



DAWN

EDITORIALS

February 2022

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Shahbaz Shakeel
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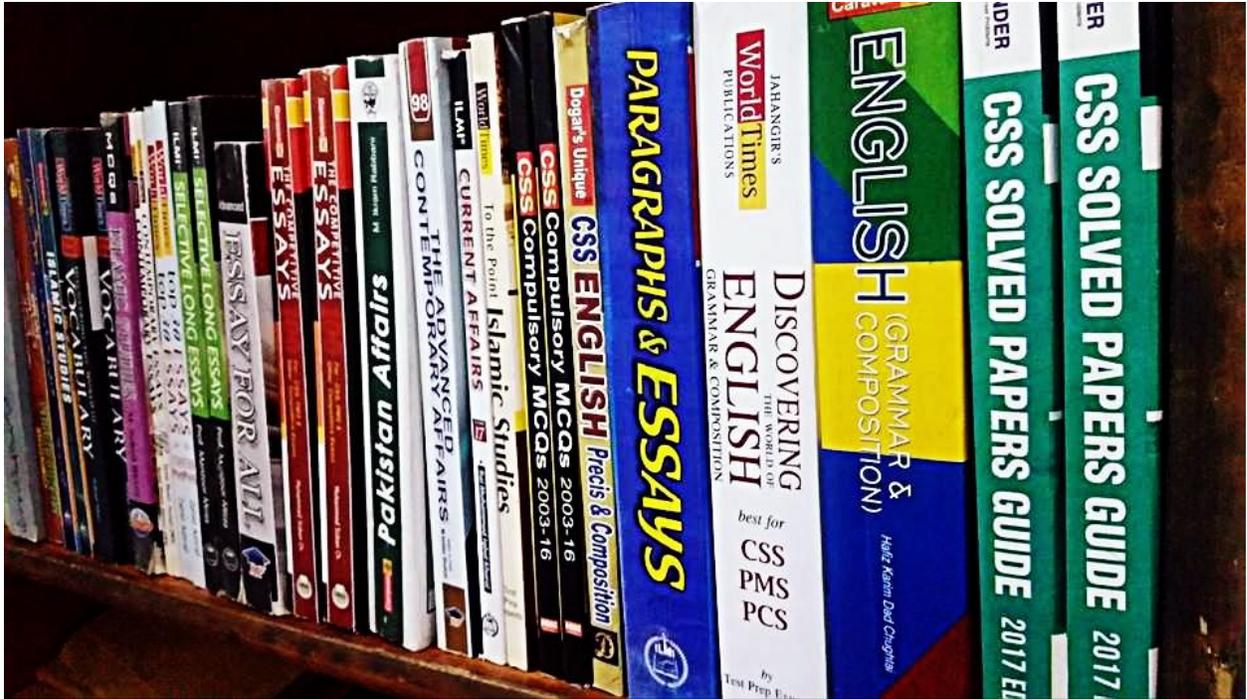
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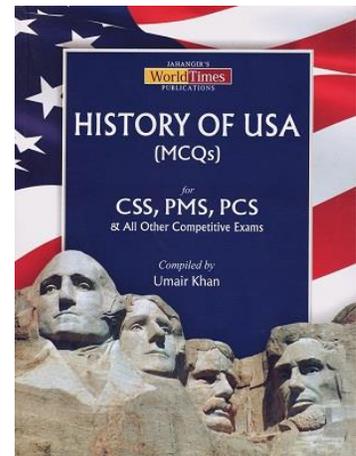
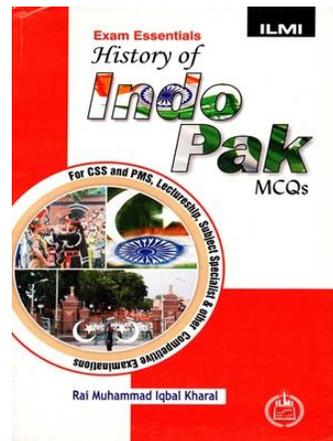
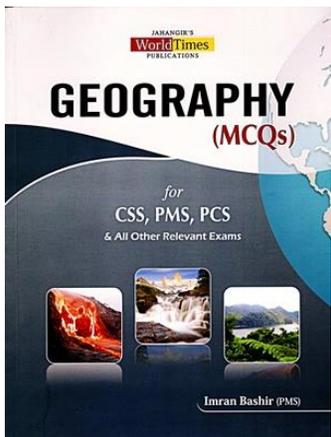
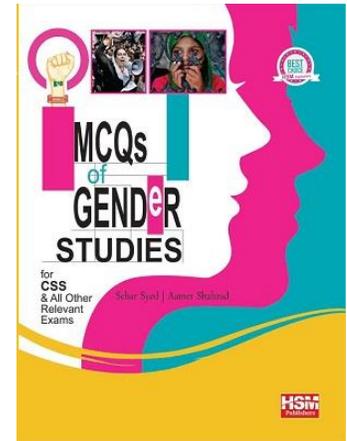
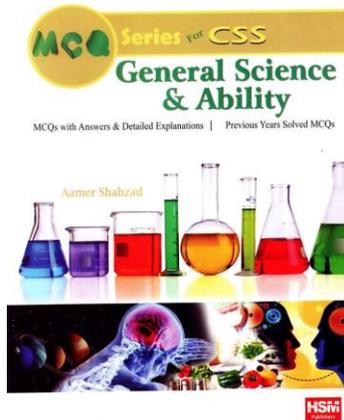
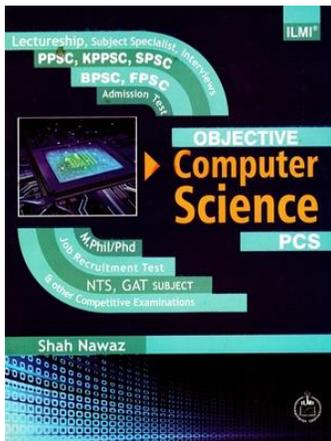
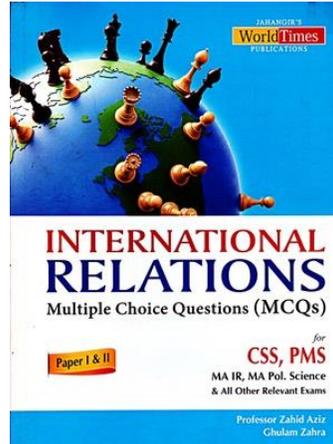
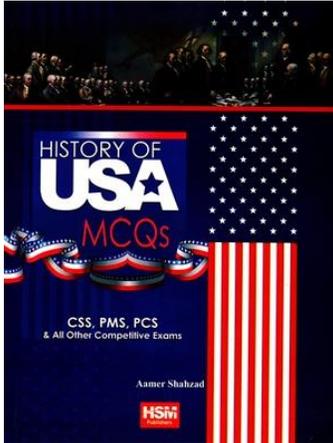
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Clergyman's killing

THE killing of Christian clergyman William Siraj in Peshawar on Sunday comes as a grim reminder of the threat that terrorism, particularly the targeting of religious minority groups, poses to Pakistan. According to reports, the priest, along with a fellow clergyman, was targeted after leaving a local church following Sunday services. While a PTI minority MPA has said the victim did not face any threats, the Peshawar police chief has termed it a “terrorist act”. Peshawar has of course seen mass violence targeting minorities in the past with the 2013 bombing of the All Saints Church being a particularly horrific example. Now, with the situation fluid next door in Afghanistan, and the resurgence of terrorist activity in this country, the authorities will need to remain alert to ensure that minorities are protected.

While security forces across the country must remain active, KP and Balochistan — due to their physical proximity to Afghanistan — should be particularly vigilant. Extra security needs to be provided to churches, temples and other minority places of worship, while law-enforcement agencies should also protect neighbourhoods where large numbers of non-Muslim citizens live. As has been the experience during earlier CT operations, intelligence-based actions may be the best option to bust terrorist gangs looking to foment violence and target vulnerable segments of society. Moreover, it is the state's responsibility to continue pressing the Afghan Taliban authorities to ensure their soil is not used for hosting elements inimical to Pakistan and determined to cause instability in this country. The challenge is essentially two-fold for the security forces where protecting minority communities is concerned. They must work to prevent ‘high-impact’ attacks against churches and large gatherings of non-Muslim citizens, while keeping alert to prevent the killing of ‘soft’ targets, such as the one witnessed in Peshawar. By no means can militant groups be allowed to unleash a reign of terror across the country, as was the case not too long ago. Pre-emptive action is required to neutralise such elements.

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NSA's visit

NATIONAL Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf has concluded his two-day visit to Kabul — his first to the Afghan capital since the Taliban takeover last August. The visit was originally scheduled for earlier this month but was put off when a senior delegate accompanying the NSA tested positive for Covid. Dr Yusuf, who heads the Afghanistan Inter Ministerial Coordination Cell, met acting Deputy Prime Minister Abdus Salam Hanafi and acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to discuss humanitarian requirements and Pakistan's proposals for strengthening the economic engagement to help Afghanistan tackle its financial challenges. An official announcement by the Prime Minister's Office said that the visit resulted in "substantive outcomes" in terms of forward movement on trade facilitation and social sector support. Both sides also reiterated their commitment to the early completion of three major connectivity projects. Recognising the collapse of the formal banking system in Afghanistan, they have agreed to start barter trade and encourage trade in local currency. In the absence of formal recognition for the hard-line Afghan Taliban regime by the international community, particularly the major powers, multinational and multibillion-dollar projects are not likely to materialise unless the new rulers agree to respect human rights including those of women and minorities.

It is encouraging to see the international community finally waking up to the humanitarian crisis and desperately needed assistance starting to flow into Afghanistan; it seems a way has been found to get around international sanctions targeting the Taliban. But much remains to be done. Notwithstanding Pakistan's own economic challenges, as Afghanistan's immediate neighbour, this country cannot afford to sit on the fence, watch the economic situation deteriorate next door and face another round of exodus from there. The formal agreement on border trade and trade in local currency will no doubt mitigate some of the challenges of the larger agrarian population in Afghanistan. As the statement indicates, no discussion appears to have taken place between the two sides regarding Pakistan's twin security challenge emanating from Afghanistan: incidents of border-fence breaching and an uptick in TTP-linked terrorist attacks. Clearly, both sides want to keep such sensitive matters away from the public discourse, as is evident from an unpublicised visit of Pakistan's special envoy for Afghanistan Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq to Kabul earlier last month. These engagements indicate that as far as the two sides are concerned, things are

moving in the right direction, though time alone will tell how much of the effort will yield results.

