, says a statement by the Foreign Office. Taking a break from war rhetoric, provided that India demonstrates the same willingness as Pakistan, the two appear poised to enter a new (as well as return to a bygone) era of people-to-people contact, with Sikh pilgrims being allowed travel across the corridor, only needing to be issued an identification card issued by the authorities on side of the border.

The movement along the Kartarpur Corridor is significant in that it reflects Pakistan’s consistent position of pushing for dialogue between its leadership and those who must make decisions on the behalf of the Indian people. It is not difficult to understand why, in recent times, this offer for dialogue may have been replaced with a sterner tone in reaction to India’s refusal to hold talks over Kashmir. And, surely, this does not represent a departure from the principle that places faith in humanity and its ability to find a joint solution without having to come to blows. Pakistan’s leadership has clearly called out Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his associates over their aggressive posturing. And it has also made clear that it is alert to any kind of danger posed to it without losing its balance, and without irrationally allowing it to be taken hostage by the hoarse cries of war.

The Pakistani delegation's handling of the Kartarpur Corridor in the recent round of talks, even at a time of serious bilateral tensions, signified both maturity and candidness. Earlier this week, Pakistan lifted a ban on import of medicines and raw material from India to prevent a shortage of crucial drugs, even as a general bar on bilateral trade remained effective. The exemption was given "in the best interest of the public". The same mature and confident approach by Pakistan may be required in dealing with other aspects of the bilateral relationship — for instance, resumption of the bus service in order to benefit families divided across the border. It displays an openness that, along with bringing other positives, will best serve the country's image internationally.

Inflation rebasing

THE inflation data just released may evoke a sense of comfort at first glance — but, when examined more carefully, one realises that what is actually being shown is a sharp jump in prices in the month of August. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index came in at 10.5pc in the last month. In the month of July, the same figure was reported as 10.3pc, which means the increase in prices is high, but appears to be stabilising. But a closer look reveals that the method by which the PBS calculates the data has been changed between July and August, and what appears to be a plateauing in the rate of inflation from one month to the next is, in fact, a sharp increase. As per the new methodology, July's CPI inflation ought to have been 8.4pc, which means a sharp increase in prices between the two months.

The new method for calculating the CPI is a few years in the making. The CPI will now be based on price statistics from FY2016, instead of the base year that was currently being used, which was FY2008. It will now also reflect prices from rural areas, whereas up until now it was largely reflecting prices in urban areas, albeit a large number of towns and cities were part of its coverage area. Very importantly, the weightage assigned to certain price categories has been changed, and some of these changes make little sense. For example, the largest increase in weightage is in prices of hotels and restaurants, while the largest decrease is in housing, electricity, gas and other fuels. It is difficult to imagine how the former is more important to people than the latter, so perhaps the PBS or whoever is involved with devising these changes ought to provide an explanation of how they are justified. This is especially important given that the

changes have played some role in mitigating the inflation number. The impression is being created that grounds for a cut in the discount rate now exist. But even the new methodology shows rising underlying demand pressures in the economy, and unless the next data release in October shows these to be plateauing, it will be interesting to see if the State Bank will attempt to justify a rate cut given its pronouncements on the subject thus far.

Misbah's dual role

FORMER captain Misbahul Haq's recent appointment as the national cricket team's head coach-cum-chief selector, though widely welcomed in cricketing circles, is perhaps the veteran player's stiffest challenge yet.

Misbah, who enjoys an impeccable reputation and wields tremendous authority in Pakistan cricket, has been hailed as the best choice for the key post after the Pakistan Cricket Board decided to part ways with South African coach Mickey Arthur following the lacklustre World Cup campaign.

Challenges are not new to battle-hardened Misbah, who fought his way into the national team in 2001 and rose to become its most successful captain.

Handed the reins of the team soon after the nasty 2010 spot-fixing scam tarnished the country's cricket image, Misbah helped the team regroup and rebuild in a brilliant fashion.

The former captain has expressed his resolve to bring professionalism back to the ranks of the national team, in both performance as well as physical fitness of the players.

However, with no prior experience in either coaching or selection matters, it is a new beginning for Misbah by all counts. Both are controversy-prone jobs given the erratic ways of Pakistan cricket.

Some former players have expressed reservations about how Misbah being saddled with two full-time duties could eventually prove to be his undoing — an argument that holds weight.

Given his temperament and his adeptness with the modern-day game, Misbah is likely to enjoy the best of relations with whoever is leading the team.

However, there is a very fine line between how the two protagonists need to act; the coach is at best peripheral, largely managing off-the-field affairs, devising strategy, sorting problems, boosting confidence, etc.

How cricket is played in the middle, though, is the sole prerogative of the captain — and it is here that Misbah needs to be discreet as chief selector.

He should always be seen as a consultant and not an ‘interfering influence’ by the captain, or else either of the two might be shown the door sooner rather than later.

Growing tax base

ACCORDING to data presented to Prime Minister Imran Khan by the tax authorities, more than 780,000 people have filed income tax returns for the tax year 2018 who were not previously doing so. This is probably the largest jump in the number of new return filers in over a decade, since the number is more than triple that of such individuals in the preceding year. It shows that a culture of filing returns is gaining impetus. Of course it took eight extensions in the filing deadline, which finally ended well into the next tax year for the first time in a decade, coupled with an amnesty scheme that was fuelled by at least three appeals for participation from the prime minister himself, to make this happen. Such a vigorous push behind tax compliance may not be possible year after year, and the real test will now be to sustain this momentum without such extraordinary measures.

Beyond compliance, there is the matter of actual revenue collected. The entire exercise of getting more people to file returns has yielded incremental revenue of Rs2.5bn, which is paltry by comparison to the targets and shortfalls facing the FBR. Clearly many of those who have filed returns in the tax year 2018 were those who were already paying their taxes through deductions at source, but were not filing returns thinking it to be unnecessary since the tax had already been paid. The real test of base broadening is when those who are neither paying nor filing are persuaded to become compliant. The FBR chief himself says that the services sector must bear the brunt of the base broadening exercise, and he is right in this. But getting retailers, transporters, professionals, schools and beauty parlours and other small- and medium-sized enterprises to register with

the tax authorities, declare their incomes and turnovers, and start filing returns and paying their share of taxes, is the real challenge.

Efforts are under way to meet that challenge. Already the FBR has sent out hundreds of thousands of notices to those enterprises that have industrial or commercial utility connections but are not registered with tax authorities. FBR officials are also visiting markets to encourage participation in the fixed tax regime. And on top of that, a new front has been opened against smuggled goods, though how they proceed on this remains to be seen. With these efforts, the FBR is probably the most vigorous government department in action these days, upsetting the status quo in ways it has probably never done before. But failure to collect actual revenues, measured in rupees and not number of filers, means more mini-budgets — which means more uncertainty. Despite the increase in the number of filers, the Rs64bn shortfall in revenue collection in July and August continues to hog the limelight.

Locust invasion

AN ancient scourge is back with a vengeance in Pakistan for the first time in two decades. Swarms of locusts have been advancing inside the country since early June, and after cutting a swathe of destruction through Balochistan, are now ravaging vast areas of Sindh. Thousands of acres of cotton crop could be devastated, that too at a time when Pakistan is already reeling from an economic crisis. South Punjab is on high alert given the alarming invasion of these insects in other parts of the country. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation in its latest Locust Watch Report has warned that the situation in Pakistan is "most serious". According to it, the second generation of these voracious insects has emerged and as they proliferate, so will their capacity to lay waste to cropland and exacerbate food insecurity.

Heavy rainfall coupled with high temperatures creates the perfect conditions for locusts to breed, and climate change could reshape their distribution area. Research organisations and government authorities in Pakistan must turn their attention to this possibility, of which we may well be experiencing the opening act. Provincial agriculture departments claim they are taking measures to combat the infestation, but they have been very slow off the mark. While close to 40,800 acres have reportedly been treated so far and training sessions held in Punjab to

build the capacity of government officials and technical staff, many farmers in Sindh — Balochistan has already seen the worst — are complaining that vast areas have not been sprayed with insecticide. Interestingly enough, the present invasion may have its roots in the Yemen war, which has affected locust control measures there, enabling huge numbers of the insects to migrate further, through Saudi Arabia, Iran and onward to Pakistan. The authorities here thus had a substantial window in which to prepare for their arrival and ensure that spraying was done at the nymph stage — before the insects can fly — to forestall proliferation. Of course, the most severe impact of the swarms will be borne by the farmers. Aside from those in the fertile agriculture belt, rural populations in already impoverished areas will see their difficulties intensify further. Severe locust infestations, by giving rise to local food shortages and the disadvantages that come with malnutrition, have been shown to even impact school enrollment rates. This is an emergency — which may become a recurrent one — and must be treated as such.

Population problem

ONE of the persistent yet lesser talked about challenges facing Pakistan is its growing population. From the distribution of essential healthcare and education services, to tackling unemployment and raising the general standards of living, the failure to control population rates has had far-reaching implications. Some have also put forth the argument that rising populations not only place a burden on a country's limited resources, but they also contribute to the climate change crisis (of course, though, it is still largely the wealthiest countries that contribute the highest global greenhouse emissions). At 2.4pc, Pakistan's population growth rate is much higher than in many parts of the world. Worryingly, the vast majority is under the age of 30. But when the long-awaited 2017 census results were announced, the realisation that we had now surpassed Brazil as the fifth most populous country in the world seemed to create no urgency amongst lawmakers. Currently, Indonesia, the US, India and China have higher populations than Pakistan. Unless concrete steps are taken to halt this trend, the country's population could exceed 300m by 2050, warned a UN report this year. Past attempts to introduce family planning schemes and greater access to contraceptives have met with little success. Due to a lack of foresight and long-term implementation of population control policies by successive governments,

along with societal stigma and resistance from right-wing quarters each time the topic of birth control is brought up, the problem has been allowed to fester.

At a recent event in the capital city, the Special Assistant to Prime Minister for National Health Services Dr Zafar Mirza highlighted the shocking fact that approximately half of all married women in the country do not use modern contraceptive methods, resulting in 3.8m unintended pregnancies each year. Early marriages, and the lack of knowledge about contraception and birth spacing, have all contributed to the position we are in today. Until these underlying causes are addressed, any and all other progress made will amount to zero.

Deciding Afghanistan's fate

DEADLY bombings against the backdrop of peace talks paint an uneasy picture for the future of Afghanistan, on the brink of witnessing a dramatic withdrawal of US troops even as the spectre of violence looms.

On Thursday, 10 people were killed — including two Nato troops — when a powerful car bomb exploded in a heavily fortified zone in Kabul, just days after Zalmay Khalilzad, US special envoy and America's chief negotiator in the peace talks, concluded the ninth round of meetings with the Taliban leadership in Qatar and announced the two sides had reached an agreement which only awaited the Trump administration's approval.

Following the bombing, Khalilzad returned to Qatar for unscheduled talks with the Taliban that reportedly went on well past midnight. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has been left out of these high-powered discussions in Qatar on the insistence of the Taliban, and appears to be deeply unhappy with some aspects of the impending peace agreement.

From the press conference that followed the trilateral dialogue held in Islamabad yesterday, with Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi hosting his Chinese and Afghan counterparts, it was clear the focus of the talks had been on ensuring that the battle-scarred country does not once again descend into internecine warfare.

At this critical juncture, all stakeholders need to exercise prudence and foresight. As the Chinese foreign minister stated during the press conference, what

transpires now must take place in an orderly and responsible manner. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has reportedly refused to sign the deal, indicating that Washington's conscience may be troubled. Anxiety about the post-agreement situation is clearly at an all-time high. The Taliban are banking on violence to strengthen their bargaining power and get the most out of the deal as the now decentralised leadership gears up to battle the militant Islamic State group. At the same time, the US is in a hurry to get out of Afghanistan — a key promise of President Trump during the 2016 presidential election. With another election around the corner, it appears that Mr Trump is keen to bill Afghanistan as a victory and cross it off his to-do list.

While the people with power deliberate, the people of Afghanistan watch with bated breath, anxious and fearful about what the transition will bring. They hope for peace and a viable path to power-sharing, that will allow them to have a say in who governs them. As a group of nine former ambassadors to Afghanistan have poignantly said in an open letter critical of the US approach to negotiating the troop withdrawal, “[The US] must not yank so much support from our Afghan friends that they are unable to protect themselves”.

A rushed decision on the US withdrawal will have regional and global consequences and spawn more violence and insecurity for a people who have suffered for decades.

Twin attacks

A PARTICULARLY diabolical mode of sowing terror revisited Quetta on Thursday. Two back-to-back explosions took place in the city, leaving one man dead and nine injured. The first blast occurred near a transport office and injured four people. The second took place a little later close to the same location, killing an emergency worker and injuring four others, including two media persons — a reporter and a cameraman working for a TV channel. That there were no more casualties is nothing short of a miracle. Balochistan's largest city, prone to terrorist violence since years now, has several times been targeted by twin attacks, coordinated to deliberately kill as many people as possible. Two years ago, the assassination of a senior advocate in Quetta was designed to draw many other lawyers to the hospital where his body had been taken. A suicide attack on the gathering killed over 70 people, including 56 lawyers. Two TV

cameramen were among the dead. To cite but one more example, a bombing inside a snooker hall in a Hazara locality on Jan 10, 2013, was followed minutes later by a second, massive explosion outside the venue. At least 81 people, including rescue workers, police personnel and media persons, among others, were killed and around 120 injured in the two blasts.

Very often, negligence in observing basic security protocols leads to more people dying in twin attacks than would have otherwise. Law-enforcement personnel must immediately cordon off the site of a bombing or targeted killing: for one, it is a crime scene and evidence must be diligently preserved so that the investigation has enough material to enable it to bring the perpetrators to book. Secondly, security cordons can ensure that bystanders and media persons are at a reasonable distance from the site in case of another explosion. Speaking of the media, such has become the cutthroat nature of the business that in the race to obtain 'exclusive' footage, news editors often push their reporters and cameramen beyond acceptable limits. Some years ago, in an environment rapidly becoming hazardous for journalists, a large group of newspaper editors and heads of news at television channels had agreed on reporting guidelines for the electronic media. Among other issues, there was a consensus they would not compete in the coverage of dangerous situations. Perhaps channel heads need to revisit and, if need be, improve the guidelines. No 'money shot' is worth risking life and limb for.

Women workers

WOMEN labourers who pick cotton from the fields of Sindh highlighted their grievances at a recent press conference in Karachi, flanked by members of human rights organisations. Other than long hours and tough working conditions that expose them to a host of health complications — the lack of safety measures provided by employers making them especially vulnerable to disease and injury on the job — they are paid very low wages and are offered virtually no social protection. The women present at the event requested the Sindh government to give them the same status and rights that industrial workers are entitled to. Workers employed in the agriculture economy are some of the most exploited and ill-treated. Since there is no data and agriculture is considered part of the 'informal' economy, it is uncertain what percentage of women are employed, but labour organisers estimate that nearly half of the total agricultural workforce of

Sindh consists of women. Due to their perceived lower social status, they are left all the more defenceless.

Out of all the labour laws passed over the years, not a single one has extended to agriculture workers, with the exception of the right to form unions under the Sindh Industrial Relations Act 2013. This might be because many of Pakistan's parliamentarians are landowners themselves, and the emancipation of their workers would not be beneficial to their own interests. Last year, women legislators vowed to work for the rights of rural women, particularly those employed in agriculture, those who MNA Nafisa Shah referred to as the "slaves of the slaves". Perhaps as a result of their efforts, the Sindh cabinet approved the Sindh Women Agriculture Act this year, but it is yet to be passed by the Sindh Assembly. It may be a rarely acknowledged truth, but much of this country's economy runs on the backs of women. It is time their voices are heard.

Halting Afghan talks

AN unexpected tweet from US President Donald Trump has put the brakes on the Afghan peace talks, giving rise to fears that the hard-won gains for a transition of power in Afghanistan may have been reversed.

Mr Trump stunned many people on Saturday evening when he announced that he was supposed to meet senior leaders of the Afghan Taliban and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at Camp David on Sunday, but that the planned secret talks had been called off after a US soldier was killed in Kabul.

The attack that took several lives was claimed by the Taliban.

In a series of tweets, Mr Trump hit out at the Taliban, asking "what kind of people would kill so many in order to seemingly strengthen their bargaining position?"

The Taliban said the US president's words had damaged his credibility, and they have warned of more American deaths.

There is no doubt that the Taliban's continuing onslaught ought to be strongly condemned.

The group's hardline position of bringing guns to the negotiating table is inconsistent with the goal of peace and has justifiably angered the US

administration. But to respond to the Taliban's violence in the manner adopted by Mr Trump is not only ineffectual, it is also self-destructive.

Mr Trump's arbitrary decision has greatly undermined the work of Zalmay Khalilzad, America's chief negotiator on Afghanistan, who had managed to move the needle on winding down 18 years of a bloody war by getting the Taliban to agree to a landmark accord "in principle" just days ago.

Although the US may have legitimate concerns about the high levels of violence in Afghanistan, it is entirely possible that increased diplomatic pressure on the Taliban could have resulted in lesser bloodshed and persuaded the insurgents to engage with the Ghani government.

It is true that in an ideal situation, a ceasefire would have been in place as warring parties negotiated. It is equally true that the Taliban have no qualms about displaying their strength to put pressure on their adversaries, especially as they are not bound by time constraints. But surely this makes continuing with the peace talks — accompanied by a closer look at Afghanistan's long history of civil war and hardline positions — all the more necessary.

Where dialogue makes things possible, walking away from negotiations achieves nothing.

Calling off the talks will hardly lead to the change in the current situation that the Americans are hoping for. In fact, arbitrary moves by the US president will only intensify the cycle of violence in Afghanistan and create more uncertainty in the region.

The Trump administration should know better than to look for quick-fix solutions to the Afghan war. Meanwhile, any dreams of a foreign policy win before the next US election must give way to the realisation that Afghanistan is too serious a matter to link to domestic politics.

Endangered freedom

"WHEN journalists lose their rights, we all do". Thus states a landmark report — the outcome of an extensive process involving input from multiple stakeholders — by the British House of Commons' influential Foreign Affairs Committee on the state of global media freedom. There is perhaps no better way to encapsulate the

critical importance of a free media as a watchdog for the public interest. However, as the report's title notes, this is "an endangered liberty". The nature of the threat it describes is multifold, and evolving in light of changing global circumstances. There is of course physical violence, by the state and other actors emboldened by their contempt for press freedom. Nearly 1,000 journalists have been killed between 2008 and 2018 due to their work: the rate of impunity is 90pc. Hundreds have been thrown behind bars on false pretexts. Moreover, the online space has created its own challenges to press freedom. Firstly, it allows the persecution of journalists across borders, even if they have escaped their countries of origin, a form of harassment particularly vicious in the case of women journalists. Secondly, digital technologies offering the advantage of advertising to target audiences have dealt a blow to traditional revenue streams. These financial constraints are further exacerbated when repressive regimes withhold government advertising to force compliance; some journalists, for the sake of survival, allow themselves to be co-opted by the nexus between government and big business. The message by the report's authors is unequivocal: the UK must be proactive in defending media freedom, regardless of its political interests, and support the creation of an international mechanism to investigate and punish "the abuse of journalists when their governments cannot or will not do so".

Unfortunately, there is good reason for Pakistan to be mentioned in the report as one of the countries where press freedom is in growing peril. Not too long ago, the body count of journalists killed in the line of duty was irrefutable evidence of the risks that media persons face. In recent years, however, more covert and sinister means are being employed to coerce them into submission; these tactics often leave no trace, and hence give the perpetrators deniable plausibility. Those in power can thus falsely assert — feigning outrage at any suggestion to the contrary — that the media is absolutely free, even as newsrooms in the country and reporters on the ground endure relentless pressure to work to a particular agenda.

Above the law?

POLICE constable Faiza Nawaz was simply carrying out her duties at Lahore's Ferozewala court when she instructed advocate Ahmed Mukhtar to not park his car in the no-parking zone. Instead of obeying orders, however, she alleged the

lawyer grew angry at being told what to do and resorted to violence. He kicked her in the shin and then slapped her — an inexcusable act of humiliation directed towards a woman doing her job. The lawyer was soon arrested. In a photograph, he can be seen smiling impishly in handcuffs, while being escorted to the courtroom by Ms Nawaz herself. Just as swiftly and bizarrely, however, he was released, due to a supposed ‘mistake’, with his name written incorrectly in the FIR.

Following his release, Ms Nawaz expressed her lack of faith in the “cruel system” in a now widely circulated video statement. She spoke about how some lawyers had resorted to her character assassination and sending threats to her family, while she felt abandoned by her own colleagues. Since she was certain that she would not get justice, Ms Nawaz expressed her wish to resign from her position in the police force that she said she had joined to help serve her community, particularly in getting justice for women. Her refusal to quietly bow to immense pressure and unjust tactics by the lawyers’ fraternity in Ferozewala led to great media interest, and finally the Punjab police and government took notice. By taking a brave and principled stand and speaking up against the abuse she faced, the police constable is an inspiration for many. There is another point to be made about the bullying behaviour of the lawyers. Time and again, we have seen members of the lawyers’ fraternity behave like thugs or a mob of hooligans, as they resort to violence, bigotry and chauvinism, particularly in Punjab. No one is above the law, least of all its custodians. Let’s hope justice is served this time.

Police brutality

IN recent days, Punjab has emerged as a territory occupied by a brutal police force. The response to a series of custodial deaths has either been outright ridiculous — as in the case of banning smartphones to prevent any unwanted footage from escaping premises that are manned by policemen — or confused and disorderly. The latest gory chapter began with the appearance of Salahuddin Ayubi, the ‘ordinary Pakistani’ who was nabbed while allegedly attempting to steal from an ATM machine and who later died while under police interrogation. Given the impunity with which the law enforcers operate, it is no surprise that others have since also made the list of victims of police brutality. The custodial deaths have caused a stir, with many demanding police reforms in a country where accountability is still selective and where the institutions supposedly meant

to monitor excesses against the people are either completely ignored or woefully underutilised. In this regard, the National Human Rights Commission, which has been dysfunctional for many months now, is a case in point. The IG Punjab is scheduled to appear before the Senate Functional Committee on Human Rights today, amid apprehensions that this opportunity for lawmakers to propose improvements may be lost because of the existing polarisation in parliament. It is apparent that the PPP-proposed Torture, Custodial Death and Custodial Rape (Prevention and Punishment) Bill, 2015, did not catch the fancy of a divided National Assembly, which failed to pass the piece of legislation in the stipulated 90 days. But lawyers say that the laws are very much there. There are sufficient legal provisions in place, not least courtesy of Police Order 2002, which governs the workings of the force in Punjab. And a basic on-the-spot remedy recalls that a magistrate can be asked to investigate custodial deaths under the Code of Criminal Procedure.

The government of Punjab has moved towards establishing some kind of a larger board, comprising people from various walks of life, to oversee police functioning. Also, as opposed to a system where the violation of rules is an ailment exclusively afflicting low-ranking policemen, senior members in the hierarchy have now been warned that it is they who will be held responsible for any excesses committed under their watch.

These may all be useful ways of dealing with an increasingly desperate situation, and the suggestion that everyone should be bound by the existing laws makes eminent sense. But what is also needed is for both the people and the authorities to avoid the strange logic that accepts, justifies and condones brutal and illegal police violence in all its manifestations inside the thanas, the improvised lockups and indeed in public spaces. The job of clearing the mess has to begin somewhere. Why not begin at the place where it hurts and bleeds the most — ie right at the top?

Netanyahu's mischief

BENJAMIN Netanyahu is known for his contempt of the Palestinians and their rights, and he has done everything possible during his various stints as Israeli prime minister to ensure the Palestinians never get a viable state of their own. Yet another reminder of this came on Tuesday when the Israeli leader pledged to

annex the Jordan Valley and other parts of the occupied West Bank — areas considered Arab land by the international community — if voted to power again in next week's general election. Though never a supporter of peace, and always a proponent of crushing Palestinian rights, it seems Mr Netanyahu is stooping to new depths to capture the hard right's votes in Israel. He had previously promised to annex all Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Moreover, the Israeli prime minister's reckless behaviour has been duly rewarded by his country's biggest benefactor, the US; in March Donald Trump recognised the occupied Golan Heights — seized by Tel Aviv from Syria in 1967 — as 'Israeli territory', again flying in the face of world opinion. Knowing that the US will protect them from all opprobrium, Mr Netanyahu and other members of the Israeli right know that they can get away with anything, and that nothing will be done practically to uphold the Palestinians' rights.

While there have been many parallels drawn between the Israeli treatment of Palestinians and India's brutalities unleashed on the people of India-held Kashmir, here, too, both states seem to be following the same playbook. Narendra Modi had also promised to scrap Kashmiri autonomy as part of his election campaign, and delivered on it; now it seems that Netanyahu has copied his ally in New Delhi. There has been a strong reaction to Israel's ominous plans. The UN has said the proposed move would be "devastating" as far as peace prospects go, while Palestinian leaders have said the move would "bury chances of peace" and amounts to a "declaration of war against the Palestinian people's rights". The largely feeble Arab League has also slammed the move. However, the question remains: will opposition to this illegality remain restricted to issuing thunderous statements? Or will anything practical be done to protect Palestinian rights? If history is any judge, Israel is likely to get away with its crimes, backed by the US, and inflict more ignominies upon the Arabs. If the world community is serious about upholding the principles of fundamental rights, then Israel must be stopped from grabbing more Arab land.

Players' pullout

THE abrupt pullout of leading Sri Lankan cricketers from the upcoming tour of Pakistan is a setback for the Pakistan Cricket Board as well as home fans who had been looking forward to the Islanders' visit for the six limited-over games to be played in Karachi and Lahore. The players reportedly expressed security

concerns as the main reason for their decision. Clearly, the memories of the terrorist incident of 2009, when the Sri Lankan team's bus was attacked in Lahore, are still fresh in their minds. This is a pity because the security situation here has improved significantly over the past years, and bomb blasts and other terrorist incidents are no longer common occurrences; indeed, the Sri Lankan cricket authorities should have stressed this point to the reluctant players. In this country, meanwhile, there is a feeling among many former cricketers that the PCB did not play its cards right either, and that the board should have set its own conditions instead of agreeing to a depleted touring team. Whether or not one agrees with that view, it is hoped that when the touring side returns to Sri Lanka, it is able to convince those who chose to stay away that they made the wrong decision.

Though major foreign teams have shunned tours to this country in the past decade, Pakistan's status as a major cricketing nation has not been altered in any way. Pakistan Super League, which ranked as the second most popular T20 league after the Indian Premier League, has attracted leading foreign players to the country in the past two years, including the Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans and the West Indians who have praised the foolproof security arrangements. In 2020, the entire PSL is to be relocated to Pakistan, which will give a big boost to this country's sporting image. Meanwhile, the PCB should, with the help of the government and its security apparatus, successfully demonstrate to cricket-playing nations that Pakistan is a safe ground for all teams.

Lopsided accountability

AMIDST the political tumult unleashed by the accountability process, and its ever-widening ripple effect, Chief Justice of Pakistan Asif Saeed Khosa has voiced his unease about the way the wind is blowing on several fronts. At the opening ceremony in Islamabad on Wednesday of the new judicial year, the country's top judge, who has a little over three months to go before his retirement, described as "dangerous" the growing perception "that the process of accountability being pursued ... at present is lopsided and is a part of political engineering". Adding that "some remedial steps need to be taken urgently so that the process does not lose credibility", he also spoke about the shrinking political space in governance that "may not augur well for the future of the country as a

constitutional democracy”. In his speech, the chief justice acknowledged the objections being raised against the suppression of the media and the curbing of dissent, and warned that such tactics only ended up exacerbating public discontent.

Coming from the top judge in a country where the judiciary has not always played a stellar role in protecting democracy, but — and this is important — has in recent years tried to shed its image as being an enabler of unelected forces, these are significant words indeed. They indicate a realisation at the highest levels of the justice system that we stand at a critical juncture where the rule of law is fast being eroded by a charade of accountability, and a political witch-hunt becoming more farcical by the day. Two former prime ministers and a former president are behind bars; several duly elected representatives of the people have also been silenced, thrown behind bars for one reason or another; there is no longer even an appearance of probity. The media, far from acting as a check on this abuse of power, is in retreat, intimidated into acquiescence rather than acting as a conduit for diverse opinions. While it is unfortunate that Justice Khosa has recognised the clear and present danger to democracy somewhat belatedly, that he has done so at last, and laid out the perils in such a comprehensive a manner, is heartening. A pushback is imperative in the interests of the country and the judiciary’s own standing in the eyes of the people.

That senior lawyers at the event on Wednesday concurred with Justice Khosa’s assessment of the situation can be seen as a positive sign. The presidential reference against Justice Faez Isa in the SJC had threatened to drive a wedge between the bar and the bench, and perhaps even spark an institutional clash of the kind which catalysed the lawyers’ movement in 2007. Announcing that the Supreme Court intends to first dispose of the multiple petitions against the reference will go some way towards allaying any lingering suspicions of partisan motives. Order must be restored and every institution return to its constitutional role.

Battle for Karachi

ONCE again, political forces are wrangling over Karachi.

Tensions had already been brewing between the federal government and Sindh over the formation of a ‘strategic committee’ for the mismanaged city by the

prime minister, with the province feeling that Islamabad was encroaching on its turf.

However, matters took a dramatic turn on Wednesday night when Federal Law Minister Farogh Naseem said that the centre may take over Karachi's administrative affairs under Article 149 of the Constitution. Although the minister later clarified that he was quoted out of context, the statement elicited a sharp reaction from PPP chief Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, who accused the centre of trying to 'occupy' Karachi.

There is no doubt that Karachi is a mess. Its solid waste disposal, sewerage, public transport and traffic systems have practically collapsed. Crime is rampant. It is not surprising then that this metropolis regularly ranks among the world's least liveable cities.

All three tiers of government — federal, provincial and local — are responsible for this pitiful state of affairs.

The city did see some development and improved service delivery during the Musharraf era, under the mayorships of Niamatullah Khan and Mustafa Kamal. But since then, it has been largely downhill, especially after the PPP changed the Sindh local government law in 2013, taking away many powers of the local bodies.

Be that as it may, it is inadvisable for the federation to take direct control of Karachi, even if it believes Article 149 enables it to do so. Such a move will set a dangerous precedent, and can be used elsewhere in the country to roll back the gains of the 18th Amendment.

Devolution may not be working perfectly, but the solution lies in strengthening provincial capacity, not increasing centralisation. Moreover, if the centre goes ahead with its move, it will add to ethnic problems in Sindh and increase the rural-urban divide.

Without doubt, Karachi needs help; but the way to provide this should be to empower the local governments, with the provincial setup maintaining checks and balances, and the federation overseeing the process.

All tiers of government should act within their defined parameters, while local governments need to be given the powers and finances to carry out civic duties.

There is no need for experiments; good governance can deliver if all parties do their job.