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Judicial independence

THE Supreme Court's landmark verdict overturning its earlier judgement about ordering FBR to look into allegations against the wife of Justice Qazi Faez Isa will go a long way in protecting the independence of the judiciary and safeguarding judges from pressure tactics by the executive.

The majority judgement overturned its June 19 order rendering the exercise conducted by the FBR null and void as it set aside the verdict that had authorised the FBR to evaluate and then subsequently impose tax liability against Ms Isa for possessing three properties in the UK.

There was a general perception that the PTI government had blundered into a reference against Justice Qazi Faez Isa by basing it on flimsy grounds. This had triggered concerns that the judge was being pressured through his family because of his independent positioning. The ordeal lasted for longer than it should have but now finally it appears that the Supreme Court has closed the door on any further attempts by the executive to hound the judge and his family.

This is not the first time that members of the superior judiciary have had to face such pressure from the executive authorities. However, whenever the judiciary has resisted such attempts to curtail its independence, it has succeeded in repulsing the attacks against it and emerged stronger as an institution. There is a lesson in here for all those who may want to bend the judiciary to their will. A weakened judiciary weakens democracy. It is therefore an encouraging sign that the apex court has acknowledged the fault in its own judgement and reversed it.

The government has, unfortunately, still not relented. The law minister and the information minister have issued statements on the judgement and the judiciary that are not only irresponsible but can also be construed as crude attempts to ridicule the judiciary. If the government is insistent on following such a course despite having its actions against Justice Isa rejected and termed illegal, then it may not be wrong to surmise that it wants to bring the court under pressure through a public campaign. This is highly inadvisable.

The PTI government has shown in the past that it has a habit of vilifying all those who do not agree with it. While this may be somewhat kosher in the political domain, it is absolutely the wrong thing to do when dealing with the highest court of the land. It would be far better if the government accepted the judgement as it is required to do under the law, stopped issuing public statements against the court, and moved on. Justice Isa now stands vindicated in every sense of the word and will continue to discharge his duties according to the requirements of the law and the Constitution. There should be no more obstacles in his path.

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How is FBR helping?

THAT the FBR missed its January tax collection target for the second month in a row is reflective of the deceleration in imports in the wake of the measures taken by the government and the State Bank to slow down the pace of economic growth in order to tackle balance-of-payments troubles. The new FBR data shows that the tax agency is not capable of making up for revenue losses at the import stage by boosting domestic sales tax and income tax. Indeed, the FBR has exceeded its seven-month tax target by Rs262bn to Rs3.35tr from July to January. But does it matter, given the country's tax-to-GDP ratio of 9.5pc is one of the world's lowest? With imports, which account for 53pc of the total tax collection at present, projected to slow further, the FBR is likely to find it more difficult to maintain its 'present collection momentum'.

The finance minister says "people don't want to pay taxes". That is correct. The question is what has the FBR done to make evaders pay their taxes? And what has it done to help those who want to pay taxes? The entire tax regime is rigged in favour of powerful lobbies that remain either untaxed or under-taxed because of their political clout. Many are willing to pay more than their due share in indirect taxes if it helps them stay out of the tax network. No effort to reform the system has succeeded due to the vested interests of FBR officials and those they help to evade taxes. Consequently, we see the government impose several indirect taxes/levies on both industry and individuals whether or not their income is taxable.

Indirect taxes and levies not only hamper new investment and heavily burden low-middle-income families, they are also inflationary in nature. For example, the

petroleum levy is hurting this population segment the most by making transportation expensive and causing the prices of essentials, especially food, to spiral. Little wonder then that in January CPI inflation touched its two-year high of 12.9pc, forcing the prime minister to deviate from his government's commitment to the IMF to raise the petroleum levy on the eve of the meeting of the Fund's executive board for considering the revival of its suspended loan programme. This decision does not bode well for the government's credibility with the lender of last resort even if it will not stop the resumption of funding. The IMF wants the government to raise the petroleum levy by Rs4 a litre every month to take it to a maximum of Rs30 as a condition for the restoration of its programme in order to boost its revenues to hold down fiscal deficit. The reason for the IMF's insistence to enhance the levy is obvious: it does not have confidence in the FBR's capability to collect the taxes needed to finance the budget.

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Persecuted media

THE media freedom report compiled by the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors paints an abysmal picture of the realities of being a journalist in the country. It highlights how, in the last year alone, five journalists were killed in the line of duty and how overall attempts to stifle the media and block access to information have grown.

It talks about the ghastly kidnapping and murder of local journalist Nazim Jokhio, as well as the threats, lawsuits and attempted attacks on other journalists. Not only does it speak of the serious threats to the lives of media workers who report on sensitive and controversial issues, it documents how the pandemic, too, claimed the lives of nine journalists.

In the past year, the financial standing of media houses has also worsened. Two media workers took their own lives due to unemployment. The situation today, the report concludes, is worse than during the previous two years.

The report is a damning indictment of the state of freedom of press in the country, but it only just about captures the everyday hardships faced by journalists who risk their lives in mostly low-paid jobs to fulfil a critical role in our democracy.

Media workers, both field reporters and desk staff, are increasingly experiencing either harassment or financial hardship or both. They are being threatened, silenced and squeezed. Be it a prime time TV anchor or a beat reporter, the threats exist for everyone. Even media group owners are not immune to such harassment.

Just this week, Mir Shakilur Rehman, the owner of the Jang Group, was acquitted in a case relating to a property purchase from over 30 years ago. Mr Rehman endured arrest and was in NAB custody for about eight months while the accountability bureau persecuted him.

All these examples point to an ugly truth, that the space for free speech and truthful accounts in our country is shrinking. Unfortunately, the ruling party has no concern for the media's plight. The prime minister has little sympathy for journalists under threat, and has spoken dismissively about serious cases such as the disappearances of journalists. His media advisers, too, are often in the limelight for trolling journalists on social media, or making unprofessional and personal comments about them.

It is not enough to praise the media when one is in opposition. Mr Khan needs to address this situation as the plight of the media will be part of his legacy.

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Beating the odds

ALL Grand Slam tennis events have numerous storylines, incredible plot twists and magical triumphs but perhaps none come close to those delivered in this year's Australian Open. On its last day, Rafael Nadal broke a three-way tie between himself, Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic with a record 21st Grand Slam title. The manner in which he won, coming back from two sets down to overcome Russian Daniil Medvedev, was a story in itself. But the back story to his historic victory — with the 35-year-old Spaniard unsure how long he can go on playing due to a chronic knee condition, as well as having just recovered from Covid-19 — was even more incredible. A night before Nadal took centre stage, it was Ashleigh Barty's time to revel in becoming the first Australian in 44 years to win a singles title at the Australian Open when she dispatched American Danielle

Collins in straight sets in the women's final. Barty had come to the year's first Grand Slam as the top seed. That couldn't be said about Nadal.

The Australian Open had opened under the cloud of Djokovic's deportation saga. The Serbian world number one, denied a sweep of all Grand Slam titles last year by Medvedev at the US Open, was embroiled in a row with the Australian government as he isn't vaccinated against Covid-19. Djokovic couldn't make it and even with his other 'Big Three' rival Federer sitting out the Australian Open due to injury, sixth-seeded Nadal never was the favourite. Not even in the final. It seemed the members of the fabled 'Big Three' would remain on 20 Grand Slam titles until the French Open in May when Medvedev won the first two sets. But Nadal's staggering comeback left Medvedev with no answers. Just when it seemed that the Big Three's time was coming to an end, Nadal came up with a sucker punch. With this showing, it seems the next generation of men's tennis stars, which includes Medvedev, will have to wait for their time.

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CJP's remarks

CONTEXT is everything. On Tuesday, a day before being sworn in as the country's top judge, Justice Umar Ata Bandial identified the 'scandalisation' of judges as one of two main challenges before the judiciary, the other being the massive backlog of cases. He was speaking at the full court reference held in honour of the outgoing CJP where he dilated upon the road map for the Supreme Court's functioning during his tenure.

In principle, the contention of now Chief Justice Bandial that judgements not judges should be criticised, is correct. There is, at the same time, a corresponding responsibility on members of the bench. Judges should speak through their judgements which must be anchored firmly in the law and uphold the democratic precepts enshrined in the Constitution.

Unfortunately, Pakistan's history is replete with instances where the apex court has endorsed military interventions and other anti-people measures such as military courts that in every aspect violate fundamental rights. One can only hope that the 'doctrine of necessity' upon which most of these validations rested will

never again be part of any verdict, for the long-term damage thus inflicted is plain to see for anyone with an understanding of history.

No doubt there have been many judges that have withstood external pressures, whether it was to refuse putting their names to a 'judicial murder' or taking an oath of allegiance to dictators — even at the cost of professional advancement. But, as members of the superior judiciary have themselves acknowledged, not all judges are created equal. Dissenting with the majority verdict of the special court that found Pervez Musharraf guilty of treason, Justice Nazar Akbar — now retired— held that the former army chief had taken advantage of weak and opportunistic elements in the judiciary to prolong his rule as president.

Sometimes judges who robustly defied attempts at curtailing judicial independence turned out to have feet of clay. Retired chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, for instance, succumbed to populist impulses and interfered in policy matters within the executive domain, handing down judgements that later proved disastrous for the country.

Divisions within the superior judiciary — as opposed to diversity of opinion that Chief Justice Bandial rightly said lends “richness to our understanding” — became evident most recently during former chief justice Saqib Nisar’s tenure and also contributed to taking the lustre off the bench. It is relevant to point out that Mr Nisar contributed in no small measure to negative perceptions with a brand of hyper judicial activism that bordered on being undignified.

When judges become ‘personalities’, when they voice controversial opinions at public events rather than speaking through their verdicts, and when their rulings appear to favour the elite rather than the ‘ordinary citizen’, they lay themselves open to criticism. Chief Justice Bandial now has the opportunity to leave behind a legacy of enhanced respect for the judiciary in the court of public opinion.

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Saving PIA

HERE we go again; yet another business plan is ready to fix PIA, our troubled national flag carrier. This time the proposal has been formulated by IATA that projects a turnaround in the loss-making airline in five years’ time and, hence, is more likely to appeal to the government. The devil, as they say, is in the details.