Dengue returns

FOLLOWING heavy rainfall in many parts of the country, there have been reports of a dengue epidemic in some parts due to the presence of stagnant water bodies and the lack of sanitation in low-lying areas. The cities of Karachi, Peshawar and Rawalpindi have been particularly hit hard this time around, as hospitals struggle to accommodate the sudden influx of patients. Last week, a man in Karachi who was already suffering from hepatitis B tragically succumbed to the illness, becoming the eighth dengue-related fatality in the city since the start of the year. According to officials, there have been almost 1,700 cases of the disease in Sindh, with the vast majority recorded in Karachi. In Peshawar, over 1,200 cases had been detected in less than a month, primarily in the rural parts, which had also been some of the worst-affected areas during the 2017 dengue outbreak in the provincial capital. Just this week, at least 25 new cases were reported at the Khyber Teaching Hospital. Additionally, the various hospitals of Rawalpindi have seen around 1,000 dengue patients since January, though many were reportedly discharged soon after receiving treatment. Last year, the health department found the dengue larvae inside 940 houses in the city after the district administration had reportedly failed to conduct the necessary fogging operations. Other parts of Punjab, including Lahore, have also seen a sudden spike in dengue cases — and figures throughout the country are expected to continue to rise in the coming weeks.

The symptoms of the mosquito-borne disease can vary from mild to severe, and include high fever, headaches, vomiting, nausea, muscle and joint pain, a sudden drop in blood pressure, and heavy loss of blood. Hospitals and blood banks struggle to provide adequate amounts of platelets to patients. Along with carrying out regular fumigation and ensuring cleanliness, the government must encourage campaigns that promote blood donation and platelet transfusion in such times.

Trade deficit narrows

ONE of the two big deficits at the heart of the government's problems — as well as the main target of its economic policy — is the trade deficit that in the past few years has devoured the country's foreign exchange reserves, to the point where an emergency appeal had to be made to the IMF.

Read: Trade deficit falls sharply by 38pc in July-August

Last year, the trade deficit came in at \$31bn, showing some decline from preceding years, but still far higher than what the country could afford. The latest provisional data now shows that the declines are gathering pace as the first two months of the fiscal year — July and August — have seen a rapid contraction of up to 38pc in the size of the trade deficit, compared to the same months last year.

The numbers will no doubt be received with relief by the country's economic managers who have a tough target to meet to bring down the full year's trade deficit to \$27.5bn. This means on average the economy can afford to run a deficit of just above \$2.2bn per month.

The provisional data shows that the first two months of the fiscal year have managed to stay within that monthly average.

The trade deficit for July and August, on a provisional basis, appears to be less than \$4bn. But now comes the hard part of keeping it there.

What is not known at the moment are the factors driving this decline.

Oil prices have fallen slightly since July, and imports of industrial raw material could also be seeing declines. As per indications being put out by those invested in the data, the declines owe themselves to reductions in non-essential luxury items. This claim needs to be scrutinised because the size of the reduction at \$2.4bn is too large to be driven solely by luxury items.

A closer look yields other important caveats.

The biggest of these is that the decline in the deficit number has been achieved entirely on the basis of a contraction in imports. Compared to the same months last year, exports have been stagnant, which is a very worrisome sign because it

comes after a massive depreciation of the exchange rate of almost 30pc since last July.

If despite this, the dollar value of our exports has not changed, it means the decline in the trade deficit may help meet a target, but is otherwise an unhealthy development.

The trade deficit must be narrowed to restore health to the economy, but how this is done is also a critical ingredient in the mix of the economic policies being followed.

The provisional data suggests that the target is being met for the moment, but other than that it points towards signs of growing ill health in the economy. Celebrations must be muted once the final data is released.

Wages of acrimony

THERE was little that was surprising in the reception the opposition accorded to President Arif Alvi as he addressed a joint session of parliament on Thursday. There had been signs of an impending ruckus, and fortunate were those in the house who were able to understand something of what the president said. Some of Mr Alvi's predecessors in earlier times had not been that lucky while addressing legislators, and could hardly make themselves heard. The current opposition says that the Imran Khan government has more than earned this confrontation thanks to its hostile attitude, and believes that the treasury's stance on many points has betrayed a desire to deny the opposition — and parliament at large — its due role. Whereas such statements are expected from those in the opposition, who often take refuge in criticism to conceal their own lack of effort, many independent voices will corroborate that the Khan setup has indeed made no secret of its utter dislike for its rivals in parliament. It is an acrimonious relationship, and while the opposition would do well to sometimes lend an ear to what top officials of the state have to say without constantly interrupting them and disrupting proceedings, most of the blame must lie with the government.

There is much evidence of the holy status the government has arrogated to itself. Take the selective accountability drive in the country. Much of the protest in the house on Thursday circled around the treasury's reluctance to allow relief to some legislators, who are currently in custody on corruption-related charges, and

to let them take part in parliamentary proceedings. The grant of such relief has been a sore point, and the ruling party has been dealing with it with a lot of unnecessary anger. Another bone of contention is the lack of a firm commitment by the government to retain the 18th Amendment — the most important law protecting provincial rights. Additionally, there is the matter of the nomination of two members to the ECP without consultation with the opposition. And if that were not problematic enough, a statement by the federal law minister citing a constitutional clause to uphold the centre's dominance is being cited as an example of arrogance by the Sindh government. Hence, the parliamentary blockade of the president's speech, reinforced by a culture of disruptions in the legislature, was not unexpected. Many more vociferous episodes could well be in store.

Prisoners of injustice

ACCORDING to Justice Project Pakistan, there are approximately 11,000 Pakistani citizens imprisoned in foreign countries. Out of these, the vast majority are in the Middle East, with 3,400 trapped in Saudi Arabian prisons. Many do not see freedom again, as they languish in such prisons for the remainder of their lives, never to see or hear from their loved ones again. The most unfortunate ones have their lives brutally snatched through the harshest forms of execution, as Saudi Arabia continues to practise public beheadings for certain transgressions on its soil. The JPP reports that 26 Pakistanis were executed in the kingdom this year alone. The latest victim of the Saudi state's criminal 'justice' system was a labourer named Muhammad Imran, who was held in Jeddah's Shumaisi Prison for nearly eight years until he met his tragic end. Like many before him, Imran was detained for allegedly carrying drugs with him at the Jeddah airport. Earlier, a Pakistani married couple were also executed by Saudi authorities for allegedly trying to smuggle drugs into the country.

While it may be the right of the Saudi authorities to formulate their own laws to govern their country, there is evidence that the majority of foreign prisoners do not receive a fair trial or get the right to adequate legal representation; and often judicial proceedings are carried on in a language they don't understand. Additionally, most Pakistanis travelling to the Middle East are simply poor working-class people looking for employment in the oil-rich nations, while others are just trying to perform their religious obligations, before getting swindled by

intermediaries into drug trafficking, through deception or force. During his official visit to Pakistan in February, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman promised to release 2,107 Pakistani prisoners from Saudi jails. So far, only a handful of them have returned. The remaining inmates are still waiting to see that promise fulfilled — a matter of life and death for them.

Buzdar's new avatar

JUST as fortune-tellers base their predictions on particular signs, the state of the Punjab government under Chief Minister Sardar Usman Buzdar is fundamental to assessing Prime Minister Imran Khan's emotions at a certain moment in time.

Recent developments suggest that there are at least some serious concerns over how Punjab is being run.

There are reports that the central authority has repeatedly urged Mr Buzdar to come out of his shell and perform. This call from the top has seemingly emboldened the chief minister, who has since been seeing making demands, and not just of the bureaucracy. Taking full advantage of Mr Khan's advice on how assertive a chief minister should eventually turn out to be, Sardar Buzdar has apparently sought a few concessions from his own leadership.

This is the context in which the exit of two of the chief minister's advisers is being seen. Mr Awn Chaudhry is known to be a Khan confidant, posted as an adviser to the chief minister in Lahore on some assignment that was never clarified. While this fact doesn't necessarily make his departure a non-event, his fall has not made the same impact as Dr Shahbaz Gill's ouster.

Dr Gill was all blood and thunder while defending the Punjab government. His reminders that he was doing it for his leader Imran Khan had only increased with time, and even by his standards the manner in which he discussed Mr Buzdar's position towards the end of his assignment was odd. It was a remarkable roundabout equation in which Dr Gill prima facie defended Mr Buzdar's right to be chief minister, but only because he had been handpicked by 'my leader' Imran Khan. His reference to the person and demeanour of the prime minister's choice of chief minister in Punjab had left people wondering, until it emerged that concealed therein may have been Mr Gill's own grievances against the chief minister — who, recall again, he was serving at his leader's behest.

Sardar Usman Buzdar is said to have been making his own overtures in search of a new image for himself, apart from escaping the influence of unwanted advisers. Of late, he has managed to convince himself that he can give interviews to the media, especially to those journalists who are not exactly looking to 'grill' him here and now.

The chief minister has also tried to adopt a firm line in his directives to the bureaucracy, and the footage of him admonishing some provincial healthcare officers is doing the rounds. Quite clearly, he is on a mission of change, reinforced for the time being by the latest statement in support of him by the prime minister a few days ago. Asked to perform in full public view, he must do it in the knowledge that he is now more likely to attract notice.

University funding

AS the country tries to paddle through a sinking economy, public universities too have been forced to tighten their belts in the face of drastic budget cuts by the federal government. Pakistan's allocation for higher education in 2018-2019 was already the lowest in the region, at 2.4pc of the GDP, and the recent cuts will end up practically paralysing higher education institutions across the country. The federal government has slashed the overall education budget by around 20pc, while it has allocated Rs28.64bn for the Higher Education Commission, against its demand of Rs55bn — a difference of more than 50pc. This is a significant reduction in funds to institutions that were already cash-strapped and barely meeting their yearly financial requirements. Several universities in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are already finding it difficult to disburse salaries to staff and faculty members. Traditionally, higher education in Pakistan has always been 'subsidised'. It means that universities spend way more than they are able to earn in the form of revenue through tuition fees from students, and hence rely heavily on government grants for their day-to-day operations, including payment of salaries, allowances and bills. The deep cuts in funding to varsities mean that many ongoing research, development or scholarship programmes will either have to be stalled or scrapped.

Considering that only a fraction of Pakistani youth are able to attend institutes of higher education, if the universities resort to increasing tuition fees, they will end up adding to the educational disparity in the country as young men and women

from lower-middle and middle income households will find it difficult to attend universities. It is true that the higher education system, and even the HEC, not only needs reform in the system but also in its ethos; cutting down on already meagre funding for public-sector universities will only end up crippling the entire system. When it was elected to power, the PTI had promised to work towards improving and increasing educational opportunities for young people, who make up the bulk of its support base. According to the UNDP, 29pc of Pakistan's population — roughly 57m — is between the ages of 15 and 29. Perhaps the government should use this crisis to sit down with academics and scholars and find ways to make universities financially and academically independent, and free from political influence that becomes inevitable if institutions have to rely on periodic cash injections from those in power.

Dress code for girls

COVER up the women, and most — if not all — social ills will magically disappear. The district education office in Haripur clearly subscribes to that blinkered and ignorant view: earlier this week, it introduced a dress code for girl students in its jurisdiction making it mandatory for them to wear an abaya, gown or chador. The circular stated that the measure was being taken “in order to protect them from any unethical incident”. Elaborating further, an official from the education office told this paper that a dupatta or ‘half chador’ was not enough to protect them from increasing incidence of harassment and providing police protection to every girl student was not possible.

Observing purdah by choice is one thing, but being forced to do so is another matter altogether. The view that the female gender must follow rigid norms of behaviour if she is to keep herself safe from the predatory male gaze, finds many takers in this patriarchal society. Boys, after all, will be boys. This is more than a simplistic notion; it is a dangerous one. It legitimises a power imbalance in which the man is the ‘hunter’ and the woman the ‘prey’. Moreover, when men's bad behaviour is seen as a ‘natural’ consequence of women behaving in a manner that arouses the male gender's worst instincts, such reasoning is presented as a mitigating circumstance even in violent crimes such as rape. If they choose to go to court, rape victims are often forced to endure — at the investigation and trial stage — intrusive questioning and the imputation that they ‘brought it on themselves’. It is extremely unfortunate that the parents of some students in

Haripur are reportedly supportive of the education board's move. They should, instead, educate their sons that respect for the opposite gender, or those who identify as transgender, is not predicated on apparel or lifestyle. And state authorities, rather than policing the bodies of women, should ensure that harassers are punished as per the law.

Focus on Kashmir

MORE than a month after India launched its ill-advised adventure in occupied Kashmir, protests regarding the dire human rights situation in the held valley refuse to die down.

On Friday, Prime Minister Imran Khan led a charged rally in Muzaffarabad to highlight the troubles across the LoC; he rightly warned the world that Indian repression in the held region would end up fuelling extremism, as people would opt to fight New Delhi's brutality using "all means".

Indeed, the reports trickling out of the valley indicate a pitiful situation for the residents of India-held Kashmir, as they remain under lockdown with little freedom to speak of.

It is to be hoped that Pakistan's efforts to highlight the Kashmir question internationally are having some effect.

Read: UN chief calls for 'maximum restraint' in occupied Kashmir

UN Secretary General António Guterres says he remains "very concerned" about the situation escalating into a confrontation between India and Pakistan, while adding that the situation needs to be addressed "with full respect of human rights".

Elsewhere, numerous American lawmakers have urged their president to mediate between Islamabad and New Delhi, and have called for India to lift the curfew in IHK.

The situation in Kashmir "has grave implications for democracy, human rights and regional stability. ..." one congresswoman has said.

Indeed, in the age of social media and breaking news, it will be very hard for India to keep a lid on the brutalities it has unleashed on the Kashmiris.

Despite India's mantra that 'all is well' in the held region, the realisation is slowly growing that India's military enforcers have unleashed a reign of terror in IJK ever since Article 370 was scrapped last month — although condemnation by world governments has been disappointingly muted.

But India can no longer pretend that Kashmir is an 'internal' matter; it stands badly exposed in IJK and no amount of spin can convince neutral observers that the situation in the region is normal. Indeed, Pakistan's diplomats have of late proactively highlighted the deplorable situation in IJK in key world capitals.

However, the key question is that despite the global cries for justice in Kashmir, and calls for a negotiated settlement to the problem, will India listen?

Up till now, the right-wing BJP government in New Delhi has shown no sign of bending its rigid stance and lifting the inhumane blockade of Kashmir.

Perhaps the only way this can be achieved is if the US and other strategic and economic partners of India exert enough diplomatic pressure on New Delhi and point out repeatedly that a peaceful solution is the only option for Kashmir, and that continued obduracy risks setting the entire region alight.

While the Kashmiris are putting up a brave front in the face of Indian brutality, if this issue is not handled with care, there is a very high likelihood that the entire subcontinent may get caught in an ugly conflagration.

Domestic violence

A NEW report published in the Journal of International Women's Studies highlights the ways in which women continue to be marginalised in Pakistani society, by focusing on the prevalence of domestic violence in Punjab. Despite the province making considerable gains in recent years, women still cannot access justice due to various legal and cultural obstacles in their path. It seems the passing of progressive legislation has not had the desired effect on the status of women in society, nor has it resulted in a decrease in the violence committed against them. Three years ago, the Punjab Assembly passed the Protection of Women Against Violence Act, which aims to safeguard women against domestic, emotional and economic abuse. It was hailed as a welcome stride towards the realisation of greater rights for women, and yet, according to the report, despite one-third of all criminal cases falling under the domestic violence category, the

conviction rate is a meagre one to 2.5pc. Three years before that, Sindh became the first province to pass a law to protect women, children and “any vulnerable person” from domestic abuse with the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2013. So far, however, only one conviction has been reported. Meanwhile, KP has still not been able to pass the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Domestic Violence against Women (Prevention and Protection) Bill due to strong opposition from religious quarters.

Unfortunately, for many in this country, domestic abuse continues to be seen as a private affair — a dispute be ‘settled’ within the home — and not a criminal offence to be dealt with by the state. Each time such a bill has been tabled, there has been considerable outcry and unnecessarily prolonged debate before its passage. And so, even with the passing of pro-women laws, it seems that the desired change has not seeped into this nation’s collective psyche. Thus, an effort to make it easier for women to access a complicated criminal justice system, along with addressing societal stigma and fear around such issues, must accompany lawmaking. Years of deep-rooted societal misogyny cannot be eroded so quickly with paperwork when violence against women becomes such a ‘normalised’ part of our lives. One simply needs to scan the daily headlines — harassment, acid attacks, rape, so-called honour killings, dowry deaths — and then observe the lack of public outrage to get an idea of how normalised women’s suffering is.

Need for urban oases

CITIZENS in Karachi’s Clifton area might breathe easier, for the patch of land known as the Urban Forest has been granted a reprieve. How long it lasts, though, is anyone’s guess given the continued friction between the forest’s founder and the city’s mayor. This is not the first time that the Urban Forest’s adoption was cancelled and then reinstated by the KMC since a five-year agreement was signed in May 2017 to develop the former dumping ground into a self-sustaining, natural forest based on the methods of Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki. Sadly, this latest tussle was not without its casualties, as KMC workers razed some of its young trees. Given Karachi’s burgeoning concrete sprawl, and the resultant susceptibility to urban flooding and heat islands, this speaks volumes for our penchant for self-injury.

Parks and recreation areas are estimated to account for less than 2pc of Karachi's total built spaces. And while the relatively affluent District South is considered the 'greenest' part of the city by this diminutive yardstick, the amount and quality of green spaces and permeable surfaces there, too, is far from adequate. Tree plantation drives have become popular among politicians, even those who lack environmental awareness in other contexts, and local administrations tend to prioritise aesthetics over environmental needs in the few green spaces they do develop. At best, this has given rise to the phenomenon of manicured lawns behind gated walls that offer little benefit to the pedestrian public most in need of green cover; at worst, it has led to the mass planting of unsuitable, non-native species of trees. Clearly, there is a need for deeper, genuine engagement between the city's public officials, experts and civil society to counteract the growing threat of climate change and public health hazards posed by living in an environmentally hostile city. The Urban Forest may seem like a miniscule intervention in the face of such an existential challenge, but at least it represents a start.

The economy in focus

THE wheels seem to be turning faster and faster at the top amid an accelerating slowdown in the economy.

In two days alone, we have seen a high-level meeting at the prime minister's residence to take stock of the economic situation, and a rare press conference by the prime minister's adviser on finance, Hafeez Shaikh, during which the latter attempted to persuade his audience that the economy was on the right track and its deficits were reducing.

Read: Accountability should not affect business: Hafeez

It was also acknowledged that the accountability process could be hurting business confidence and a wish was expressed for NAB to continue its work in a "manner that does not negatively affect the business climate".

While this remark and similar statements of late have led some to ask whether the accountability process will continue in its present shape, the government's pursuit of political rivals accused of corruption has not halted.

The deficits in the economy are undoubtedly shrinking, and Mr Shaikh is right to point out that the size of the imbalances is reducing. He is also right to take a stand on tax collection and the documentation drive that is presently under way.

The actual revenues from the drive will be a while materialising, but a culture of compliance needs to be built, and if the vigorous hunt for non-compliant parties is what it takes to deliver results, then so be it, provided of course that certain lines are not crossed and the authorities do not resort to harassment.

But Mr Shaikh was premature in urging the people to take heart and asserting that the results of the decisions taken under the IMF programme had begun to come in.

For the people, whether the common man or the investor, results do not mean shrinking deficits. What the people are looking for is a check on inflation, improved job and investment opportunities, a tax burden that does not eat into one's essential spending, and so on. Material improvements in the lives of the public and getting the rusty wheels of the economy to start turning again are the real deliverables of economic policy, and not shrinking deficits and changing ratios.

Mr Shaikh also pulled a small surprise for everyone by suggesting that the National Bank of Pakistan could be transferred into private hands. If so, this could be one of the biggest-ever privatisation deals. The list of heads from where the government is expecting to receive up to Rs1tr in non-tax revenue also threw up a number of caveats. For example, Rs400bn as State Bank profit hinges on the exchange rate remaining stable throughout the fiscal year.

Everybody wants to see the economy improve, but more importantly, everybody wants to feel that improvement in their day-to-day lives.

Ghotki violence

THE vandalism of temples and the destruction of private property, following the registration of a blasphemy case against a Hindu school owner in Ghotki, once again reminds us of the extent to which the social fabric of Pakistani society has been eroded.

Though the Hindu community has been living in Sindh for centuries, violent incidents like these leave them defenceless.

The case against the school owner was registered when a student claimed he heard him making objectionable religious statements; he told his father, who then informed the police.

Earlier in May, violence erupted in Mirpurkhas when a local vet allegedly used paper inscribed with religious texts to wrap medicine. After the incident, a mob vandalised shops and houses, mostly belonging to the local Hindu community.

Though it can be argued that those whose religious sentiments have been hurt have the right to protest, no one can be absolved of taking the law into their own hands and targeting another community.

It is a sad reality that the land of Sufis is falling prey to violence committed in the name of religion.

The Ghotki police have registered a case against the rioters for damaging places of worship. Let us hope that the cases are pursued to their logical conclusion, even in the case of potential political opposition.

Unfortunately, there have been several incidents that show the blasphemy law's potential for being misused.

A Christian couple in Kot Radha Kishan (Kasur) were accused of blasphemy in 2014, following which they were beaten and burnt by a mob because they demanded their wages from their employer.

Similarly, in 2013, a dispute among two friends led to the burning of a whole Christian settlement in Gojra (Toba Tek Singh) on blasphemy charges.

Society's attitude towards the issue is just as big a challenge.

Mashal Khan, a student of the Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan, was killed even before accusations against him could be pursued according to the law.

Prof Khalid Hameed only needed to be seen as 'anti-Islam' for his student to stab him to death.

It is about time the state took religious scholars on board to chalk out a strategy aimed at stopping the rampant misuse of the law — often for settling property,

monetary and personal disputes. Meanwhile, it can demonstrate some political grit by penalising those who took the law into their own hands in Ghotki.

‘A’-class accountability?

THERE is an element of both self-righteousness and audacity in the way the government has ignored all advice to proceed cautiously with its accountability drive and not appear to be on a vengeance spree. In fact, at a press conference in Islamabad over the weekend, there was yet more evidence of how the PTI setup may actually be relishing the allegations about targeted accountability. Farogh Naseem, the federal law minister, accompanied by Firdous Ashiq Awan, the prime minister’s special adviser on information, said a new rule would soon bar those involved in mega corruption from claiming ‘A’-class status in prison. The new rule is thought to be a result of the widespread anger in the country against those who are accused of gobbling up the millions that were supposed to be spent on the welfare of the people. However, the proposal that aims to demote certain ‘A’-class prisoners or detainees has clearly not been thought through. Surprisingly — and this has been pointed out by news reports — neither Mr Naseem nor Ms Awan seemed to have considered the fact that jails are a provincial subject. This means that the federal government’s attempt to bring in change by merely amending the National Accountability Ordinance is open to legal challenge.

The announcement, made on the directives of Prime Minister Imran Khan, has been termed ill-timed on many counts. The law minister’s reputation as someone who understood the law is at the moment under a cloud over his controversial remarks about a special constitutional status for Karachi. But the biggest issue, of course, relates to the opposition politicians who are or are likely to be thrown in a prison cell in the near future, given the thrust of the current accountability campaign. The debate about how the process of accountability must appear to be fair and non-discriminatory is futile once it is established that the government’s chosen manner is not rooted simply in over-exuberance. It seems to be deliberate and may remain the preferred course.

Maryam's place in PML-N

THE ECP's decision on what party office Ms Maryam Nawaz can and cannot legally hold could see considerable legal wrangling in the days to come.

Read: ECP dismisses plea to remove Maryam as PML-N vice president

Ruling on a complaint by some PTI politicians, the ECP has confirmed Ms Nawaz can remain vice president of the PML-N, but at the same time has banned her from playing a more active role in the party's affairs.

The details of the verdict have been reserved but from what emerged in the media immediately after a short ruling was announced on Tuesday, the ECP apparently deems the position of vice president as ceremonial and of no consequence.

Having been convicted by a court of law, Ms Nawaz has been barred from holding any 'functional' office in the party. This means that she cannot take charge of the PML-N as its secretary or president or under any other title, even in a temporary 'acting' capacity.

As the first responses to the decision came in, it appeared there was still plenty of room for ambiguity and confusion. For instance, what would happen if a supposedly innocuous vice president of a political party were to suddenly wake up and insist on being more useful without undergoing a change of title? Perhaps the detailed judgement will shed some light on this question.

It is a decision where, *prima facie*, views from both the parties have been accommodated. Yet, it could be a source of discomfort for the ruling party as the decision may appear to go against the spirit of the PTI's conquest-style politics that it has adopted in its avowed effort to root out corruption.

While, clearly, this ruling would put severe limits on Ms Nawaz should she emerge from the custody of NAB anytime soon, the government is obviously looking for even more ways to rein her in.

The PTI lawmakers behind the original appeal may soon challenge the ECP decision in court — a development that will duly feed the debate about the growing reliance of a certain school of politicians in the country on what some other parties call 'outside' support. The argument is that, instead of proving it is

better than others on the basis of its performance in government, the PTI as a political party is just too eager to celebrate developments where its rivals are incapacitated because of court actions or other reasons.

Whether or not a convicted person can hold party office is a legal question that any citizen can raise. But the matter is bound to be viewed in a different context if PTI lawmakers show too much enthusiasm in pursuing the case and petitioning the ECP to remove Ms Nawaz from her post in the PML-N. Under more traditional rules, the task of deciding the fate of a convicted and maligned politician is best left to the people's jury.

Attacks on oilfields

THE attacks on two key Saudi oil facilities on Saturday, claimed by Yemen's Houthi movement, offer a small preview of just how explosive — figuratively and literally — the situation in the Middle East can become unless there is de-escalation from all sides. The attacks, believed to have been carried out by either drones or missiles, struck the Saudi oil heartland in the country's east, and stood out due to the devastation they caused, as well as revealed major chinks in the kingdom's armour where internal security is concerned. Oil prices have spiralled, while an angry war of words has erupted primarily involving the Saudis, the US and Iran. The US says it has intelligence that Iran is involved, but has offered nothing concrete, while the Saudis have called for action without naming their cross-Gulf neighbour. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has, meanwhile, termed US accusations "max deceit".

The Middle East currently resembles a cauldron ready to bubble over, with multiple crises brewing in different parts of the region. And behind most of these confrontations are two geopolitical blocs fighting for influence in the area; one is led by the US and contains the Gulf Arabs, with Saudi Arabia as its most important component, as well as Israel. The other is fronted by Iran and its allied groups in the region, including Hezbollah, the Houthis and militias within Iraq, along with Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. There is little doubt that the events in eastern Saudi Arabia over the weekend were the latest act in this power play. There can be two ways to proceed from here; the first is the path of confrontation. President Donald Trump, without naming Iran, says his military is "locked and loaded" waiting upon the right signal from the Saudis. Iranian military

commanders have responded by saying all US bases in the region are within the range of their missiles. The other path is of de-escalation. For one, the US and Saudi Arabia can take the initiative to end the ruinous war in Yemen, which has killed over 11,000 civilians. This, along with ending the long nightmare of the Yemeni people, can be a key move to ensure regional security, specifically that of Saudi Arabia. Secondly, the US needs to end the economic war it has unleashed against Iran and return to the nuclear deal. The next few days will be critical and indicate which path all parties involved will take.

Private school regulation

A LARGE number of parents across the country must have heaved a sigh of relief after the Supreme Court decided to reset the fees of private schools to what was being charged in January 2017. The 65-page verdict sets many precedents for the operation and regulation of private schools, an issue that has so far been largely ignored by the government. The Supreme Court, in its verdict, reflected public sentiment by declaring private schools to be businesses and subjecting them to regulation. The court also capped the annual increase in fees at 5pc, subject to the approval of the regulatory authorities. Interestingly, private school regulatory authorities have existed in all four provinces for many years, but up until now, they had appeared toothless in the face of large educational corporations. With more than 23m children out of school, the right to free and compulsory education in Pakistan remains a distant dream for many. The public education system, in its present state, only seems to benefit those whose livelihoods are attached to it. After the passage of the 18th Amendment in 2010, it was hoped that decentralisation of education would improve its management and service delivery, but the sector was seen to fall prey to the 'foreign aid syndrome'. The overall development of schools, teachers and curricula was relinquished for short-term projects that contributed little towards educating the children of the poor.

It was no surprise then that the private education sector grew and came to the rescue of children from lower-middle and middle-class families. It is understandable that the provision of education by private institutions incurs a significant cost, especially in an inflated economy like Pakistan's. However, when profits earned are drastically higher than the costs — such as an arbitrary increase of up to more than 30pc in a single academic year — it is no less than

blatant exploitation. The Supreme Court, through its verdict, has outlined the parameters of preventing this exploitation and put the onus of regulation back on the government's shoulders.

Trump on Kashmir

AS the leaders of Pakistan and India get ready to fly to the US to attend the UN General Assembly, there has been speculation of a possible meeting on the Kashmir issue at the multilateral moot, with Washington playing the role of facilitator.

President Donald Trump's recent comments that "a lot of progress" has been made in defusing tensions between the two South Asian states has strengthened this assumption.

The US president will be meeting both prime ministers — Imran Khan and Narendra Modi — and the possibility that Mr Trump will use the meetings to discuss India-held Kashmir cannot be ruled out.

However, considering India's intransigence — with its stubborn insistence that the decades-old Kashmir issue is an 'internal' or 'bilateral' matter — as well as the American leader's own mercurial nature, it is obvious that not too much hope should be pinned on any breakthroughs in the US over the next few days.

On the ground in IHK, there is no sign that India is ready to abandon its cruel methods of subjugation.

While New Delhi's military enforcers were already meting out brutal treatment to ordinary Kashmiris who oppose its suffocating rule, now it appears as if even those amongst the held region's elite who were known for their loyalty to India are being humiliated.

For example, Farooq Abdullah, the octogenarian former chief minister of IHK, has been formally arrested after being held under house arrest for over a month. He has been detained under the Public Safety Act, widely considered a black law, which allows for detention without charge for two years.

Elsewhere, the nightmare of Kashmiris shows no sign of ending. As highlighted in this paper on Tuesday, citizens of the occupied region have told foreign media

that they have been brutally tortured by Indian troops on the slightest suspicion of aiding fighters. Young men speak of harrowing beatings, electrocution and other forms of abuse at the hands of the Indians. The brutal methods have sent a wave of fear across the occupied region, with hundreds reportedly detained. It is strange that India still trumpets its democratic credentials despite such damning evidence against it.

In the backdrop of such cruelty and arrogance on the part of India, can any miracle be expected in the US?

While the doors of dialogue should never be closed, New Delhi needs to seriously reconsider its atrocious methods in IHK. The use of force has failed, and failed miserably, to crush the Kashmiri quest for freedom over the last three decades; if the Indian establishment thinks more of such failed policies will bear fruit, it is horribly mistaken. In fact, such methods will only fuel the armed struggle in IHK.

The solution to the Kashmir crisis is obvious: India needs to stand down and talk to the Kashmiris as well as Pakistan to resolve this imbroglio, and shun the current repressive course it has adopted.

Kasur's fault line

ONCE again, protests have erupted in the city of Kasur over the sexual abuse and murder of children, and parents are forced to relive their worst nightmare, as painful memories of the not-too-distant past resurface. On Tuesday, the bodies of three out of a reported five missing boys were discovered in Chunian tehsil: eight-year-old Faizan and Suleman Akram, and nine-year-old Ali Husnain. Kasur's trade and local bar associations have called for a strike until arrests are carried out. Following these calls for strikes and agitation from the public — which saw protesters pelting stones at a police station, burning tyres, shutting down shops, and blocking roads — the Punjab police have suspended two of its officials for failing to carry out their duty to protect and serve the public. They also claim to have detained several suspects in connection with the murder of the children, and will be carrying out DNA tests soon. Such knee-jerk efforts may or may not deliver justice, but they certainly help in managing public perceptions.