But the scheme doesn't suggest anything new or out of the box. Most proposals — PIA's financial restructuring, reorganisation of company structure, financial discipline, human resource rationalisation, cost controls, independence from political and bureaucratic domination, induction of new aircraft, route expansion, etc — have been on the table for more than a decade and a half now, and part of almost every suggested PIA revival road map. If implemented, consultants tell us, the airline will achieve the break-even point in the fourth year provided the internal and external market situation remains favourable. So far so good. The problem is that the PIA management finds the proposed road map "aggressive and difficult to accept" even though it agrees to "many proposals". It remains unclear as to what parts of the plan it has problems with. All we know is that the plan's dependence on factors such as financial restructuring, changes in national aviation policy and exemption from procurement rules is the major reason behind the management's scepticism.

However, there are other factors besides the management's reservations that might kill the proposal before it can even take off. Apparently, the finance minister thinks the government would require around half a trillion rupees to implement the proposals. That brings us to questions we must answer before moving forward. Would it be worthwhile to spend such a hefty amount on an experiment that may or may not succeed? What is the guarantee that a bankrupt PIA would not start losing money again within a few years of its revival? Last but not least, why is the government so adamant about keeping the airline in its business portfolio? It is true that many countries have national carriers. But most of them are wealthy and have the cash to erase losses if and when needed. Moreover, these airlines are managed professionally according to best international practices outside the civil service rules. With PIA's accumulated losses running close to Rs560bn, the cash-strapped government should carefully consider the serious trade-offs it will have to make for the revival of the national flag carrier.

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Supreme Court on LGs

THOSE quarters that believe that the PPP has concentrated far too many powers that are supposed to belong to the local bodies with the provincial government in

Sindh will be heartened by the Supreme Court's decision on Tuesday. Deciding on an appeal filed by the MQM seeking empowered and autonomous local government institutions in Sindh, the apex court ruled that the provincial administration should not execute fresh projects falling under the purview of the LGs. Moreover, interpreting Article 140-A of the Constitution, the court said that under this article, LGs needed to have "meaningful authority and responsibility" in the administrative, political and financial spheres. This is indeed a legal and moral victory for the parties that believe that the PPP's 2013 LG law violated all these constitutional requirements. Moreover, the PPP's attempts to amend the law late last year were also met with scorn by the opposition in Sindh, as the parties felt the changes did not go far enough in empowering the local bodies, resulting in widespread protests against the provincial LG law.

The fact is that after scrapping the Musharraf-era local bodies system in Sindh, the PPP government in the province started taking one LG institution after another under its wing, effectively turning the Sindh administration into a glorified municipality. However, the impact of these moves on urban Sindh, particularly Karachi, has been anything but beneficial, with a noticeable fall in service delivery and accelerated urban decay. Now, considering the nearly universal disapproval of its LG system by the opposition, as well as the observations of the learned court, the PPP should act in a democratic manner and deliver an LG law that fulfils constitutional requirements and also satisfies popular demands. The Supreme Court has said in black and white that local bodies must be empowered, hence this is what the amended law must reflect. The task to bring urban Sindh into the 21st century is a considerable one, and the first step in this direction is a progressive LG law.

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More attacks

THE uptick in terrorism in Balochistan is shocking to say the least. On Wednesday evening, Baloch insurgents attacked security forces' camps in Panjgur and Naushki in the province. In its statement on the militant violence, ISPR, the military's media wing, said both attacks were repulsed and 13 terrorists killed while seven soldiers including an officer embraced martyrdom.

The two attacks occurred just when Pakistan's security apparatus was discussing and analysing a deadly attack late last month in Kech, Balochistan, where Baloch insurgents targeted a security post, resulting in the martyrdom of 10 soldiers. Coming as Prime Minister Imran Khan embarked on a visit to China, the attacks sent out an ominous message: the security situation may well be getting out of hand.

Evidently, not only have the number of attacks shown an increase, the violence is turning out to be deadlier than all previous hit-and-run assaults. The Baloch insurgents seem have to changed their tactics and have upped the ante, throwing a huge challenge to Pakistan's security forces and intelligence agencies. Seen together with increasing activities and attacks by the outlawed TTP, the security picture in Pakistan looks increasingly grim.

ISPR also referred to a communication intercept connecting the attackers with their handlers in Afghanistan and India. If true, this is deeply unsettling. While Pakistan had been routinely blaming the Afghan intelligence service NDS and India's RAW in the past for fomenting trouble in Balochistan and KP, there was a sense of optimism that Kabul's new rulers would uphold their commitment and not allow Afghanistan's soil to be used against any state. There is no indication that this is happening.

It is true that some former NDS sleuths might still be hiding and orchestrating terrorist attacks in Pakistan without the knowledge of the Afghan Taliban when it comes to the Baloch insurgents, but the TTP is openly operating from Afghan soil. Pakistani intelligence may also be aware of reports that some of the Baloch insurgents, soon after the Taliban overran Kandahar, had moved to neighbouring Iran.

Due to sensitivities and Pakistan's relations with its western neighbour, Islamabad has been reluctant to speak publicly on the matter. That National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf didn't bring up the issue during his recently concluded two-day visit to Kabul and that the matter was left to another high-powered security team to discuss corroborates the fact that Islamabad is being cautious as it does not want to embarrass its new partners in peace.

It is clear by now that the Afghan Taliban want to help Pakistan but are not willing to use coercive tactics to rein in the TTP and other militant groups, leaving few policy choices for Islamabad. It is time the government revisited and reviewed its

counter-intelligence and counterterrorism policy and took a long, hard look at its internal security policy as well.

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Tough IMF demands

THE resumption of the \$6bn IMF funding programme, which paves the way for the disbursement of another tranche of about \$1bn, must help clear economic uncertainties and ease pressure on the exchange rate. Yet it does not end the travails of the people. If the press release issued by the Washington-based multilateral lender after the approval of Pakistan's request to revive the programme paused since April last year is anything to go by, we should brace ourselves for another increase in the domestic electricity prices sooner than later and the enhancement of personal income tax rates latest by the next budget. That is contrary to what the finance minister has been telling us for the last few months — that he had not accepted the IMF demand to raise taxes on the salaried classes groaning under soaring price inflation, which shot up to its two-year high of 13pc in January. The IMF has unambiguously told Islamabad that personal income tax measures are 'essential'. So is the alignment of the power tariffs for a fuller cost recovery to avoid its adverse spill-over on the budget. This is in spite of the repeated claims made by the minister that he had declined the IMF condition to impose additional taxes of Rs700bn for resumption of its funding, and convinced it to slash its demand to Rs343bn in the mini-budget approved by parliament last month. Apparently, the IMF has agreed to only delay certain tax measures till the budget for the next year.

That said, the IMF review of the country's economy remains optimistic for a GDP growth of 4pc for the present fiscal. Nonetheless, it warns that Pakistan remains vulnerable to possible flare-ups of the pandemic, tighter international financial conditions, rise in geopolitical tensions and delayed implementation of structural reforms. Therefore, it wants the government to increase its focus on measures to strengthen productivity, investment and private sector development, reform state-owned enterprises, and address the challenges posed by climate change. Can the PTI-led government, desperate to provide inflation-stricken voters some respite, be able to stay the IMF course with the 2023 elections approaching fast? It is never easy for a government to carry on with tough IMF-mandated reforms.

With Islamabad likely to see faster inflows of multilateral dollars from other global lenders such as the World Bank after its re-entry into the IMF programme, chances of the government digressing from the course later this year cannot be discounted.

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Israeli apartheid

FOR the Palestinians dispossessed by Israel in 1948 and subsequent waves of violence and state-sponsored brutality, 'apartheid' is an apt term to describe their plight. Today, they are strangers in their own land, uprooted, imprisoned and killed at will by the Israeli military machine. These grim facts have been highlighted time and again, with the latest iteration coming in an Amnesty International report. The extensive document serves as an indictment of the Israeli state, saying in very clear terms that Israel is involved in "the crime of apartheid against Palestinians". The report, released earlier this week, says Tel Aviv routinely indulges in seizing Arab land, restricting movement, denial of nationality as well as unlawful killings. For those who have been documenting the Palestinian plight, none of this is new. Yet what is particularly ironic is that around the same time the human rights body released this damning indictment, the Israeli president was being feted in the UAE in a landmark visit, without so much as a peep from the Palestinians' Arab 'brothers' in the defence of the former.

The response from the Israeli state has been predictable, terming the report 'anti-Semitic'. Unfortunately, any criticism of Tel Aviv's brutal behaviour elicits such defences of Israel's indefensible actions. The US, Israel's primary protector and patron, meanwhile has been even more blunt, with the American ambassador to Israel calling the report "absurd", while the State Department has also rejected it. This, in essence, is the root of the problem. Any attempts by the international community to hold Israel to account are stymied by its powerful foreign friends, especially the US. Tel Aviv knows it can quite literally get away with murder, as its Western friends will defend its crimes vigorously. Amnesty's secretary general Agnes Callamard has called for Israel to "dismantle the apartheid system and start treating the Palestinians as human beings". Unless the West stops its hypocritical defence of Israel and the whitewashing of its crimes, this is unlikely to happen soon.

Murders for ‘honour’

A NEW report by a local NGO has revealed, yet again, how prevalent and ‘institutionally acceptable’ is the mindset that condones the cold-blooded murder of citizens on the pretext of honour. A survey of such cases conducted by Sindh Suhai Sath has revealed that as many as 176 people — 48 men and 128 women — were killed across Sindh by their immediate families last year. Not only that but a drastic increase was also witnessed in such cases in four districts of upper Sindh. According to the report, 27 men and women were murdered on the pretext of honour in Kashmore-Kandhkot, 26 in Jacobabad, 23 in Shikarpur and 17 in Ghotki district.

The fact that such a large number of killings continue unabated, despite the existence of laws and rulings by the apex court, shows how deep the rot goes. It is not confined to Sindh. Human Rights Watch estimates that at least 1,000 women are killed on the pretext of honour every year in Pakistan. Meanwhile, the low conviction rate associated with such murders — according to the Sindh police it hovers below 3pc — also underscores the fact that the state machinery is either unable or unwilling to enforce the laws that are in place. That the numbers of such murders are on the rise in upper Sindh indicates that the writ of the state is missing there, emboldening those with narrow-minded worldviews to perpetuate illegal and barbaric practices without fear of punishment. Last year’s attack on a couple in Karachi in broad daylight — they had been returning from a hearing pertaining to their free-will marriage — demonstrates the level of impunity with which these crimes are committed. By continuing with its apathy, the state is only aiding the criminals and normalising such archaic practices. The authorities must do more than ensure maximum punishment for these murderers. They must firmly communicate to society that far from preserving family honour, such barbaric practices only reflect a blindly mediaeval and criminal mind.