In 2015, the country was shaken when news of hundreds of videos of young children being forced to perform sexual acts on adults surfaced. These videos were allegedly sold in the market or used to blackmail the parents of the children. If the protesting parents had not clashed with the police, who had previously dismissed their pain and cries for justice, it is likely that the scale of the abuse would never have been unearthed. But even then, the alleged high-profile patrons in power or with close links to those in power were never arrested. Then came the news of the horrific rape and murder of six-year-old Zainab Ansari in 2017, which led to even greater outrage, with countrywide protests and increased pressure on the PML-N government. In an attempt to assuage the protests, the then Punjab government hastily carried out the execution of one Imran Ali, who the court found guilty of rape and murder. But the problem did not end there — even if it silenced the protesters for the time being. In December 2018, four other people were arrested for purchasing minor girls for prostitution in Kasur. Clearly, the scale of the rot is extensive for such incidents to keep happening over and over again in one part of the country. Indeed, the sexual abuse of children is Pakistan's hidden shame.

Heart disease prevention

EXPERTS have suggested that more than 40 people die of heart disease every hour in Pakistan. Until three years ago, the number of such deaths was around 12 per hour. This is an alarming increase of more than 200pc in the heart-related mortality rate. The data speaks volumes for the inability of the public healthcare system to cater to a rapidly growing population; secondly, it shows that there is something inherently wrong with the lifestyles of a majority of Pakistanis. Government spending on healthcare in Pakistan has remained less than 1pc of the GDP over several decades. While the present government came to power promising to make healthcare one of its top priorities and also announced a couple of health programmes, the budgetary allocations tell a different story. The federal health budget was slashed this year, along with the provincial budgets of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Balochistan. Fortunately, in Sindh the health budget was increased by 19pc, underscoring the provincial government's plan to improve the provision of healthcare. In this regard, the opening of a chest pain unit by the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases in the low-income neighbourhood of Orangi in Karachi is a step in the right direction.

Meanwhile, unchecked ‘development’ over the years has led to a decline in the overall quality of life as air pollution has increased and public spaces have been reduced, especially in the bigger cities. Karachi, which has been declared the fifth least liveable city in the world, is a case in point. It is no surprise that sedentary lifestyles and poor diet, combined with bad air quality, have resulted in every third person suffering from hypertension — a precursor to heart disease. If heart patients get medical assistance in time, a large number of these deaths could be prevented. However, this requires that people have easy access to basic but effective healthcare, something that is impossible to achieve until the government makes considerable investment in the development of health facilities and medical staff.

Media courts

AN extraordinarily unwise and provocative idea, rather than having been discarded after due reflection, is instead being embraced by the PTI government.

The federal cabinet on Tuesday approved the setting up of ‘media courts’, ostensibly to expedite the disposal of media-related complaints within 90 days. This was followed by the government spokesperson, Firdous Ashiq Awan, saying the bill is to be presented in parliament, with media organisations brought on board later if it is passed.

According to the plan, Pemra and the Press Council of Pakistan will refer cases to these ‘tribunals’ which will be monitored by the superior courts.

On Thursday however, Ms Awan appeared to backtrack a little and said that the draft had not been finalised, and no decision will be taken without consulting the stakeholders.

These qualifiers notwithstanding, no one buys the fiction that such courts are desired for any benign purpose.

After at least a year of unrelenting assault on the freedom of the press, we can be sure the proposed tribunals will be yet another device to harass and persecute outspoken journalists.

Of course, no government relishes a truly free and independent media. Military dictatorships by definition are the most authoritarian extreme, and a compliant media is the conduit for promoting their one-dimensional narrative.

The press during Gen Zia's regime was made to submit to the indignity of censors at the Press Information Department vetting every news report, and later, to a plethora of 'press advices'.

Even democratic governments would like nothing better than to police the media. In 2017, for instance, during the PML-N government, the proposed Pakistan Print Media Regulatory Authority would have required newspapers to renew their licence on a yearly basis — a brazen ploy to ensure compliance. The government, however, hastily retreated in the face of vociferous opposition from journalists and civil society.

The PTI government has now gone a step further in its indifference to the furore that erupted at the suggestion of media courts a couple of months ago.

An independent press is supposed to hold the authorities' feet to the fire; for the government to insert itself into the system that regulates the media presents an obvious conflict of interest. One can, in fact, ask whether this latest move has anything to do with television anchors of late becoming a tad more critical of the government's performance, something that has undoubtedly discomfited some PTI legislators.

Instead of acquiring the reputation of a regime that recalls the darkest days of censorship, the government should strengthen Pemra and PCP by respecting their autonomy rather than proposing a system whereby they would function as mere post offices.

Moreover, if they are indeed set up, what punishments will the courts be empowered to mete out? Should we expect public floggings of journalists, as in the days of Gen Zia?

Khursheed Shah's arrest

SENIOR PPP politician and lawmaker Khursheed Shah has landed where he was expected to a long time ago. He belongs to a party that has forever been

fighting allegations of its leaders amassing assets beyond their declared sources of income.

Of late, however, it appeared that the PPP had been given competition, even overtaken, by PML-N members — numerous stories about the latter's allegedly corrupt ways have been doing the rounds.

Mr Shah's arrest by the National Accountability Bureau has rectified the balance and once again brought into focus the PPP's dubious reputation as a party that condones corruption within its own ranks. The newest arrest will intensify the battle in the country's political arena. Government ministers might say they have played no part in Mr Shah's arrest, but that has not prevented PTI activists from gleefully celebrating the capture of the seasoned parliamentarian.

It is not surprising that the opposition parties have been insisting, with some justification, that the arrest reflects the vengeful nature of the current accountability drive — an impression that no amount of rhetoric on the need for accountability of the mighty can dispel. They view the controversial drive as a scheme that targets not simply legislators accused of corruption, but parliament as a whole.

Regrettably, the government does not mind being blamed for trying to undermine parliament whenever an opportunity presents itself. Nor do the rulers seem to be concerned at the flak that NAB gets over the manner in which it selects individuals and then proceeds against them. The PTI conveniently maintains that NAB is an invention of the parties which were in power then and are in opposition now, ie the PPP and PML-N.

Indeed, this view would have secured the government some brownie points had it not been for the sheer defiance of common sense betrayed by NAB's operations. No investigating authority can retain its neutrality and escape critical censure and public outcry if it appears too sluggish or eager in its methods. The accountability bureau is far too slow in its investigations — but loses no time when it comes to identifying and then arresting suspects.

There is little sense in holding suspected individuals for so long, and exploiting, even abusing, the provision for physical remand. If it has concrete reasons for its actions, and evidence to support them, NAB must process the cases against Mr Shah and the others quickly and let the courts decide.

Nimrita's death

THE jury is still out on the details surrounding the death of Nimrita Chandani, a final-year student at the Bibi Aseefa Dental College in Larkana. The judicial probe formed at the request of the Sindh government will hopefully shed more light on the tragic incident. Meanwhile, anger is rising. Protests have been held in several cities of the province, including Mirpur Mathelo, Larkana and Hyderabad. Demonstrations have also been held in Karachi by students, along with members of civil society and the medical fraternity that tend to support Nimrita's family's claim that she was murdered and did not take her own life. Hopefully, the protests will put pressure on the authorities not to slacken, though it must also be understood that speculation will cause more confusion, and only a thorough, uninterrupted probe can clarify matters. Whatever the circumstances of her death, ready judgements might hamper an impartial probe, besides making it more difficult for her family to cope in their hour of grief.

In the backdrop of targeted violence against Hindus — especially the recent violence in Ghotki and Mirpurkhas — and the issue of forced conversion of Hindu girls, it is no surprise that Nimrita's community feels stuck between a rock and a hard place. Hence, it was heartening to see civil society rallying together for the protection of minorities. The protest in Karachi was also attended by the leader of a religious party. Participants demanded another judicial inquiry into the desecration of temples in Ghotki, following an incident of alleged blasphemy by a Hindu school owner earlier in the week. As disturbing as the violence (that also damaged businesses owned by the Hindu community) in Ghotki was, it was reassuring to see images on social media showing Muslims sitting inside the temples to prevent further destruction by a raging mob. These intermittent displays of support by people belonging to the majority faith show that there are pockets of tolerance that might help the country overcome its larger demons.

Maternal and child health

A MOTHER or her newborn child dies every 11 seconds in some part of the world, according to a new report published by affiliated agencies of the United Nations. Most of these deaths occur in regions where access to healthcare remains a challenge, even though globally since 2000 the rate of neonatal

morbidity has halved and the number of maternal deaths has reduced by a third. Housing about a quarter of the world's population, South Asia remains one of the most problematic regions with regard to maternal and child health. According to a Lancet report, stillbirth and neonatal mortality rates are about twice as high in South Asia as in sub-Saharan Africa. When it comes to Pakistan, unfortunately, the country has the highest rate of newborn deaths in the world and one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the region. A 2018 report by Unicef stated that one in every 22 babies born in Pakistan dies within a month. The report further said that more than 80pc of newborn deaths would be preventable, given good nutrition, hygiene and access to well-trained midwives.

Adequate sanitation and the provision of adequate healthcare in Pakistan has always remained a challenge. However, in the past couple of decades, the problem has been compounded by a rapidly increasing population (Pakistan is the sixth-most populous country in the world), making the distribution of resources and doctors even more difficult than it was before. Unfortunately, it is characteristic of politics in Pakistan to pay little heed to the people's actual needs — health, education and security. Successive governments introduce health schemes, usually towards the end of their tenures to gain popularity, but the overall approach towards subjects like health and education remains nonchalant. The PTI leadership has succeeded in making headlines by announcing the Sehat Insaf card early in its tenure, but that seems to be the extent of work put into improving the provision of healthcare. If the PTI-led government intends to bring some real change at all, it must shift its focus from 'accountability for all' to 'healthcare for all'.

IMF impressions

FOR a number of days, a senior delegation from the International Monetary Fund, consisting of a director and the mission chief, made the rounds in Islamabad and Karachi, gathering impressions of how the implementation of the IMF programme has been going thus far. They met government leaders and opposition politicians, as well as the State Bank leadership, business stakeholders and the media. After their round of meetings, Mr Jihad Azour, the director of the Middle East department of the IMF, told media persons that the programme is "off to a good start". This assurance alone is important because it should lay to rest all speculation that the visit was some sort of an emergency

event due to slippages in meeting the targets. The team was clear that a formal review is scheduled for the end of October or early November, with the exact dates yet to be finalised, and that it is far too soon to start evaluating the programme's success or failure. The most fundamental message of the team was for the authorities in Pakistan to stay the course; meanwhile, it was conveyed to the business elite and larger populace that without going through a difficult process of adjustment, the economy would not improve.

This much is fine. But the team also made some observations that merit further comment. In their assessment, there is a strong commitment to the programme and the reform targets envisaged in it at the topmost levels of the government. Mr Azour even said that the prime minister himself, whom he has met three times already, is very committed to the programme. We hope this is true, since sticking to a path of reform and not making further about-turns is important. Besides, Pakistan has little choice at this point in time but to continue and earn the Fund's seal of approval after the first review, because meeting the Fund's targets depend — crucially — on unlocking a large quantity of other financial assistance.

Ownership of the programme is critical to its success — there is no doubt about this. But if it is too soon to evaluate the programme's success, it is also too soon to assess the quality of the ownership that the programme enjoys. Many of the more critical steps in the reform agenda have yet to be rolled out. All we have seen at the moment is a large macroeconomic adjustment, in the form of currency depreciation, high interest rates and a fierce tax effort launched since July. Many other steps, the real ones as a matter of fact, have yet to come. But those steps will require ownership beyond just the federal government level. The opposition parties, the provincial governments, and indeed the citizenry itself, have yet to be called upon to play their role. It is when that time comes that we will know how much ownership the programme actually enjoys.

Torkham crossing

THE launch of round-the-clock operations at Torkham — one of the two key trade and travel routes between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the other being Chaman in Balochistan — is one of the rare confidence-building measures taken by either side in recent years. The availability of day and night customs and immigration facilities at Torkham is expected to rapidly boost bilateral trade and

make it easier for people travelling to and from Pakistan. The new data shows that the trade volume across Torkham has increased by about 55pc since upgradation of the border post early this month; hopefully, it should continue to surge in the months ahead. Similarly, the cross-border traffic of Afghans for medical treatment in Pakistan and for other reasons is also expected to jump once the government here upgrades its visa-processing section at its embassy in Kabul and reconstructs its Jalalabad consulate, which is in very poor shape because of being subjected to repeated militant attacks. Encouraged by early results from Torkham, a federal minister has hinted at the provision of round-the-clock immigration and customs services at Chaman too, if and when required.

Although the initiative was undertaken on the instructions of the prime minister, KP Chief Minister Mahmood Khan's active interest in it expedited work on the project. Indeed, closer business ties with Afghanistan are an important aspect of the provincial economy. Brisk bilateral trade will help create new jobs in the region, improve public services and attract investment in transport and other infrastructure. China has already expressed its desire to set up cold chain facilities and a hospital at the border, and its foreign minister has spoken about Beijing's plan to build a motorway connecting Peshawar with Kabul. This initiative could be a first step towards enhancement of regional connectivity. Peshawar as a regional trade hub could help Pakistan access the Central Asian markets for its export cargo once differences over road transit facilities through Pak-Afghan territory are resolved. Also, the goal of regional connectivity and improved trade ties cannot be achieved without concerted efforts from both sides to bridge their political differences. There has been a visible improvement in bilateral ties at the political level in recent months due to Islamabad's efforts to convince the Afghan Taliban to sit across the table with the elected government in Kabul. Both countries should use this to build trust and an enduring relationship for the future of their people.

Regrettable ordinance

WHEN a law is passed surreptitiously, even if it is through a provincial ordinance that can only be in force for a maximum of two 90-day periods, there is good reason to be sceptical. It recently emerged during the hearing of a petition in the Peshawar High Court that the KP government had on Aug 5 issued the KP Actions (in Aid of Civil Power) Ordinance, 2019. In other words, certain powers

given to the armed forces to tackle militancy in former Fata and Pata back in 2011 (retrospectively applied to take effect in 2008 and legalise detention centres) have now been extended to the rest of KP. The legislation, presented as a *fait accompli*, brings millions more people under the ambit of a special law which compromises their constitutional rights. The HRCP has roundly condemned the promulgation of the ordinance, citing the findings from its recent report that reveal “a strong trust deficit between the state and citizens of KP, the local communities that HRCP consulted are already wary of what shape law enforcement and access to justice will take...”.

Rather than expand its writ over the newly merged tribal districts, bring them into the Constitutional fold and strengthen civilian authority, the KP government has abdicated its duty to maintain law and order to the armed forces. It is a regrettable and retrogressive move. After all, we have long been told that militancy is under control; why is there now a need to tighten the state’s grip over an even larger section of the population? When the ordinance was first promulgated, it could be argued that Pakistan was in an existential battle against militancy in an area where civilian authorities were ill-equipped to fight back. In fact, the main purpose behind the original legislation was to give legal cover to the internment centres in erstwhile Fata and Pata where hundreds of forcibly disappeared people were indefinitely detained. In many cases, it was only when the military courts were set up in late 2014 and began to convict detainees that their families learned of their whereabouts — often simultaneously finding out that their loved one had been sentenced to death.

Special laws are never the solution. Military courts, mercifully not revived, were said to have been ‘necessitated’ by the country’s dysfunctional criminal justice system. But setting them up merely allowed the government to kick the can down the road rather than undertake meaningful legal reforms. Another example is that of the Sindh Rangers, the renewal of whose special powers of arrest and detention every three months has become so normalised that it is hardly worth a mention. Instead, it should be the provincial police taking sole responsibility for fighting crime. The KP government must repeal both the ordinance and the Action (in Aid of Civil Power) Regulation, 2011.

Climate emergency

IT is an irony that while it contributes little to the world's carbon footprint, Pakistan is eighth on the list of countries most affected by climate change.

Until now, the conversation around climate change had been limited at best. However, the public march held on Friday in as many as 30 Pakistani cities, reflected that maybe we too have hit our own 'climate swerve'.

In 2012, Pakistan was the first country to set up a climate change ministry. This was followed by the release of the National Climate Change Policy. But unfortunately, as usually happens here, nothing more was done to empower the ministry, nor was there any adherence by the government to its own policy.

Climate change is a much deeper and broader issue than policymakers realise.

According to a 2012 report of the World Wildlife Fund, due to Pakistan's geographical location, the overall temperature increase in the country is much faster and greater than the global average. This has become evident with the mercury rising to record-breaking temperatures with every heatwave that strikes various parts of the country; prolonged droughts; erratic rain patterns and perennial flooding; frequent glacial lake outbursts and depleting water resources. These extreme weather events also pose a threat to the country's existing oil, gas and power infrastructure, while the loss of homes, agricultural land and livelihoods force people to move to larger cities, putting further strain on our already overstretched resources.

The impact of climate change has multiple aspects. These include the immediate loss of lives incurred by extreme weather events and worsening water and food insecurity as droughts becomes more frequent and floods destroy farmland.

Meanwhile, people and governments struggle to cope with the economic damage of recurring climatic events.

The Global Climate Index Report, 2018, states that more than 10,000 people have perished in Pakistan during the past 20 years due to approximately 140 extreme weather events that incurred losses of almost \$4bn. The crisis has reached a stage where it will take all-out efforts by both the government and the public to minimise the damage caused by extreme weather events. Alarm bells

are ringing and the climate march is a cry for help from experts, civil society, and the public to take action. The ban on single-use plastic by the federal, Punjab and Sindh governments can prove to be the first step, only if enforced properly.

Beyond cricket

BOXER Muhammad Waseem returned home to deafening silence at the airport. With three swift punches, Waseem had knocked out his contender in a breathtaking 62 seconds just a day or two earlier in Dubai at the Rotunda Rumble event. Even more significantly, it was his first match after nearly a year away from the boxing arena. Unable to secure sponsors, Waseem was stripped of his silver flyweight title and top rating in 2018. Despite his remarkable comeback, the exhilarating minute and two seconds were not aired on local sports channels. Other than a handful of sports enthusiasts, no one in the country seemed to even notice what a big moment this was for Pakistan sports. In reaction to the cold indifference, a ‘news page’ on Twitter questioned why no one had bothered to greet Waseem upon his arrival. The flyweight boxer responded that he did not fight for “greetings”, but to show the world Pakistan’s boxing prowess. This exchange was picked up by cricket legend Wasim Akram, who criticised the Pakistani state and public for their apathy towards their own ‘heroes’. Finally, all eyes were now on Waseem.

Akram’s tweet pointed to a bitter reality: beyond the stars of cricket, there is little to no media, corporate or government interest in highlighting other sports. Earlier this year, when snooker champion Babar Masih arrived in Karachi after winning the Asian Team Snooker Championship in Doha, he regretted that only the association’s president showed up at the airport to greet the team. The present state of boxing has also been marred by tragedy, internal politics and indifference in recent years. One of Pakistan’s greatest boxers, Abrar Hussain, was shot dead in Quetta in 2011. Another rising star, Lyari’s Mehrullah Lassi, was banned during his peak after he failed a doping test in 2004 — for traces of cannabis, not any performance-enhancing drug. It is time to show greater appreciation to those who continue to make the country proud, despite all the odds stacked against them.

Kashmir & militancy

THE issue of Kashmir is an emotional one and dear to most Pakistanis. This is why successive governments in this country have given sustained diplomatic and moral support to the Kashmiris in their just struggle for rights against India. However, past adventurism, especially by non-state actors and self-proclaimed jihadis, has done more harm than good to the Kashmir cause, besides tarnishing Pakistan's global reputation. In this regard, the prime minister's recent comments about those wanting to cross over and fight in India-held Kashmir are timely and must be welcomed. Speaking to the media in Torkham recently, Imran Khan said that anyone wishing to cross over to fight in IHK would be an enemy of Pakistan and the Kashmiris. He said that such moves would help India blame this country for infiltration. Since assuming office, the prime minister has taken other steps (such as action against JuD and its supremo Hafiz Saeed) to show the world that Pakistan is serious about not letting its soil be used by militants.

The prime minister's words have been praised in Washington, with American officials applauding "PM Imran Khan's unambiguous and important statement. ..." This newspaper has always called for action against militant groups, considering that Pakistan has often been accused of being soft on jihadis. Especially in times like these, with India looking to divert world attention from the atrocities it is committing in occupied Kashmir, and Afghanistan blaming Pakistan and issuing knee-jerk reactions after acts of terrorism on its soil, the state needs to send a firm message to the world that militancy of all kinds is unacceptable to this country. Where IHK is concerned, the struggle against Indian brutality is indigenous, and New Delhi must be prevented from painting this just struggle for rights in the ugly colours of terrorism.

Coming back to the Americans' commendation of Mr Khan's recent move, it must be added that the tone of State Department official Alice G. Wells was patronising, 'reminding' Pakistan "of its commitment to counter all terrorist groups". While indeed this country needs to do more on this front for its own security, the US is hardly in a position to lecture others. It has a reprehensible tradition of arming, training and financing rival groups — from Latin American to the Middle East — to fight and overthrow ideological and geopolitical opponents. Where South Asia is concerned, the US once played the main role in building the jihadi infrastructure in Afghanistan, then, after settling scores with the USSR, it

cut and ran, leaving Pakistan in the lurch. Terrorism is a transnational, complex issue and needs a cooperative approach to tackle; it should not be exploited, and certainly, those states with rather prominent skeletons in their own closets should not lecture others on the need to crack down on militancy.

From Nepra to NAB

THE power-sector regulator, Nepra, has included some extraordinary language in its latest flagship State of the Industry Report pointing to the damage that NAB has done to its operations, as well as the failure of long-term power-sector reforms. It laments that NAB is straying into the regulator's jurisdiction, a complaint that is perhaps inspired by the detention of some Nepra officials by the anti-corruption watchdog. "Almost all the projects on which Nepra had made determinations in the past have been questioned by NAB, and the way the investigations are being conducted, it has completely stifled the morale of Nepra professionals," the report says. This is the first time that the State of the Industry Report has been used as a vehicle to advance such grievances, and it shows the extent to which the damage wrought by the so-called accountability drive is being felt. NAB officials do not have the capacity to understand complex topics such as tariff determinations, yet they have the power to detain first and ask questions later. Even in cases where they seek to understand complex agreements or calculations, those who have engaged with them find that it can be an extremely vexing experience to try and explain these matters to them.

What is troubling about Nepra's warning is that the damage being done could end up carrying a steep price tag, and it is the citizens who will eventually have to pay. If NAB inquiries result in officialdom being afraid to take decisions, simply out of fear that they will be made to explain their decisions later to people who do not possess the capacity to understand them, then it will result in severe demoralisation, perhaps enough to jam the wheels of government. That is precisely what Nepra seems to be warning about. To top it off, the regulator also warns that the status quo is in dire need of reform, and some near-momentous changes are needed in the immediate term. The cost of this failure is evident in the circular debt, which the report says had crossed Rs1tr by the end of last year. The minister for power seems to be pleased with his efforts to enhance recovery and contain the flow of circular debt. But the fact is that without deep-rooted reform, the problem will keep recurring. And this reform is not going to come

about so long as government officials have to work with a gun held to their heads.

Rabies scourge

IN a widely circulated video, a 12-year-old boy is seen gasping for breath on his mother's lap. As he lies there breathing his last, she sobs into her dupatta, equally helpless. As painful as it is to watch, the video shows the desperation of victims and their families affected by the deadly rabies virus in their last days. The boy is said to have contracted the virus after being bitten by a rabid dog in his village in Shikarpur. Approximately 40 days later, he passed away at a Larkana hospital. Prior to this tragic incident, health experts had been decrying the dearth of rabies vaccines in the country, particularly in Sindh, which has seen a number of cases this year.

However, when the issue was recently brought up with the PPP's Saeed Ghani, he blamed the parents for delaying the child's visit to the hospital. While the exact details of the case are not yet known, the comment is incredibly insensitive at this time. Many are not aware of the precise steps that need to be taken immediately after a bite from a potentially rabid animal, through no fault of their own. First, the area that has come into contact with the animal's saliva must be rinsed with soap and water, followed by the administering of the anti-rabies vaccine and immunoglobulin inside or around the wound, depending on the severity of the bite. It is the job of the government and health authorities to have up-to-date knowledge and to spread awareness about vital and timely steps to take in order to counter the spread of rabies. The response by the authorities to tackle the threat has so far been short-sighted. Forgetting that animals, too, suffer, stray dogs are killed brutally through mass culling, which proves counterproductive as it leads to higher rates of breeding amongst them. Instead, investing in trap-neuter-return programmes is a far more effective and humane way to reduce the stray dog population and thus safeguard human life.

Blocking websites unlawfully

AFTER years of flagrant abuse of power, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority has finally been called out on its practice of blocking websites in an ad-

hoc, non-transparent manner with no opportunity to challenge its decisions. The Islamabad High Court, on hearing a petition filed by the left-wing Awami Workers Party for the blocking of its website, ruled that the authority had blocked over 800,000 websites in violation of the statutory provision. Through the PTA's own admission, it was learnt that no rules had been established for the blocking of websites, despite having in place the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act since 2016, which explicitly requires the regulatory body to do so. Sub-section 1 of Section 37 of Peca gives PTA the authority to block websites if the content contained therein is deemed to be against the glory of Islam, the integrity, security and defence of Pakistan, public order, and morality or is in contempt of court. However, sub-section 2 of Section 37 states that, "the authority shall, with the approval of the federal government, prescribe rules providing for, among other matters, safeguards, transparent process and effective oversight mechanism for exercise of power under sub-section 1".

It was also uncovered that the PTA had blocked the AWP website on the recommendation of an intelligence agency. This finding, while alarming, is only to be expected, given the years of complaints and criticism by multiple stakeholders, including NGOs working on internet issues, members of civil society etc, as well as detailed investigations undertaken by local and international publications and organisations that have established the role of the agencies in controlling the internet in Pakistan. In its detailed order, the court noted that given these circumstances, the PTA's, "blocking of websites was indeed in violation of the principles of natural justice". Such clarity on a contentious practice which amounts to the violation of basic rights to freedom of expression and the right to information is to be welcomed, even if over a decade late.

The court has now directed the authority to frame rules to govern the blocking of websites within a period of three months. It is to be hoped that the regulatory body takes on board all stakeholders in this process and utilises their input to finalise the mechanisms, without which — given the body's tainted history — the newly established rules may result in even greater misuse and abuse of authority. This, in turn, will not allow any let-up in petitions being filed in the courts that would again have to correct the path that the state apparently wishes to take. In all of this, it is the ordinary citizens and businesses that will suffer.

Slide in SDGs

PAKISTAN'S continuous decline in rankings for the Sustainable Development Goals over the past few years — from 115 in 2016 to 130 in 2019 — is yet more evidence of how little successive governments have worked towards fulfilling their promises to the electorate. Whether it is garbage collection in Karachi or building schools in Balochistan, any effort in this direction by officials is guided by the level of public attention they are likely to receive. Under the present circumstances, a stifled economy and regional and domestic political constraints will make it even more difficult to focus on the efforts required to uplift the quality of life of millions of Pakistanis. Where there have been efforts for achieving development-related targets, they seem to have been stymied by the lack of resources and trained personnel, as well as bureaucratic delays. The 18th Amendment saw many subjects, including health, education and transport, devolved to the provincial governments that have mostly failed to build up the requisite financial and human capacity to manage and improve service delivery. For almost a decade, more than 70pc of SDG-related development responsibilities have rested with the provinces, while around 20pc are under federal authority.

To cope with the lack of finances and expertise, public-private partnerships and donor-funded development programmes are emerging as one solution. However, at the moment, the sustainability of such initiatives remains questionable. Governments might lighten their load by outsourcing short-term development projects to corporate or international donor agencies, but the projects usually lapse when funds dry up or are later abandoned by the provincial administrations. Moreover, successive federal and provincial governments are overlooking the biggest factor that ties almost all development-related SDGs together — the country's burgeoning population. Pakistan has surpassed Brazil to become the fifth-most populous country in the world, and by 2030 (at the current population growth rate) it is expected to rise to fourth position. All development-related efforts will remain insufficient until the authorities take stock of the population growth rate. The present government's Ehsaas programme is said to be linked to 11 out of the 17 SDGs, but it is still in the planning stage. Its effectiveness will only become clear when and if the programme is launched. Until then, the people will have to tighten their belts and hope that someone in

public office thinks of them soon.

Digitising history

THANKS to modern technology, ancient history — from handwritten manuscripts to maps — can be made accessible to a large number of people at their fingertips. Now students, academics, researchers and journalists will be happy to learn that the Punjab archives department has announced its plan to digitise most of the 27,000 files it has sorted through amongst the ‘half-a-million’ documents in its collection, having recently purchased specialised scanners to this end. These invaluable primary sources of information should be available to the greater public by June 2020. The files in the authority’s possession are specific to the history of Punjab, with the oldest material dating back to the rule of Mughal emperor Shah Jehan in the 17th century, trailing down to the period under the Sikh empire and the British Raj. It is to the credit of the colonial rulers that they had a healthy obsession with documenting all transactions and observations — although for the reprehensible goal of maintaining empire.

Previously, only a privileged few were privy to this treasure trove of knowledge nestled within the confines of the Punjab Civil Secretariat. Much has been written about the ‘democratisation of knowledge’ and the concept of building ‘libraries without walls’, and such archival material will be of interest not only to Pakistanis, but to history enthusiasts everywhere in the world. Furthermore, digitisation and transferring data onto the internet is indeed the most effective way of ensuring that physical material does not get lost or damaged with the passage of time. Previous such efforts have been undertaken by the Sindh and Balochistan culture and archives departments, but due to the lack of funds and perhaps a lack of care on part of the governments, they have struggled to maintain their websites over time. One can only hope that the archives department is able to maintain the good work it set out to do, and collaborate with archival authorities globally to enrich its contribution.

Trump's 'offer'

THOUGH Donald Trump's offer to mediate between Pakistan and India on the Kashmir issue may come across as a sound idea, there's very little reason to believe that the American president is keen to pursue it.

For one, Mr Trump is known for his mercurial character, saying one thing and then making a U-turn within days or even hours. Secondly, mediation can only work if New Delhi sheds its rigid stance that the burning issue of India-held Kashmir is an 'internal' problem.

The US president has already made several similar 'offers' of mediation; the latest of these came during his meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan in New York on Monday.

"I will be ready to do it," Mr Trump told reporters with Mr Khan by his side, apparently eager to play the role of conciliator.

Where global crises are concerned, Mr Trump's propensity for making U-turns on American policy, indeed, his own actions, has become a regular feature of his tenure.

For example, Mr Trump is largely responsible for the current imbroglio in the Gulf, thanks to his withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal because of his intense dislike of all things related to his predecessor Barack Obama.

And just when the Afghan crisis seemed to be approaching a solution, the US leader called off a meeting with the Afghan Taliban at Camp David earlier this month, and torpedoed plans for further negotiations.

In the present case, just a day before his conversation with Mr Khan, he attended a rally in Texas, patiently listening as India's prime minister fulminated against Pakistan to the raucous applause of the Indian diaspora. It appears that Mr Trump is in election mode and making efforts to secure the American-Indian vote, while attempting to appear 'neutral' by praising Pakistan and its leadership.

The fact is that while Pakistan should welcome mediation, it should not have any expectations on this front from Mr Trump.