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IHC’s verdict

THERE are some verdicts that throw a lifeline to a nation and slow its descent into a dystopian future where justice and merit have no place. Thursday’s

judgement by the Islamabad High Court on identical petitions pertaining to the Federal Government Employees Housing Authority's allotment of plots in four sectors of Islamabad certainly counts among these.

A division bench comprising Chief Justice Athar Minallah and Justice Mohsin Akhtar Kayani ruled as unconstitutional and illegal FGEHA's revised policy whereby top judges, lawyers and bureaucrats were allotted plots on subsidised rates, and ordered the authority to develop housing schemes for the general public.

The verdict highlighted the egregious flaws in the registration process, noting the lack of transparency and flagrant conflict of interest evident therein. For example, it found the list of beneficiaries even included some judges who had been dismissed from service following disciplinary proceedings. The bench also held that the inclusion of the Supreme Court, IHC and district judiciary among the entitled groups — something they did not even request — is “not in conformity with the impartiality and independence of the judiciary as an institution”, noting that the FGEHA was a litigant before these judicial branches.

According to the court, “The sole object appears to have been to extend extraordinary pecuniary benefits to a few selected senior bureaucrats and [superior court] judges... . The policy governing the scheme ... [appears] to be in the nature of advancing elite capture and in disregard to the well-being and welfare of the people at large”.

It is a devastating indictment of the government's priorities and its contempt for the principles of social justice. Indeed, this is what an extractive state looks like, where privileged segments of society fatten themselves on what should be collective resources, while ordinary citizens must scrounge for even the basics.

According to the court, the public exchequer sustained a loss of over Rs1tr as a result of the subsidised allocation of plots to select members of certain groups in four prime sectors of the capital. Then, to underscore the appalling injustice, the ruling listed the many deprivations suffered by the people of Pakistan — the want, the hunger, the disadvantages in health and education that condemn millions of our children to a future where they cannot hope to improve their lot.

Catering to the enrichment of a few at the cost of the many is what has brought the country to such a pass. With this scathing judgement, the government has no choice but to change course. It must come up with a rational policy that prioritises

public interest and is executed transparently. Land allotments must be made with a view to providing shelter, not to curry favour with the powerful or to enable select individuals to make windfall gains at the cost of the state's coffers and the country's progress.

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Digital payment

THE introduction of free person-to-person payment and settlement service by the State Bank under its instant payment system, Raast, will help the digitisation of financial services and documentation of the economy — just as similar solutions have worked elsewhere. The launch of Raast will enable people to send funds from and receive funds in their accounts in real time via their bank mobile applications, internet banking or over-the-counter services (through cheques, etc). Raast offers a convenient digital payment mechanism for account holders by linking their accounts to their mobile phone numbers, thus eliminating the need for details like bank name and account number needed for interbank funds. It tackles two fundamental issues: one, it takes care of the lack of interoperability of the systems being used for online payments and fund transfers by commercial banks, microfinance banks and digital wallets owned by telecom companies; two, it allows real-time transactions at near-zero cost — a major impediment to adoption of digital payments through interbank transfers has been the fees on the latter. Therefore, many expect its services to trigger a big digital transformation of the financial services in Pakistan by providing an efficient infrastructure for fund transfers.

Ever since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the State Bank has taken several measures to encourage digitisation of payments and financial inclusion of the unbanked population, particularly women. The launch last year of Raast, connecting banks and digital wallets, has put Pakistan on the list of over 50 countries that have developed instant real-time payment infrastructure and solutions. So far, it has been used for the payment of cash dividends to bulk shareholders of listed companies. After introduction of the P2P payment system, it is expected to be used for paying pension and salaries to government and private sector employees, as well as for Ehsaas disbursements. In the near future, we may see people using the services for grocery shopping without the

need for cash or debit/credit cards. Apart from that, the State Bank has also announced a licensing framework for digital banks and measures for digital onboarding of bank customers with remote biometrics. These are all steps in the right direction and will push the agenda of financial inclusion and documentation of the economy for tax purposes. But digitisation of payments or opening of bank accounts will help only so much in achieving financial inclusion unless more people are given access to credit for their businesses and housing needs.

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Coming closer

THAT the leadership of the PML-N and PPP have agreed to start over and cooperate in their efforts to dislodge the PTI government after months of mutual recriminations and squabbling is a significant development.

The thaw came at a lunch meeting hosted by PML-N's Shehbaz Sharif, who is leader of opposition in the National Assembly, for the PPP's Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Asif Zardari. The meet-up that took place on the intervention of PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif, is expected to bridge the divide that gave Prime Minister Imran Khan's government an edge over its opponents both within and outside parliament.

The two parties had drifted apart on the question of collective resignations by opposition members from the assemblies after months of joint anti-government rallies under the PDM banner, leaving the alliance practically ineffective. The weekend meeting has brought both parties closer on the constitutional option of a no-confidence motion against the prime minister, a PPP proposal that had been rejected by the PML-N and other PDM parties in favour of en masse resignations and a 'long march' on Islamabad.

Admittedly, the PML-N was deeply divided on the issue of bringing a no-confidence motion either in Punjab or the centre at the time. But now, Shehbaz Sharif claims there is greater consensus in the party and expects it to decide on the matter soon before taking it to the PDM's platform.

Whether or not the opposition's attempt to oust the government bears fruit, the PML-N's change of heart regarding the use of the constitutional option for an in-house move shows that it is seeing chinks in the government's defences. It is

likely that some national and provincial PTI legislators from Punjab — including the Jehangir Tareen group — who are not happy with the prime minister, have contacted the PML-N for securing its support in the next elections. Also, the government's relations with the establishment have been strained over the past few months, giving the opposition hope of winning the backing of the powers that be. Additionally, the opposition feels that popular support for the PTI has been drastically eroded over the past year because of the crushing impact of inflation.

The opposition has its own reasons for trying to push the government out of power before the 2023 polls. Many of its grievances are, in fact, genuine. These include the government's selective 'accountability' process to hound political rivals, the prime minister's refusal to work with the opposition parties in parliament and to fulfil his obligation to consult the opposition leader on constitutional matters, etc.

Under these circumstances, it is possible that a concerted move for an in-house change could begin once again. While so far previous attempts to undermine the government, most recently seen in the passage of the State Bank bill in the Senate, have failed, the PML-N and PPP are once again closer to giving the PTI sleepless nights.

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One-man contingent

ATTENDING the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Prime Minister Imran Khan praised the dazzling spectacle of pyrotechnics and dance presented by China. Alongside seven other ministers in the delegation sent by Pakistan to attend the event, he said the audiovisual treat at the Bird's Nest Stadium was at a different level. The delegation travelled amid a Western boycott of China over rights concerns. But surely, Mr Khan must have been disappointed at the number of Pakistani participants at the Games. For a country blessed with three of the world's most famous mountain ranges — a haven for skiers and snowboarders had proper infrastructure been in place — Pakistan could send just one athlete. Tropical island nations in the Caribbean — Jamaica (six), Trinidad and Tobago (two) and Puerto Rico (two) — have greater representation than Pakistan in Beijing. The representation in Beijing is one down on Pyeongchang, South Korea, four years ago. It will be the third time alpine skier

Mohammad Karim will take part in a Winter Olympics, having represented the country in the 2014 Sochi Games and in 2018. He's one of only three Winter Olympians produced by Pakistan — a dismal figure considering the country's northern landscape.

Foreign athletes who have visited in recent times are in awe of the slopes Pakistan possesses, but little work has been done to make ski resorts. There are only two — Malam Jabba and Naltar, which has produced all three of Pakistan's Winter Olympians ie Karim, Mohammad Abbas and Syed Human. All of them began skiing on wooden skis, with modern equipment unavailable in the far reaches of the country. Infrastructure too is non-existent in areas other than Malam Jabba and Naltar where potential talent is in abundance and where a taste for winter sports exists. There is also potential for ice hockey. Canadian High Commissioner Wendy Gilmour's visited Hunza where she refereed a girls' game at Altit Lake. It's time for Pakistan to unearth that potential, otherwise its dignitaries will continue to outnumber its athletes at global events.

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Fifth wave

WHILE the daily count is showing a declining trend, the country still remains in the grip of the fifth wave of Covid-19. Feb 4 was the fifth consecutive day that the number of total cases remained below 7,000, but just a few days before, on Jan 27, Pakistan had recorded 8,183 new coronavirus infections. That was the highest daily caseload since the beginning of the pandemic in February 2020. Moreover, no less than 14 cities that day reported a positivity rate of over 11pc, although taking the entire country into account, the figure remains just under 10pc. The number of fatalities also indicates we are far from turning the corner. In the 24 hours preceding Friday, 42 people lost their lives to Covid-19, the country's highest daily death toll since Oct 6 when 46 people had lost their battle against the disease.

The focus remains, as it should, on observing SOPs and getting vaccinations, and also boosters where applicable. It has been found that those who have taken their jabs, and especially a booster shot, are likely to experience comparatively milder symptoms of the infection, whatever the variant. Certainly, the National Command and Operation Centre has done a commendable task of addressing

this once-in-a-century public health challenge. As per its data, 36pc of the country's total population and 54pc of the eligible population have been vaccinated thus far. Given the massive numbers involved this is not an achievement to dismiss lightly. However, as the number of infections at present show, we cannot afford to become complacent and rest on our laurels. Here it has to be conceded that the observance of SOPs leaves much to be desired: it is sloppy, cavalier and honoured more in the breach than otherwise. The authorities themselves have allowed some large-scale public gatherings to go ahead despite the risk of these becoming superspreader events. We have been very fortunate thus far. Covid-19 could have gone very differently for Pakistan. One does not have to look far to see a worst-case scenario. Consider our neighbour, India, where on Friday the official death toll passed the somber milestone of 500,000 — a figure that is almost certainly extremely conservative. Fatalities from Covid-19 in Pakistan are around 29,500, a vastly lower ratio even after accounting for the difference in the total population of each country. While the government should continue to push ahead with vaccinations, it must impress upon the provinces to strictly enforce SOPs.