While bilateral attempts to resolve the Kashmir issue have stalled, Pakistan should continue to engage with world capitals and inform them of India's atrocities in the held valley. Indeed the UN General Assembly is an ideal forum to tell the world of the plight of Kashmiris who have been suffocating under Indian occupation for decades.

Due to its economic prowess and slick PR, India has deflected much of the criticism of its tactics in IJK. But that should not prevent Pakistan from continuing to plead Kashmir's case in all forums, while urging states to censure India for its human rights abuses.

If Mr Trump is indeed ready to mediate, he must tell Mr Modi, in no uncertain terms, that Indian troops have made life in the occupied region a living hell where human rights continue to be violated with impunity. Otherwise, much like his other actions, the US leader's words will appear as mere theatrics on the world stage.

Auto sector woes

THERE have been many news stories of late about the dire state of the country's automobile sector. It is of concern that the number of nonproductive days, or NPDs, is increasing each month at auto plants, and the spectre of large-scale lay-offs is advancing closer. Inventories have piled up at the three main plants, with Toyota and Honda especially hard hit, and at the rate of current accumulation, these inventories could reach the level of one month's production soon. At that point, the management of these plants may well have some very difficult questions to answer: should they shut down for the full month and start laying off full-time, permanent staff? At the moment, they are coping by cutting down the number of shifts, thus raising the number of NPDs during which their workforce is sent on forced, unpaid leave. The situation is aggravated further by the second-round impact on the vendors — those manufacturers whose output feeds into the auto assemblers. According to one estimate, for every one job in the main auto assembly sector, there are eight jobs in the vending and ancillary industry. So if the auto assemblers have laid off an estimated 4,000 people, given the cut in the number of shifts and increasing NPDs, the vendors are likely to have dismissed the services of close to 32,000 people, a figure that becomes

even larger if we include other related industries. And this is just the beginning of the story.

Of course, this is a global trend. The auto industry in many other countries is reeling from contracting demand. It is also a larger trend seen in manufacturing, within Pakistan as well as in the region and beyond. But two things should be borne in mind. First, in other countries the government is taking active measures to help support the industry in its time of crisis. India, for example, rolled out its package of measures to help the industry in late August. Second, the trend of an aggravated slowdown is visible across manufacturing sectors, but the auto sector is employment-heavy, and the government has an obligation to safeguard jobs. There are good reasons why the government should also take steps to alleviate the problems of manufacturing in general, if only to help protect employment and save whatever is left of the country's productive base. It is high time we realised that this situation will not self-correct.

Literary storm

POLITICS, freedom of expression and conscience, and the burden of history: all these have coalesced in a storm of controversy over the revocation of the Nelly Sachs Prize to acclaimed British-Pakistani author Kamila Shamsie. Earlier this month, she was announced the winner of the biennial literary award named after the Jewish poet and Nobel Laureate. However, a few days ago, the jury in the German city of Dortmund rescinded the award upon learning that Ms Shamsie has expressed her commitment to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement in support of Palestinian rights. The decision has not gone down well in the literary community. Over 250 writers from across the world have put their signatures to an open letter titled 'The right to boycott' that was printed on Monday in the London Review of Books, denouncing the move as tantamount to punishing a writer for human rights advocacy.

Among them are some of the finest practitioners of their craft and those whose works are a defining voice in contemporary social and political commentary — Arundhati Roy, Michael Ondaatje, Ben Okri, J.M. Coetzee, Noam Chomsky and William Dalrymple, to name but a few. In its zeal to expiate the sins of the past, Germany — along with other countries — has sometimes over-compensated by turning a blind eye to the suffering of the Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli

state. Ironically, Nelly Sachs, whose verses capture the horror of the Holocaust and lingering effects on the Jews who survived it, herself continued a correspondence with a younger generation of German writers in her later years. A sense of moral purpose and an understanding of the human condition on the part of an artist add to their work, rather than detracting from it. As the open letter says, “What is the meaning of a literary award that undermines the right to advocate for human rights, the principles of freedom of conscience and expression, and the freedom to criticise? Without these, art and culture become meaningless luxuries”.

Earthquake crisis

THE earthquake in northern Punjab and parts of Azad Kashmir has brought with it bitter memories from the 2005 catastrophe that claimed almost 75,000 lives. So far, some 40 people have been reported dead in Tuesday’s quake while over 500 have been injured. Cellular network services remained suspended in many places, preventing a more accurate assessment.

While rescue efforts this time were quicker and better than before — perhaps owing to the smaller scale of destruction — the loss of life could have been averted had the authorities put to use the lessons learnt from the 2005 tremor.

The statement given by the National Disaster Management Authority chairman shortly after the quake speaks volumes for the state’s apathy when disaster strikes. Responding to a question, the NDMA chairman said aftershocks could not be ruled out, but the situation was ‘nothing serious’ since there were several fault lines in the country.

Considering that the affected area of New Mirpur lies on the active Samwal-Jharik Kass fault line, which, experts say, was also activated in the 2005 earthquake, this statement is simply absurd and insensitive, and the people who lost their homes and loved ones would disagree with it. The quake was the second major one to have hit the area — that lies in seismic zone 4 (the most at risk) — in two decades. The devastation of the 2005 earthquake should have made a deep impact on how the government views and deals with natural disasters, but unfortunately, we do not seem to be any wiser. The fact that an earthquake preparedness strategy approved by the Planning Commission in 2007 has been lying in cold storage is evidence of this lackadaisical approach.

In terms of geographical location, Pakistan is more prone than many other countries to natural disasters, the incidence of which has drastically increased owing to global warming.

According to a report by the disaster management authority in KP, all 26 districts of the province are now vulnerable to natural calamities because of the increased frequency of extreme weather events (in addition to seismic activity in the region) as compared to only 13 districts a decade ago.

This is also true for the rest of the country that now witnesses torrential rains, floods and droughts on a routine basis. Pakistan's largest city, Karachi, with all its urban perils including substandard construction, also lies in a zone of 'noticeable' seismic danger, according to the Geological Survey of Pakistan. Many areas are so densely populated that only a mild tremor would be enough to incur large-scale loss of lives.

Regrettably, our collective approach towards disaster management leaves much to be desired. It is time the government moved on from 'first-aid rescue' — the short-term provision of tents, medicines and food to the affected — to developing and then implementing a comprehensive and sustainable policy to counter disaster and deal effectively with its aftermath.

PIA finances

IT would be a good idea for the chief executive officer of PIA, Air Marshal Arshad Mahmood Malik, to refrain from boasting about the revenues or 'operating profit' that the national carrier is running these days until the company has filed its annual and quarterly results as it is required to do under the law. PIA is a listed company and its shares are publicly traded. It makes for a sorry sight to see the head of a listed company paint the financial health of his company in glowing colours when he has not been able to report financial results for almost two years. PIA last filed its annual results in August of 2019, and those were for the calendar year 2017. Even this came after the company had to be placed on the defaulters segment by the stock exchange, the frontline regulator. By law, these results are supposed to be filed within 120 days of the end of the year. Clearly, PIA is deep in default with regard to this elementary obligation of all listed companies.

No financial results since 2017 means six quarterly filings have been missed, four in 2018 and two in 2019. The logic for this delay is unconvincing. We are told that the company's accounts people are still learning the ropes of the new software that is supposed to handle company finances. This cannot be seen as a valid reason to keep stockholders in the dark about the financial health of the company they own, and is no excuse to violate the law and fail to file these results on time. New to corporate ways, the CEO has still to learn some elementary lesson, and somebody needs to point out that shouting the 'good news' from the rooftops does not impress corporate circles. Before coming up with any numbers for revenue or profits in public gatherings, PIA should focus on delivering on its responsibility to its shareholders and furnish a complete and audited picture of the company's balance sheet and cash-flow statements down to the latest quarter. At the moment, it seems that the CEO himself does not have a very clear picture of the finances of his organisation. This is hardly surprising given that the national carrier is still working on finalising the 2018 numbers. It is for this reason that he should not expect others to believe in the numbers that are being given verbally.

Dengue again

ACCORDING to the special assistant to the prime minister on health, Dr Zafar Mirza, the number of registered dengue patients in the country now stands at over 10,000. Out of the total, 2,363 patients are from Punjab; 2,258 from Sindh; 1,814 from KP; and 1,772 from Balochistan. To make matters worse, malaria too has been on the rise in recent months. The two worst-hit cities are Karachi and Rawalpindi. Just yesterday, another patient in Karachi succumbed to the disease, raising the number of fatalities in the city to 11 this year alone. These are alarming figures, and they are expected to grow as parts of the country continue to experience moderate to heavy rainfall, temperatures soar, and the cleanliness of the cities remains a challenge for the authorities. The WHO classifies dengue as the world's "fastest spreading vector-borne viral disease", with approximately 40pc of the world's population at risk of contracting it.

Pakistan has struggled with containing the spread of the disease at different points in its recent history. While Dr Mirza has advised opposition leaders to not 'politicise' issues concerning health, such disasters are directly the result of poor governance — one cannot neatly separate politics from public health. When

Lahore was hit with a dengue epidemic back in 2011, the then chief minister was able to counter the further spread of the disease by being proactive and taking the necessary measures such as enacting new laws and seeking the expertise of medical teams from Sri Lanka to ensure that such a tragedy would not take place again. This knowledge and assistance was then passed on to the KP government, when it was facing its own dengue outbreak in 2017, which resulted in over 50 deaths and thousands rushed to hospitals to seek treatment. So while citizens should take preventive measures, the ultimate responsibility of carrying out anti-dengue campaigns and fogging rests with the government, and local governments must be empowered to this end.

Mediator's role?

WITHOUT doubt, the current crisis in the Gulf pitting Iran against the US and Saudis is one of the most combustible in the world.

One wrong move from either side can easily spiral into a conflagration of ugly proportions that will send the global economy into a tailspin and destroy regional peace.

Therefore, all attempts to defuse tensions must be welcomed and encouraged.

Pakistan is in the unique position of having ties with all three sides; though the relationship with the US tends to go up and down, it is currently on a stable course, while the Islamabad-Riyadh equation is a cordial one. As for ties with Iran, though these may be less than ideal, there is a realisation in both Islamabad and Tehran that relations between them need improvement.

It is in this context that Prime Minister Imran Khan's offer to Mr Trump in New York to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran must be seen. Speaking on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Mr Khan said he had discussed the issue of mediation with both US President Donald Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and had also brought up the issue with the Iranian president. "We're trying our best," said Mr Khan, adding that war between Iran and Saudi Arabia would be "a tragedy for all".

The prime minister's effort to promote regional peace must be lauded. However, there must be absolute clarity where the terms of such mediation are concerned, especially in a dispute as complicated as the one involving Riyadh and

Washington on one side (mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran would invariably involve the US) and Tehran on the other.

It was the Trump administration that precipitated this crisis by scuttling the Iran nuclear deal; ever since, the US president has been issuing a combination of threats and peace offerings to Iran — mostly the former.

If Pakistan has been asked to play mediator between Riyadh and Tehran (when asked, Mr Trump's response was ambiguous) it can ill afford any U-turns by the American or Saudi administration.

On its part, Pakistan would have to assure Iran that it is not in the Saudi-American camp and would play a neutral role to promote peace.

As home to both Shia and Sunni communities, Pakistan must realise the sensitivities involved in the Saudi-Iran spat.

Once the terms are clear, instead of indulging in public diplomacy, Pakistan should task its senior Foreign Office hands — who have a thorough understanding of the respective Saudi and Iranian administrations — with establishing contacts with both sides and start the process through the backchannel.

The risks involved would be considerable, but Pakistan can play a major role for peace if it is able to pull off a diplomatic coup and reduce tensions in the Gulf.

The alternative — of tensions boiling over — paints a grim scenario for the entire region.

Justice: 18 years late

WHAT is the price of 18 years of one's life spent on death row, despite being innocent of the crime that put one there? On Wednesday, the Supreme Court acquitted Wajih-ul-Hassan of blasphemy for which he had been sentenced to capital punishment in 2002. The court ruled that the prosecution was unable to prove the letters, which constituted the basis for the case, had actually been written by the condemned man. A lack of direct witnesses and the prosecution's reliance on what is considered weak evidence, ie an 'extra-judicial confession'

and the handwriting expert's report, was instrumental in Mr Hassan being exonerated.

This is but the latest example of how the country's dysfunctional justice system fails the people. In November 2016, the Supreme Court acquitted Mazhar Farooq of murder; by then, he had spent 20 years on death row. However, the nature of a blasphemy accusation is such that even those found innocent are dogged by it for the rest of their lives, forever looking over their shoulder lest vigilante 'justice' catch up with them — and with good reason. There have been several instances of individuals acquitted of the crime having been hunted down and killed later. So far-reaching is the violence that even lawyers defending people accused of blasphemy and judges who find them innocent, do so at the risk of their lives. And their adversaries, consumed by self-righteous hatred, do not forget. In 1995, an adult and a teenage boy were acquitted of blasphemy by a Lahore High Court judge — two years later, he was shot dead in his chambers. In 2014, advocate Rashid Rehman was murdered in Multan. His crime? He was the defence lawyer for Junaid Hafeez, a university lecturer accused of blasphemy. Incidentally, Mr Hafeez has been languishing in a high-security prison ward for over six years. His case has passed through the hands of nine judges; no one, it appears, wants to be the one to bring it to a close. The most well-known case of course is that of Aasia Bibi who spent eight years on death row upon her conviction for blasphemy. Even after being acquitted by the apex court — an event that triggered violent protests across Pakistan — she had to take asylum abroad, a normal existence in her home country now impossible. Surely, one must question the quality of such 'justice' where being proved innocent can be the prelude to even more peril.

Unsung heroes

A PAKISTANI documentary, *Armed with Faith*, which follows a bomb disposal squad in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during the worst period of terrorism in the country, won a well-deserved Emmy in the News and Documentary category in New York on Tuesday. While accolades pour in for the filmmakers for bringing to light an important and largely ignored issue in a gripping manner, one cannot overlook the heroic subjects of the film itself — the “front-line soldiers”, in the words of one of the officers in the film, who put their own lives at risk in the name of duty. Indeed, they are armed with faith and little else; the film offers a glimpse into the

private and professional lives of the 34-man-strong bomb disposal squad in Peshawar, who have scant resources and safety equipment at their disposal, often using their bare hands to defuse a bomb or remove a suicide vest from a young boy's body. Giving a human face to these often nameless members of the Pakistani police fraternity, the film reminds us to honour our unsung heroes.

When a bomb attack takes place, the first reaction by many is to blame those in charge of our security, without recognising the proximity to terror these officials live with every day themselves. "Your first mistake can be your last," says one of the men, mentioning the friends and colleagues he has lost to this profession. Some of the film's most sensitive moments are those spent with the family members of the bomb disposal squad, who worry about their safety and live with that fear each day. Horrific moments are captured by the camera that remind us of the not-too-distant past: the sheer chaos and fear that terrorism instils in the people; the panicked screams of the ambulance sirens; and the agonising scenes of the dead, dying and injured that are witnessed once the smoke clears. In other words, the film sheds light on the all too human cost of the war against terrorism.

LNG expansion

EVER SINCE the country entered the LNG market back in 2015, it was clear that the first baby step of setting up a terminal, coupled with a long-term supply agreement, would inevitably be followed by a long series of further measures aimed at transforming Pakistan's gas markets. Given that natural gas accounts for nearly half of the country's primary fuel needs, this was by no means a minor development. Once the door was opened for imported gas to play a role in the national economy, a slew of associated reforms became necessary. Framing rules for third-party access of the existing pipeline capacity was necessary to allow gas that lands at the port in Karachi to be transported to consumers upcountry. The country's own credit had to be established in global LNG markets, and arrangements for the swap of molecules from upcountry fields had to be created. As the private sector, especially in power generation, moved towards LNG, the pace and depth of the reforms pressed forward, and the role of LNG in our economy grew.