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Quiet diplomacy

PAKISTAN has emphatically rejected the statement of the Indian army chief in which he claimed that the ceasefire announced last year between the two countries was holding because India had negotiated from a position of strength.

In a tweet, military spokesman Major General Babar Iftikhar said the Indian army chief's statement was "clearly misleading", and that the ceasefire "was agreed only due to Pak's concern for the safety of the people of Kashmir living on both sides of the LoC [and that] ... No side should misconstrue it as their strength or other's weakness". The spokesman of the Foreign Office has also said the Indian army chief's comments made no sense and were made for domestic political reasons only.

It is obvious that the ceasefire is holding because of the success of the backchannel process that took place between the two countries over a period of many months. The fact that the ceasefire is still intact and survived many hiccups shows that it is an effective confidence-building measure which proves that even

under the most trying of conditions, positive engagement can produce tangible outcomes. Irresponsible statements like the one made by the Indian army chief create an unnecessary controversy.

Backchannel diplomacy has always delivered encouraging results and should therefore remain a viable option to defuse tensions. Pakistan has expressed its serious concern that India is supporting militancy inside Balochistan and this has further vitiated the already tense atmosphere. India too may have some grievances which it can share with Pakistan if such an opportunity arises through quiet diplomacy.

In order to give such a process a chance, the Indian leadership must desist from making wild accusations and irresponsible statements against Pakistan. The past provides a good context. It was not too long ago that the two countries engaged in active conflict and Pakistan shot down two intruding Indian aircraft a day after Indian planes had violated Pakistani airspace.

A quiet and deep engagement can produce headway on issues that can constitute important steps in rebuilding confidence. At some point, both countries should also consider the return of high commissioners to the respective capitals. The resumption of trade ties is also an issue that needs to be addressed. Leading businessman Mian Mansha recently advocated such a resumption saying the two countries should resolve their disputes and start trade in order to strengthen the economy. What he has said makes eminent sense but cannot happen under the existing state of relations.

Pakistan has to ensure that it firmly retains its principled position on Kashmir while engaging with India on all these issues. All this can only happen if Indian officials including their army chief desist from making statements that are far removed from reality and that only exacerbate the situation, and New Delhi stops stoking the embers of militancy in Balochistan.

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Xi-Putin summit

THE summit between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in Beijing on Friday sends a strong message to the West that China and Russia are displaying strategic convergence on a number of key global issues. In the backdrop of the brewing

Ukraine crisis, as well as the West's boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics over criticism of China's alleged human rights abuses, the significance of this meeting cannot be missed. Mr Putin was in China to attend the opening ceremony of the Games, which was boycotted by most Western leaders to spite China. Without mincing words, Moscow and Beijing opposed the "further expansion of Nato" while calling on the "North Atlantic Alliance to abandon the ideological approaches of the Cold War". The eastern expansion of Nato is a key bone of contention between Russia and the US-led West, with Moscow drawing the line at Ukraine joining the grouping. Russia has also expressed support for the 'One China' policy, with both sides stating that Taiwan is an "integral part of China". The two countries signed oil and gas deals worth over \$117bn to strengthen the economic dimension of their relationship.

While the Cold War had witnessed the Sino-Soviet split, in the present times, their shared distrust of the US and EU is bringing China and Russia closer. The level of mistrust on both sides is immense, and any strategic miscalculation or brinkmanship can easily cause a flare-up with unsavoury geopolitical implications. The Western bloc sees Russia and China as strategic, military and economic competitors, while Moscow and Beijing seek to assert themselves on the global stage. The fact is that Ukraine, as well as the tension over Taiwan, has the potential to spiral into a greater conflict, something that would lead to a fresh global arms race. As has been observed, it is Nato's responsibility to assure Russia that the bloc does not seek to encircle it; further eastward expansion will only fuel greater hostility. As for China, the US appears to be rattled by its rapid economic growth. China is today the world's second biggest economy and could possibly unseat the US from the top slot some time down the road. To avoid more tension, all sides need to keep competition within manageable limits, and the possibility of violent encounters must be off the table. The politics of forming spheres of influence is a dangerous one, and the world would benefit greatly from peaceful attempts to resolve disputes.

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'Unauthorised' plates

RECENTLY, Lahore traffic wardens were empowered to initiate strict legal action against violators of the Motor Vehicles Ordinance 97-A pertaining to fabricated

vehicle number plates. The police were directed to lodge FIRs against those using outdated, and therefore unauthorised, plates, subjecting the 'guilty' ones to a possible prison term of up to two years and a fine of up to Rs200,000. Subsequently, the Lahore traffic police, in collaboration with the Punjab Excise, Taxation, & Narcotics Control Department, launched a massive crackdown, leaving motorists in fear.

Indeed, all licence plate holders must follow the rules. But, as always, the devil lies in the detail. As it turns out, 2.1m applications are pending with the ET&NC for the newer, regularised number plates — a fact admitted to by the body's director general. Some of the applicants have been waiting since 2019 for this proof of registration. Meanwhile, the excise department's coffers have swelled by some Rs1.5bn in advance fees paid by the applicants. This is absurd — the fines so far levied have been mainly on the low side but the heaviest penalty prescribed is appalling. The DG offered a curious solution to motorists: that frustrated applicants could have number plates manufactured to mimic the authorised ones. This, while those culpable of more serious offences, particularly in Karachi, such as driving in cars with number plates that are unreadable, fancy or inscribed with AFR (applied for registration) ply our roads with impunity. Many such vehicle owners have sufficient clout to escape the clutches of the law. Such number plates are used to avoid paying tax. And in the case of hit-and-run accidents, fake registration plates make it almost impossible to identify the culprits. Traffic authorities need to set their priorities straight, and stop penalising those who are still waiting to receive their number plates. It is regrettable that those who are trying to follow the law are being targeted for no fault of their own while those driving around with illegal number plates fly under the radar.

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Meeting IMF demands

IF we thought Pakistan had already met the IMF demands for the resumption of its \$6bn funding by implementing 'prior actions' involving absolute autonomy for the State Bank, an increase in electricity prices as well as the development levy on petroleum products, and withdrawal of tax exemptions of nearly Rs350bn, we were hugely mistaken. More conditions directly affecting the low- to middle-income segments of the population have yet to be implemented.

The details of the agreement with the IMF disclose that the government is still required to slap additional taxes of Rs430bn through the next budget in June. Overall, the FBR has been given a tax target of Rs7.25tr for the next fiscal, up by Rs1.15tr from the revised target of Rs6.10tr for the ongoing year. Almost two-thirds of the additional tax revenues are expected to come from 4pc growth and 8pc inflation.

The rest has to be raised through new measures, including a reduction in personal income slabs from the existing 12 to six and enhanced rates. This is in spite of the finance minister's repeated claims that he had turned down the IMF demand to jack up personal income tax rates since that would further distress the salaried class. That is not all. Electricity tariffs will also go up as the government desperately wants disbursement of the remaining loan amount of \$3bn from the IMF before the end of the programme in September to pursue its growth agenda before the 2023 elections.

While Pakistan's re-entry into the IMF programme was crucial for shoring up its foreign exchange reserves, the Fund's harsh conditions will decelerate growth, fuel inflation, increase unemployment and erode purchasing power of the struggling low- to middle-income households. But it is too simplistic to blame the Fund for our travails, even if it seems to have gone overboard with its demands.

Pakistan, as is underscored by the IMF in its review, with a long history of "stop-and-go economic policies and weak implementation of structural reforms", should blame itself for its troubles. Successive governments (including the present one) have knocked at the IMF's doors 23 times to seek help in tackling the repeated crises. But they have delayed the necessary governance and fiscal reforms and abandoned the programme midway to again spend their way to re-election once the external sector stabilised. It isn't surprising that this time around the Fund has put its foot down, forcing Islamabad to execute some of its conditions before approving the programme's resumption.

The PTI government believes it can ditch actions agreed with the IMF if it is able to convince China to help. But it must understand that even bilateral assistance largely depends on the IMF's approval of Pakistan's actions to restructure its economy. Further delay in the implementation of reforms will create more complications, and constrain economic recovery and investment at the expense of the people.

CPEC concerns

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has concluded a four-day visit to China at a time when ties with Beijing are poised at a delicate juncture. Mr Khan had important meetings with the Chinese leadership including President Xi Jinping, and according to an official press release, he discussed a wide range of issues with him.

Although the main reason for the prime minister's visit was to witness the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics, he utilised the opportunity to interact with prominent world leaders in attendance and to take stock of the various strands of the Islamabad-Beijing relationship. One key component of bilateral ties is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Reports suggest that during the last few years, CPEC has lost some of its original pace and this has led to anxiety that the projects may not have received the kind of focused attention that had been envisioned.

In the days running up to Mr Khan's China visit, various cabinet ministers had stated that matters related to CPEC would constitute a high priority during the visit. It has been reported that the prime minister and his entourage reviewed the progress with Chinese officials and some headway was made to keep it on track.

If that is the case then it is a positive sign considering that CPEC holds a central place in this country's efforts towards economic revitalisation including job creation and infrastructure development. At one point, CPEC was allowed to become a source of public controversy, with some government politicians issuing rather irresponsible statements. The Pakistani leadership needs to ensure that the multibillion-dollar venture does not fall victim to petty politics and that special care is taken to avoid spreading misperceptions.

In pursuing the project, each side has its own national interest to think of and if any reservations or disputes arise, it is best for the two countries to settle them in private. It is also important to not let red tape and bureaucratic inertia become an obstacle in meeting deadlines and finishing CPEC projects on time. That said, the standards of transparency have kept to be kept in mind at all times. There have been genuine concerns about CPEC and the state can only allay these by engaging with the stakeholders and giving them an accurate picture of the actual

costs, the work done on each project, the audits carried out and similar information. Only then can we reap the dividends.

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Iran sanctions relief

WHEN it comes to the difficult US-Iran relationship, particularly the thorny nuclear issue, even small steps towards a solution must be appreciated. In this regard, the American decision to restore sanctions waivers on parts of Iran's civilian nuclear programme should be seen as a confidence-building measure in tense talks between the Islamic Republic and the P5+1 currently underway in Vienna. The nuclear negotiations were widely seen to be close to collapse, so while this cannot be termed a significant breakthrough, the sanctions waiver may be a tactic to buy more time for all parties and let temperatures cool during heated discussions. Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian has termed the American move "good but not enough" while calling upon Washington to guarantee it will not withdraw from the landmark deal as the Trump administration had done unilaterally.

If the Western parties want complete Iranian compliance with the deal, then they should go a step further and grant Tehran maximum relief where economic sanctions are concerned. US-led sanctions have succeeded in battering the Iranian economy, as global firms stay away from the country to avoid incurring America's wrath. However, in the interest of global peace and to send a strong goodwill message to Iran, the US and its Western allies must assure Tehran that economic sanctions relief will be assured, and that the nuclear deal will not be violated. True, there will be actors — chiefly Israel — who will seek to sabotage any positive developments on this front. But the international community must ignore such irritants and work for a deal that is beneficial to Iran, regional states as well as the wider community. Should negotiations in Vienna collapse, it will spell more trouble for the Middle East. The West, then, must assure Iran of the genuine advantages of the deal, and deliver on them, while it is incumbent on Iran to honour its commitments if it wants a smooth re-entry into the international system. Barring this outcome, a destructive confrontation between both sides will be the unpleasant alternative.

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Desperate strategy

THE ruling PTI has decided to launch a major public relations effort using 'Brand Imran' to lift its sinking political fortunes as the opposition ramps up its efforts, both inside and outside parliament, to oust the government.

The decision made by the PTI's central executive committee to organise public rallies that will be addressed by Prime Minister Imran Khan himself ostensibly aims at mobilising supporters in the run-up to the crucial LG polls in Punjab and KP where the party suffered substantial losses in the first leg of the local elections.

The party leadership thinks it can sway the voters, who have been heavily impacted by the dire economic conditions under the PTI's rule, through their direct interaction with the PM. This is open to question. The very fact that PTI leaders want Mr Khan to lead the campaign even for local government polls betrays their nervousness about their party's electoral chances in view of the public's frustration.

Admittedly, Mr Khan is the face of the ruling PTI. However, the trouble is that he has little to offer after more than three and a half years in power. It has been a period marked by poor governance, rising cost of living and surging unemployment. A fixation with the so-called accountability of political rivals and empty anti-corruption slogans won't be enough to resurrect his party's popularity. That the man on the street isn't happy with the economic performance of his government is a reality and, under these circumstances, anti-opposition campaigns cannot win over public support.

Unfortunately, the present rulers want to brush the growing discontent under the carpet. They are not willing to admit that the slogans and promises that worked in the 2018 elections are unlikely to appeal to the majority of voters now. Nothing elicits wider public backing for a ruling political party like economic prosperity and good governance.

The PTI is also facing another problem. The events of the last few months — such as its tensions with the military leadership over the appointment of the ISI chief and losses in the cantonment board elections and the local polls in KP— have cast the government in a vulnerable light. Sensing an opportunity, the major

opposition parties are again coming closer to join forces in order to send the government home. That is not all.

Some of the PTI's allies in the ruling coalition in Islamabad and Punjab are also increasing their contacts with the PML-N and PPP to explore opportunities for cooperation if and when the chips are down for the ruling party. Politics is all about perception and voters are quick to notice the cracks in government. The use of the Imran Khan brand to boost public support for the PTI may appear to be a clever move. But it is no substitute for good governance and better management of the economy.

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On the way out?

THERE are hopeful signs that we may have turned the corner. With the Covid-19 positivity rate declining, the NCOC has felt confident enough to give the go-ahead for full-capacity attendance at the cricket stadium in Lahore when the PSL enters its next phase later this month. In fact, unvaccinated children below 12 years will also be allowed to attend though it is mandatory for the rest of the spectators to be vaccinated. At the time of writing, the NCOC's latest update showed a positivity ratio of 5.3pc, down from 7.4pc a day earlier. Overall, the stats are encouraging — though there is always room for more effort and improvement. Over 87m people in the country have had the full dose of the vaccine, while the figure for those who are partially vaccinated is around 111m. Meanwhile, around 3m boosters have been administered. The daily figures released yesterday showed that no critical Covid case had been officially registered for the day before, a testament perhaps to the less dangerous nature of the Omicron strain. Internationally, too, Pakistan is not at the moment perceived as a high-risk country, with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention placing it in the lowest-risk category. All this should put a smile on the faces of those who have been running the Covid programme — and justifiably so. The challenges have been many but efforts to contain the contagion have also intensified.

But the dangers are never far away, and precautions and vaccinations must continue even as Covid SOPs are slowly relaxed. Scientists have already warned of possible new strains and though many believe that these are likely to be

milder, as the current trend and the pattern of previous pandemics appear to suggest, there are no guarantees. The best protection against the virus so far has included vaccinations, wearing properly fitted face masks and social distancing among other measures. Continuing to stress on these will be a test of the national and provincial governments' commitment to battling the infection. The immediate concern in the days ahead are the grand political rallies that are being planned by the government and the opposition, where all caution will be thrown to the wind. Such superspreader events are a virus's delight and both sides should take a step back to consider the damage they are likely to cause. Public rallies are a democratic right but so is the health of the population.

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Ajmal Pahari's release

It is on occasions such as the release of Shahnawaz, better known as Ajmal Pahari, that the public's trust in the country's justice system falls to new lows. Pahari, a former MQM worker and an alleged hitman, is said to have been involved in over 100 targeted killings in Karachi. He remained in and out of jail for years, with the courts acquitting him in several cases as they were unable to find enough evidence to convict him in even one. Last week, a video of a 'changed' Ajmal Pahari in religious garb went viral on social media, following his unpublicised release from Sukkur jail on Jan 14, after a court granted him bail in the remaining cases against him. Similarly, Uzair Baloch, a notorious gangster from Karachi's Lyari area, and chief of the banned People's Amn Committee, is allegedly involved in scores of cases of murder, kidnapping and extortion. Yet, he has been 'rewarded' with acquittals in around 20 out of the 70 or so cases in which he has been reportedly named. Given this trajectory, it will not be surprising if the law fails to nail Uzair Baloch in the remaining cases.

It is no secret that the arrests of both men came about due to the loss of their political patronage rather than the professional capabilities of the law-enforcement agencies, which remain unable or unwilling to build even a single iron-clad case against them. However, it is also true that systemic issues such as lack of operational independence for LEAs and flawed witness protection programmes, combined with limited evidence-gathering capabilities and forensic processing, have created serious hurdles in ensuring convictions in such cases.

Moreover, the state has provided ample opportunities to political and criminal elements to influence sections of the judiciary and prosecution — either out of apathy or because it has its own agenda. Such an approach always extracts a heavy cost and sends a message to even the most dangerous criminals that their chances of escaping the clutches of the law are very good indeed.

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UN report on terrorism

THE return to power last August of the Afghan Taliban was a watershed event certain to have far-reaching consequences for the region's security landscape. For Pakistan, having suffered years of bloodletting at the hands of violent extremist outfits, the stakes are extremely high. According to the 29th report of the UN's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, the first since the momentous development in Afghanistan, the country once again "has the potential to become a safe haven for Al Qaeda and a number of terror groups with ties to the Central Asia region and beyond". Al Qaeda already enjoys enduring links with Afghanistan's new rulers, having fought alongside them in the Taliban's two decades-long insurgency against Western-backed governments in Kabul. During their years in the wilderness, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan gave them refuge on this side of the border. And now the Afghan regime has made clear they will not take coercive action against their former hosts, even as they claim they will prevent terrorist groups from launching transnational attacks from Afghanistan's soil. The most they will do, it appears, is mediate talks between the TTP and the Pakistani government. Predictably, the initial effort at such negotiations has, aside for a brief ceasefire, gone nowhere. Another source of worry for Pakistan is that, as per the UN report, the TTP and Al Qaeda have joined hands with the Uighur extremist group ETIM to carry out attacks on Chinese interests in this country.

If the turmoil in Afghanistan worsens, breakaway elements from the Taliban, as well as foreign extremists, may be tempted to switch allegiances to the militant Islamic State's Khorasan chapter which also has roots in the country. The UN report describes the IS-K as the Afghan Taliban's "primary kinetic threat as the group aims to position itself as the chief rejectionist force in Afghanistan, with a wider regional agenda... ." Despite its limited territorial control, this militant outfit

has demonstrated time and again the wherewithal to mount horrific, mass casualty attacks often along sectarian lines.

Afghanistan-based terror outfits have since decades cast a long shadow over this region, but at least earlier it was not smooth sailing for them. Certainly, Afghan and American forces were strategic in their targeting of terrorists — for instance, allowing TTP safe havens to exist largely unhindered despite their cross-border attacks in Pakistan. Nevertheless, tactical drone strikes, such as those that killed Mullah Fazlullah and other senior TTP commanders in Afghanistan, meant they had to be constantly on their guard. Now even that restraint has more or less evaporated. What makes matters even more complex and fluid is that despite some differences, all these terrorist outfits are on an ideological level cut from the same cloth, and they collaborate and enable each other. World powers must urgently formulate a unified strategy to deal with this threat that ultimately menaces all humanity.

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Vawda's disqualification

THE ECP's decision disqualifying PTI Senator Faisal Vawda for life as a lawmaker for concealing his dual nationality while contesting the 2018 national election from Karachi shows that one can cheat the system once or twice, but not all the time. The chances of getting caught are ever-present.

Mr Vawda resigned from his National Assembly seat early last year when it became clear to him and his party that the Islamabad High Court would disqualify him for submitting a false affidavit to the election authorities regarding his American citizenship. He thought that he could avoid disqualification by quitting the National Assembly and shifting to the Senate.

His lawyers argued before the court that a dual nationality case against him was not valid after his election as senator. The court did not agree, however, and directed the ECP to proceed against the PTI leader under Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution that sets out the moral qualifications of public representatives.

That his party and the prime minister, who had hailed the Supreme Court decision leading to the exit of PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif under the same clause, helped the PTI loyalist avoid punishment by electing him to the Upper

House is deplorable. Clearly, they had not thought that their actions could harm their public image when the opposition parties started flexing their muscles against the government.

That said, it must be emphasised that Mr Vawda's disqualification from contesting polls for life — as in the case of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and estranged PTI leader Jehangir Khan Tareen — for violating a law pertaining to parliamentarians' and civil servants' moral standards, and that bars their election to parliament unless they are 'sadiq' (truthful) and 'ameen' (trustworthy), is a bit harsh.