In this story, a meaningful milestone has just been crossed. For the first time, end-to-end arrangements have been made by a body in the private sector to contract, import, regasify and transport LNG to the end-consumer. The body in question is the CNG association (Universal Gas Distribution Company); they have made a contract with Exxon Mobile, and purchased regasification capacity at one of the terminals to bring and store their own gas. They plan to use existing third-party access rules to transport this gas to end-consumers in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. If successful, this arrangement could be an example for other large private-sector parties to follow. The CNG sector was the first to be unplugged from the supply of subsidised domestic gas, and it languished for many years. Now as it prepares to re-enter the market on the back of this arrangement, perhaps textiles and power generation could be the next in line to put in place similar end-to-end supply arrangements for themselves.

The next such milestone is price reform. It is widely known that in Pakistan, the gas-pricing regime cannot continue in its present form for very long. At some point, it will have to be realised that gas cannot be subsidised by the state. The more market-based gas becomes a reality in our economy, the closer that point arrives. This is a moment of reckoning for many in industry, since much of Pakistan's productive base is related to the price of gas, either directly or indirectly. At some point, gas-pricing will have to move towards a market-based price, in addition to market-based supply arrangements. That is the big achievement towards which these developments are taking us, and the more the government can do to facilitate the process, the better it will be.

Police reforms

SENIOR police officers in Punjab have been incensed by an attempt to 'subjugate' them. And some of them, reportedly, are ready to even give up their jobs in the face of a plan that emerged in the wake of the recent allegations of police excesses in the province. It is a rather brief remedy suggested by a committee that was set up under a senior bureaucrat. The federal government seems keen to introduce changes in Punjab and KP, the two provinces that have PTI administrators, that will put the home department fully in charge of the police. Some of the proposed reforms can be brought in through an administrative order whereas others would require legislation by the assemblies or an ordinance. The solutions, in discussion for long, are of a fundamental nature. For instance, the

reform agenda calls for an inspectorate and a complaint commission. Basically, the police officers in Punjab are protesting because they believe that the changes will hand over their command and control of the force to government servants. The Police Service of Pakistan has fought a long battle for powers with the Pakistan Administrative Services. Police officers are often perceived as being suspicious of bureaucrats of the PAS, who according to them, want to usurp the rights of other government employees. These police officers argue that the new proposals virtually place the force under the command of PAS bureaucrats. Under the proposed system, for example, deputy commissioners will have the powers to monitor police stations.

Let us concede that many of the objections the police officers have voiced against the proposals for reforms are valid. There is an element of arbitrariness and an unnecessary and clearly unwanted surreptitiousness with which these changes are being pushed. The suggestions need to be debated to create greater acceptability; the failure to follow this route has created doubts. It is easy to view the move as an attempt to exploit the existing negative sentiment against the police to coerce the department into accepting unreasonable purges and outside dominance. But it would be sad if anyone is allowed to use the stories about the age-old tussle between two groups of government servants to delay the evolution of a system where the police are fully accountable for their deeds. Let us hear out the concerned police officers but at the same time it must be ensured that the law enforcers themselves do not cross the limits of the law.

World Rabies Day

ONE of the most horrific deaths is caused by rabies. The disease is transmitted to humans through the saliva of infected animals. While nearly all warm-blooded mammals can contract the virus, it is most commonly found in dogs and bats. In a state of rage, the animal attempts to gnaw at anything in its path. When humans are bitten by a rabid animal, the virus creeps through the nerves and quickly enters the central nervous system. Early symptoms include fever, headaches and weakness, which can develop into general feelings of anxiety and confusion. At its final stages, the unsuspecting victim suffers from insomnia, hallucinations, delirium, hydrophobia, and has difficulty swallowing. Gradually, the unfortunate victim of the rabies virus slips into a coma, before meeting an untimely death due to organ failure. Perhaps the most tragic aspect of rabies

death is that it is entirely preventable, if necessary steps are taken in its early stages. Timely intervention and vaccination can destroy the virus by building the body's immune system. Unfortunately, many Pakistanis are unaware of what steps to take after being bitten by an animal, or they do not have the means to access the relatively expensive vaccines and immunoglobulin that have to be administered immediately after being bitten.

Despite repeated warnings by health officials about the shortage of rabies vaccines in government hospitals and the threat posed to citizens from a growing stray dog population — repeated, inhumane culling campaigns clearly proving to be ineffective — there have been at least 13 deaths caused by rabies in Sindh alone this year. The latest victim was a 40-year-old woman from Badin, who passed away at the JPMC Hospital in Karachi. Between January and August, over 122,000 incidents of dog bites have been reported. While all dog bites are not rabid, precaution must always be taken. On this World Rabies Day, the provincial and federal governments, health authorities, NGOs and all concerned citizens must pledge to end the spread of rabies.

UNGA speech

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan's trip to New York has culminated on a high note after a hard-hitting speech at the United Nations General Assembly.

In the presence of world leaders, Mr Khan delivered a speech focused on four key areas: climate change, financial corruption, the perils of Islamophobia and lastly — and most importantly, since it was the main purpose of his visit — Kashmir.

On the first three issues, Mr Khan made some valid points although more informed input from his advisers could have yielded greater impact.

The prime minister spoke of Pakistan's melting glaciers and the PTI's tree plantation initiative. But at the UNGA, where the existential threat of climate change was a major theme, there was a need to underscore how Pakistan — a country that is seeking opportunities to grow its economy — needs the international community's assistance to expand with the least possible damage to the environment.

His appeal to countries to assist Pakistan in combating the menace of money-laundering was also relevant, though at times the prime minister meandered into dharna-style politics which might have been lost on his international audience.

On Islamophobia, Mr Khan delivered a very pertinent message on the divisions a hate-filled mindset creates — indeed, it is a vital concern in a world that is increasingly seeing tragedies such as the one in Christchurch. Pursuing this theme on the international stage required more focused observations on the difference in perception between the Western and Islamic worlds.

But all shortcomings were compensated for by the subject Mr Khan saved for the last: the appalling situation in India-held Kashmir. He spoke with heartfelt conviction: “What I know of the West, they wouldn’t stand for eight million animals to be locked up. These are humans,” Mr Khan said as he spoke of the pitiable conditions that people are living under in occupied Kashmir.

“I have pictured myself locked up for 55 days ... Would I want to let this humiliation continue? I would pick up a gun” are words that are likely to stay with those who listened.

Besides drawing attention to the plight of the Kashmiris, Mr Khan framed his plea to the international community by calling out the UN. “It is a test for the United Nations. You are the one who guaranteed the Kashmiris the right [of self-determination]. This is not the time for appeasement.”

Comparing Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s association with the Hindu nationalist RSS to Hitler and the Nazis, he asked how the world would respond if it were Jews and not Muslims under curfew — a scenario that might resonate more with an international community that for decades has rightly viewed the Holocaust as amongst the worst atrocities in history. In delivering an unequivocal, thunderous message to the world on Kashmir, Mr Khan did the right thing for millions of Kashmiris living under siege. For that, he must be given credit.

Justice for Qandeel

JUSTICE has been done, an outcome seen far too seldom in cases of ‘honour’ killing. On Friday, a model court in Multan sentenced Mohammed Waseem, the brother of Qandeel Baloch, to life imprisonment for murdering his sister. Five

others, including another brother, were acquitted, while a third brother who lives in Saudi Arabia was declared a proclaimed offender. The court ruled that the prosecution had conclusively proved the social media star was strangled to death by Waseem in July 2016 at her parents' home in Multan. He later confessed to the police that he had killed his sister because he believed Qandeel had brought 'dishonour' upon his family with her risqué pictures and videos. His lack of remorse was typical of such cases in which perpetrators are motivated by patriarchal notions where women are repositories of honour and liable to be punished should they engage in 'unacceptable' behaviour. However, in an unusual twist, Qandeel's parents themselves demanded justice for their daughter and steadfastly refused to pardon their sons, at least until recently when — perhaps worn down from the long legal proceedings — they submitted an affidavit saying they had forgiven the men.

If the anti-honour killing law had not been passed in 2016, just a few months after Qandeel's death, that affidavit may well have allowed yet another murderer to walk free. While murder is a compoundable offence in Pakistan, to extend the concept of forgiveness or compromise to honour killing is antithetical to justice. Given the cultural context in which this crime is committed, the murderer and the victim belong to the same family (although sometimes men deemed to be the women's 'partners-in-crime' are also among the victims). A pardon is thus almost inevitable, whether through an exercise of free will or under pressure from the wider community. The new law, however, has tightened this loophole considerably as well as enhanced the punishment. Now, the court can refuse to accept any compromise and, upon finding the accused guilty of honour killing, sentence him to life imprisonment. Hopefully, the maximum sentence handed down to Qandeel's brother for a crime that claims close to 1,000 lives every year will become the norm rather than the exception. The social media star was often derided for her claims of being a feminist by virtue of living life on her own terms; nevertheless, in death she has struck a blow for women in her country.

Detaining citizens

OVER the past couple of weeks, there have been incidents where members of the public have been detained in Punjab and Karachi for allegedly flouting some vague 'emergency' regulations. 'Rules' were apparently violated during Punjab's dengue emergency drive, while in Karachi, urgent measures to supposedly rid

the city of heaps of solid waste were impeded. Nabbing citizens for allegedly violating the rules fools no one; everyone knows the disposal of solid waste is the responsibility of the provincial authorities. In Punjab, some 100 people have been arrested; FIRs have been registered against more than 500 others. In Karachi, a man was detained for throwing trash in an open space before being released a day later. These crises had long been in the making, and citizens cannot be deemed responsible for them. It is the authorities that failed to take measures to prevent conditions from worsening.

The Punjab arrests are absurd — many people were detained or had FIRs registered against them after dengue inspection teams found mosquito larvae in their homes and workplaces. The case of Karachi, on the other hand, is one of sheer negligence. The provincial government spent billions on setting up a waste disposal authority that did nothing to prevent Pakistan's largest city from turning into a garbage dump. If there are no designated places to throw waste, where are people suppose to dispose of it? And if the authorities must hold the public accountable, it should be for logical reasons; they should not do so to gloss over their own incompetence. What will be the legal mechanism for proceeding against those who have 'violated' anti-dengue rules? Cracking down on the public will only fuel resentment. Some years ago, KP decided to arrest parents who refused polio vaccination for their children. This strategy had to be revoked because it politicised the issue and further endangered polio eradication teams who were already a target of the militants. Instead of wasting their time and resources, the authorities should get on with their responsibilities.

Afghan election

IT is unfortunate that Saturday's much-awaited Afghan presidential election was marked by numerous acts of violence, both on polling day and during the run-up to it.

The Afghan Taliban claimed to have carried out most of the election day attacks that have left a number of people dead; the militia had warned civilians to stay away from the voting booths.

Expectedly, as a result of the Taliban's violent campaign, the turnout was low while the state closed over 2,000 polling stations due to the precarious security situation. It goes without saying then that those who did turn out to vote deserve

praise for bravely defying the violence and threats, and carrying on with the democratic process — however hobbled it may be.

While poll-related violence is the biggest threat to fair elections, there are also issues of fraud; independent observers as well as Afghan politicians and voters have questioned the transparency of the electoral process.

Indeed, this has been an issue since the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001. Frequent allegations of fraud, vote-buying and other corrupt practices have cropped up during presidential and parliamentary elections in the country.

Perhaps one of the main reasons for this is that the democratic process has not been allowed to grow organically within Afghanistan, with civil war, foreign invasions and internecine rivalries severely disrupting the evolution of electoral politics.

But the process must continue and improve, so that a viable leadership acceptable to all Afghans emerges and pulls this unfortunate country out of the morass of decades of war and violence, and puts it on the path of a better future.

As for the presidential contenders, this is largely a two-horse race, with the incumbent Ashraf Ghani facing off against Dr Abdullah Abdullah, chief executive of the government. Though the two men shared power in the outgoing administration, it was seen as a marriage of convenience propped up by the Americans, and there were major disagreements between the two. It remains to be seen if the loser of this contest accepts defeat graciously, or if a fresh wrangle for power begins after the votes have been counted.

Looking at the big picture, although the Taliban have called the elections ‘fake’, what other method exists for the Afghan people to elect their representatives?

The process, flawed though it may be, needs to be improved, as there is no other alternative for power-sharing in a society as complex as Afghanistan, with its myriad tribes, clans and ethno-religious groups all wanting a slice of the cake.

The Taliban are doing no service to Afghanistan by attacking voters. Moreover, whatever dispensation emerges, the militia needs to engage with it for the sake of the country.

The Taliban may not trust whichever government takes power in Kabul, but they need to keep channels open if peace is to come to this scarred land.

Business ease

THE World Bank has declared that Pakistan has made a great deal of progress in its ease of doing business reforms, and as a result, the country is among the top 20 ‘improvers’ in the world. Soon the bank will release its ease of doing business rankings, and it is expected that Pakistan will exhibit significant improvement in its position too. The reforms focus on six areas in particular — starting a business, dealing with construction permits, getting electricity, registering property, paying taxes and trading across borders. In these areas, the registration of a new business has become easier. The use of online portals has helped a great deal, and soon the Federal Board of Revenue plans to introduce an app and a portal for filing tax returns as well, thus reducing contact between the taxpayer and the taxman.

Some of the credit for this change goes to the federal government, particularly the Board of Investment where these reforms were first conceived. In equal measure, the World Bank has lauded in its report the role of the Sindh Building and Control Authority and the Lahore Development Authority that have “streamlined workflows and improved the operational efficiency of their one-stop shops”. The BoI had initiated these reforms in October last year under its 100-day sprint programme. The latter focused the reform effort on one point specifically: it should take a maximum of 100 days to get a new business up and running. All approvals should be possible to arrange within that time frame. Perhaps it is because of these reforms, in part, that the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan was able to announce that 1,187 new companies were registered in the month of August alone, and 94pc of these were done through the e-portal where registration happens on the same day. This streamlining is essential to unleashing the entrepreneurial energies of the citizenry, and encouraging more businesses to comply with tax requirements. The sad thing to note, however, is that the government easily accepted the resignation of the architect of these reforms, the former chairman of the BoI, when he was frustrated with the pace of movement in other areas that particularly had to do with the Special Economic Zones. The improvement in the ease of doing business reforms testifies to how committed professionals can deliver results. But retaining them should also be a priority for the authorities.

Police excesses

PHOTOGRAPHS of bruised and bloodied doctors began circulating on social media soon after the KP police baton-charged and used tear gas against them at the Lady Reading Hospital in Peshawar on Friday. Fifteen doctors and medical staff were arrested and sent to jail under the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance. They had been protesting against the Regional and District Health Authorities Act, 2019, which they say will lead to the 'privatisation' of public health service. The bill was passed hurriedly by the government, even though the chief minister had constituted a committee to address the doctors' and health workers' reservations. Shockingly, Section 144 was quickly imposed on the hospital's grounds, which outlawed the gathering of 'five doctors and more', thereby criminalising protest. The doctors' grievances go a little further back, though. In May, the professionals had gone on a strike to register their protest against the continued indifference of the authorities that did not consult them on the health reforms that were first introduced in 2015. They felt these reforms did not take into account the ground realities of the province, and they viewed the changes as the imposition of an expensive, ineffective, 'foreign' system. This animosity then culminated in a physical altercation between an assistant professor and the provincial health minister.

According to the police, it was the doctors who had first pelted stones at the law-enforcement officials. While these details cannot be confirmed, the introduction of Section 144 and the force's heavy-handed response are unjustifiable. Unfortunately, it is a common occurrence witnessed in all the provinces. A few months ago, excesses by the police in Karachi were rightfully condemned, when protesting teachers marching towards the Chief Minister House were baton-charged and injured. Meanwhile, in Punjab the police are grappling with their own cases of torture, custodial deaths and extrajudicial killings. The inability to resolve conflict tactfully and the speed with which we criminalise peaceful protest speaks to a deeper malaise in society.