Although the apex court ruled otherwise in 2017 in the Nawaz Sharif case, no punishment — whatever the offence is — should be 'permanent'. The Supreme Court Bar Association president has already filed a petition with the apex court against the principle of lifetime disqualification of a lawmaker.

The ECP has also allowed Mr Vawda to move the Supreme Court against its decision, an opportunity that we expect him to avail. The SCBA plea provides an opportunity for not only a legal debate on the subject but also a larger one about the demands of democracy itself. Everybody is entitled to have a second chance in life and no law should deprive them of this opportunity.

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Rape for 'honour'

THE logic that to retrieve a misplaced sense of 'honour', the members of a tribe or community have to subject women to violence of the most bestial kind is simply incomprehensible. Yet, such barbarism is reported regularly across the country. An incident has now surfaced in Sindh's Mirpurkhas district where 20 men of the Tungri tribe kidnapped two teenage girls of the Rajput clan in Naokot town and subjected them to sexual assault. Reportedly, the men were incensed over the free-will marriage of a Tungri woman to a Rajput man. Given the twisted notions of tradition entrenched in society, this incident is not likely to be the last of its kind. This is because despite the official narrative to the contrary, both state and society remain deeply patriarchal and are narrow-minded about women's rights. There is institutional acceptance of the archaic idea that a woman marrying a man of her own choice is guilty of bringing 'dishonour' to her family or

tribe. We have frequently heard politicians and officials offering views that lend justification to such crimes on the pretext of religion or culture.

In fact, it is not simply about acceptance of the crime. In this case, the two young women, aged 14 and 19, stated that their kidnappers had active help from the area's police. According to them, after being kidnapped they were first taken to the house of an ASI, before being shifted to the home of the prime accused. The authorities should thoroughly investigate the role of the police official and give him exemplary punishment if found guilty. It is impossible to root out this barbaric mindset unless the government removes officials who sympathise with it. When state officials condone or facilitate such crimes, the perpetrators get away with a sense of impunity. Additionally, backward notions are further entrenched as can be seen in the rising number of cases of violence against women in Sindh and Punjab. It's about time the authorities treated such violence as a serious crime.

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Hijab controversy

IN today's India, the rabid forces of Hindutva appear hell-bent on baiting Muslims. Sometimes their antics are farcical, such as the debate over whether actor Shah Rukh Khan 'spat' on singing legend Lata Mangeshkar's mortal remains while reciting a prayer. In other instances, their activities threaten the safety and well-being of India's minorities, as the current controversy surrounding schoolgirls wearing the hijab has revealed.

These examples sadly illustrate how India has changed under the right-wing BJP, as the forces of secularism and tolerance have been besieged by the extremists of the Sangh Parivar, whose aim is to remake India in their destructive image. And the fact that the Hindu hard right now has the firm backing of the state has brought this dream — a nightmare for India's minorities — closer to realisation.

But perhaps this violent trajectory was expected, as the ideologues and foot soldiers involved in physically turning Babri Masjid into dust are today in the corridors of power. This has meant nothing but trouble for India's Muslims. With regard to the Shah Rukh Khan incident, an innocent gesture of respect was deliberately twisted by a BJP leader who falsely said that the Bollywood star

'spat' at the funeral. This is not the first time that the popular actor has been targeted, while other Muslim celebrities in India have also had their patriotism questioned by the hard right.

As for the hijab controversy, there is even more cause for concern with the administration in Karnataka not letting female Muslim students wear the garment to school. This is clearly not about academic discipline, but a move to stamp out religious and cultural symbols, and dictate what women and girls can and cannot wear. Just as the Afghan Taliban and other Muslim hardliners are wrong in enforcing dress codes for women, the state in India too has no business telling Muslim women how to dress. The video of a veiled schoolgirl on her way to class being heckled by a far-right Hindu mob in Karnataka is chilling, and her courage in the face of such violent bullying is to be lauded.

What are India's Muslims to do? Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's watch, they have been hunted down for allegedly eating beef, stripped of citizenship on flimsy grounds and prevented from performing prayers in public places. Now, schoolgirls are being targeted for wearing the hijab. This madness must stop if the fundamental rights of Indian Muslims are to be protected.

If India is still committed to democracy, then it follows that minority communities must be allowed to live according to their religious and cultural norms, without being harassed. However, if the decision has been made to ditch democracy in favour of Hindutva, then the outlook is grim for Muslims as well as followers of other faiths in India — in fact all those who believe in pluralism.

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Saindak approval

THE Economic Coordination Committee has just approved a 15-year lease extension for the Chinese company working on the Saindak Gold and Copper Mine project in Balochistan. The ECC nod raises several questions about the transparency of the process. Even the revised terms of the lease that offer a slightly 'better deal' to Pakistan than previously cannot be a substitute for open, international competitive bidding for the project. Moreover, the ECC's approval infringes Balochistan's right under the 18th Amendment to take decisions regarding the project and float international tenders to award the lease of the

mines producing precious metals, including gold, silver, copper and iron ore, to the highest bidder. This isn't the first time the province has been ignored by Islamabad on the future of the project. The contract was extended twice in 2012 and 2017 for five years each in complete disregard of constitutional provisions and in spite of a decision taken in 2017 that the Saindak project would be handed over to Balochistan after the expiry of the previous five-year agreement with the Chinese firm later that year.

The contractor has agreed to enhance Pakistan's share of profits by 3pc to 53pc, and increase rent, royalties and social uplift payments for the province and centre under the renewed contract. But Pakistan remains dependent on the Chinese company's calculations of profits and payments as we don't have a mechanism for determining the quantity of metals extracted and moved out of the country, and to verify the exact revenue from the project. Some reports suggest that Saindak's metal deposits are fast depleting due to over-mining by the contractor in order to maximise its profits. These allegations need to be looked into and an audit conducted of the total quantity of minerals extracted in the last two decades. Moreover, little of the profit made by the lessee — or the federal and provincial government — are invested in the welfare of the people of Chaghi, where Saindak (as well as Reko Diq) is located. That Chaghi, known as the 'museum of minerals', remains the country's most under-developed district despite holding mineral wealth worth trillions beneath its soil speaks volumes for the state's exploitative 'development' policies. Instead of endorsing the ECC's approval, the government should hand over the project to Balochistan to decide on its future with directions that at least half of the revenues it receives from Saindak are spent on the people of Chaghi.

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Student unions' revival

A NUMBER of student-led events in several places including Islamabad, Lahore, Swat and Hyderabad were held recently to demand the restoration of student unions that had been banned on Feb 9, 1984, by the Zia regime. Almost four decades later, there may be reason to hope that some of the damage can be reversed with the approval by a standing committee of the Sindh Assembly of a bill calling for the election or formation of student unions in public and private

higher educational institutions. According to the bill's provisions, a union would have seven to 11 elected members with representation in the higher educational institution's syndicate and anti-harassment committee. However, it is uncertain if and when the bill becomes law. Over the years, the closure of what were once vibrant nurseries of democracy has weakened the political culture. Student-led activities and representation helped educated youth interact, share ideas and develop intellectually, socially and academically in preparation for their future leadership role. Many seasoned politicians today learned their skills on campuses brimming with ideas and activities. But the ban created a political vacuum and is partially responsible for the present crisis of governance and democratic culture that we see in the country today.

In fact, the ban rapidly led to the politicisation of educational institutions as the student wings of political parties pushed their own agendas. These wings have emerged as the chief stakeholders in students' grievances at public universities. What was a move to ostensibly prevent violence on campus has backfired, with a clash of ideologies taking a lethal turn in universities and different political groups fighting each other to retain their illicit influence on academic and administrative activities. The government says that 2022 will be observed as the year of the youth. It can take its first step in this direction by restoring student unions so that a culture of debate and respect for difference of opinion can once again take root.

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Larkana jail crisis

THE chaos that gripped Larkana Central Jail until yesterday had been years in the making. The delay in introducing prison reforms had led to a fertile environment for criminal elements to routinely abuse the law even when they were supposedly being punished for breaking it. Last week, the inmates took 10 jail officials hostage to compel the new prison administration to allow the free flow of contraband items on jail premises. Thankfully, all the officials have now been released, and the protesting prisoners are back in their barracks. They had apparently been 'spoiled' by the previous jail superintendent under whose watch items such as mobile phones, drugs and alcohol circulated freely among the

prisoners. Tensions between the new jail superintendent and the prisoners had been ongoing for months.

The situation raises several questions about the role of the Sindh home department as well as the professional capabilities of the jail officials. Moreover, Larkana Central Jail is one of the most overcrowded prisons in the country. While it has a sanctioned strength of 650 prisoners, it actually houses a total of 1,033, with 482 among them undertrials. For years, experts and activists have pointed out the problem of overcrowding in jails and how it burdens the prison system. There is ample evidence linking horrendous living conditions to long-term antisocial and aggressive behaviour. This also means that prisoners convicted of being tried for petty crime often find themselves in the company of hardened criminals whose pernicious influence is hard to escape. This situation, combined with severely outdated, underfunded and understaffed prison departments — where officials remain underpaid, unmotivated and untrained — widespread political interference and a disinterested state is a sure-shot recipe for disaster. The recent crisis in Larkana Central Jail is akin to a charge sheet against all the relevant authorities. The government should take this incident as a wake-up call and set about reforming the prison system to prevent similar crises from erupting in prisons in other parts of the country.

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Cabinet or classroom?

INSPIRED as he is by his own struggles to balance academics with sporting pursuits while at school, the prime minister's recognition of the top 10 best performing ministries might seem like a good idea, at first.

By his own admission, Imran Khan was always more interested in sports than curricular pursuits. All that changed when exam results started being announced in front of the entire student body, rather than just being handed out in envelopes. This, in the PM's own words, was what drove him to do more homework.

What works in the schoolyard, however, won't necessarily work in the secretariat. The PTI has always placed a premium on performance; delivering on promises was perhaps the main manifesto goal of this government. From the '100 Days

Agenda' to signing of performance agreements with ministers in 2020, there have been several efforts to track and evaluate the work being done by the men and women in charge. But the prime minister's impulse to do everything publicly — noble though his intentions may be — seem to have the opposite effect from the one that was desired.

Recall that in May 2021, Mr Khan gave his ambassadors a dressing down, in full public view. At the time, this paper had held: "While the prime minister's censure of the poor performance of some of the missions is valid and must lead to remedial action, the manner in which the no-holds-barred criticism was publicised is quite bizarre." We stick by those words.

The managerialisation and marketisation of the public sector — to borrow a phrase from the UK civil service lexicon — is a noble aim to pursue, but perhaps the methodology can be better fleshed out. A performance review can be most effective if the feedback is bespoke and precise. While a pat on the back from one's prime minister before a rapturous audience may do wonders for the individual ego, it isn't the best way to provide constructive feedback.

In fact, it may produce contempt rather than encourage competition in the top team. We had a glimpse of that during Thursday's ceremony too, when those not included in the top 10 failed to turn up for the event — something the PM noted in his speech. Although he chided his special assistant Arbab Shahzad for 'leaking' the names in advance, he could not have seriously expected stalwarts like Shah Mahmood Qureshi or Fawad Chaudhry to turn up to such a ceremony and not be lauded on stage.

Perhaps it is time to channel the Imran Khan of old; he can marshal his men and women like he would urge a strike bowler in the death overs; with a few whispered tactics, a firm pat on the back and the confidence that their leader stands behind them. That kind of inspiration could be just what this government needs.

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Impoverished districts

GIVEN decades of lopsided and uneven 'development', it was inevitable that the different regions of a province the size of Punjab would have significant social

and economic disparities. A new UNDP report — South Punjab Regional SDGs Indicators Comparison with Centre and North — has only confirmed what is already known to most people and policymakers: the impoverished southern districts of Punjab are lagging far behind the rest of the province, both in social and economic indicators. The data produced by numerous government and independent research studies and surveys over the last two decades shows that the majority of the districts of southern Punjab are among the most underdeveloped and deprived in the province in terms of basic public services such as health, education, safe drinking water supply, sanitation etc. because of years of underinvestment by successive governments. As a percentage of its population, south Punjab has a significantly higher incidence of multidimensional poverty compared with the central and northern parts of the province. Thus, it is not surprising that the prevalence of stunting and wasting among children in the southern districts of the province is much higher than in other parts. So are child labour and child marriages. Likewise, infant mortality and gender disparity are also above the provincial average.

The government's development spending data shows that the social and economic lag in the underdeveloped southern region of Punjab has exacerbated over the years — even with an increase in provincial financial resources — as the bulk of public development funds are spent on large infrastructure projects in the more affluent central or northern regions of the province. Historically, south Punjab has suffered because it has fewer development allocations than its share in the provincial population and received even less than what was committed in the budgets at the cost of its impoverished citizens. Although the PTI administration has ring-fenced development funds for the resource-starved southern region for bridging development gaps with the northern districts, the allocations are not sufficient to address the acute socioeconomic differences and deprivations of the population. The government has to do much more for bringing this disadvantaged region up to the developmental level of the rest of the province. The rulers should know that recognition of the existing disparities alone will not tackle the growing socioeconomic and political tensions in south Punjab. But reductions in regional disparities on a fast-track basis may achieve the goal.

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Punishing the Afghans

PRESIDENT Biden's decision to begin the process of splitting half of the Afghan central bank's assets on the deposit of \$7bn in the Federal Reserve Bank, to compensate the victims of the 9/11 attacks, is simply appalling and lacks moral ground.

Granted that the executive order also aims to unlock the balance of \$3.5bn to pay for the humanitarian needs of the Afghan population, but the very decision of the superpower to seize half the amount that legally belongs to an impoverished nation is wrong on many levels and has raised some serious questions.

For one, these assets belong to Afghanistan and not to the Taliban rulers. How can Washington justify inflicting collective punishment on the Afghans to penalise the Taliban? It raises a legal question as well. The money belongs to the Afghan central bank and therefore, should not be commandeered to pay the Taliban's judgement debt. None of the 19 hijackers involved in the horrific terrorist attacks on that tragic day were Afghans. True, the plotters used Afghan soil and were under the Taliban's protection, but to penalise the entire population implies that the attack had the sanction of the entire nation.

One would have hoped that the US, which bombed its way into Afghanistan to seek revenge, and then spent trillions of dollars to rebuild it, only to leave two decades later and virtually hand over the country to the Taliban on a platter, would have learnt a few lessons. Sadly, it has not.

The decision will undoubtedly have far-reaching implications for America's counterterrorism efforts and will lead to destabilising a country that is already on the verge of financial collapse. Afghanistan's banking system is near disintegration. Seizing the money, part of which belonged to the country's commercial banks, has dealt a mortal blow to the Afghan banking sector.

Moreover, there is mass starvation and poverty in the country. Mr Biden's decision will only complicate matters. It has already deprived Afghan banks of much-needed liquidity and will put further strain on the value of the Afghan currency, thus fuelling more inflation and making it even harder for the banks to honour their commitments which, in turn, will lead to defaults.

This does not represent a good picture of a country that has seen far too much bloodshed. The decision has more or less left the Afghan banking system to fend for itself. The Biden administration is reported to have spent months in discussions on how to untangle the legal complications related to the unfreezing of Afghan assets, but surely there could have been a better and smarter way to try and stabilise Afghanistan's economy by channelling the funds back to its central bank, while ensuring that the money did not fall into the hands of the Taliban. An unstable Afghanistan does not serve anyone's interest.

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Seeking undue allowance

PML-N LEADER Ishaq Dar's desire to take oath as senator virtually or at the Pakistan High Commission is a classic example of wanting to have one's cake and eat it too. The former finance minister has written a letter to chairman Senate Sadiq Sanjrani expressing his willingness to do so as he is based in the UK due to illness and medical check-ups. His victory notification was restored by the ECP last month, therefore, he is due to take oath. But Mr Dar has made it clear that he will not be coming to Pakistan for this purpose and has referred to Article 255 (2) of the Constitution which, he believes, would allow him to take oath remotely. Indeed, the article says that in "impracticable" circumstances, an oath "that is required to be made before a specified person" can be taken before someone "who is nominated by that person". But surely, this allowance is the logical step for those who are not able to take the required oath at a given time for genuinely practical reasons. Should it apply to those who have shown little inclination to be actively involved in Senate proceedings, but would still like to enjoy the privilege of being a member of the Upper House?

Mr Dar's attitude is reflective of what has become the new normal for his party: remote and convenient political participation and party governance. The tone has been set by PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif, who is running the party from London where he is based on health grounds. This trend is utterly undesirable and makes a mockery of democratic principles. Can voters really hold politicians accountable if they are thousands of miles away? For Mr Dar to expect that he will remain senator without participating in debates and legislative business is absurd. Being senator should not be treated as a token role. Mr Dar should

return to the country, take oath and face his legal battles if he is serious about having a future in governance.

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Fishermen's plight

WHENEVER hostilities spike between India and Pakistan, fishermen belonging to both states often have to pay the price as they are scooped up by the authorities on either side for 'violating' the maritime boundary. From here on, several months — or years — of incarceration follow, adding to the miseries of the poor fishermen and their distraught families. In this regard, a picture published a few days ago in this paper shows a number of Indian fishermen, bound together by ropes, being led out of court and back to detention. It is a small illustration of the ordeal these individuals will have to go through for the foreseeable future, until they can return. As per reports, over 30 Indian fishermen were picked up by the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency recently, while their boats were seized, after they were reportedly found in Pakistan's territorial waters.

Conditions in detention are far from ideal. This is also true in India. Pakistani fishermen who have returned from Indian jails narrate tales of woe of having to live in deplorable conditions. It is high time that the authorities in both countries devised a mechanism to prevent the detaining of fishermen if they mistakenly stray into the other's territory. The fact is that there are no border posts at sea, so it is easy for the fishermen to lose their way. Instead of pouncing on them every so often, and then eventually returning them as a 'goodwill gesture', as both states often do, it would be better to put in place a mechanism to prevent their detention in the first place. For example, if fishermen from one country are found to be in or near the other's territorial waters, they should be warned by the authorities to turn back. If they are apprehended, the process of verification should be swift, and they should be returned to their country of origin as soon as possible. Lengthy incarcerations have a devastating effect on the fishermen and their families, while the confiscation of boats is equal to taking away their means of livelihood. Moreover, while in detention the fishermen should be granted smooth consular access to help establish their identities. This is one of the 'soft' areas in Pakistan-India relations where progress can be made if both sides

desire it. It is unfair to keep apprehending poor fishermen; a workable mechanism needs to be put in place to permanently address the issue.

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Few transplants

THE factors that together give sustenance to illegal organ transplantation exist here in plenty — greed, abject poverty, ignorance and weak rule of law. That is why this is a racket the authorities must always keep an eye out for; any complacency could result in the practice taking root once again. The Punjab Human Organ Transplant Authority has taken notice of some rather skewed data pertaining to transplant surgeries at the 60 government and private hospitals in the province that are authorised to carry out the procedure. According to the figures, not only is the number of transplant surgeries small considering the potential, but the government hospitals have performed only 40pc of the total 44,000 such procedures during the last four years. Moreover, of these, 95pc have taken place at only two government health facilities. As a result, PHOTA has initiated an exercise to assess the facilities offered by the private and public hospitals with the objective of creating an enabling environment for ethical organ transplantation.

The initiative is a sensible one, taking its cue from data that does not seem to stack up — a situation that if allowed to persist may become a factor in the revival of the organ trade. Several years ago, Pakistan had acquired global notoriety as an organs bazaar where ‘transplant tourists’ could fly in and, for a hefty price, buy themselves a ‘new’ kidney. After the practice was criminalised in 2007, the incidence of illegal transplantation — whether pertaining to foreign or local patients — declined drastically for some time. But lax implementation led to this exploitative business again spreading its tentacles, especially in the impoverished hinterland of Punjab. The savvy criminals that play different roles in the racket devised ingenious tactics to evade detection, which included setting up discreet operating theatres inside private residences. In the last few years, the FIA busted several organ trafficking rings and this disrupted the trade in organs to a large extent. However, recent stories illustrate that remnants of the illegal business continue to thrive underground. Only last month, FIA nabbed several members of a huge organ trade ring, including doctors and agents, that had been

carrying out their illegal activities in Punjab and KP. What is needed is strict implementation of the law. Instead, even the health professionals that are caught tend to make bail and go right back into medical practice, sometimes repeating their criminal pursuits without any consequences.

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Circular railway funds

THE release of more than Rs270bn by the federal government for the revival and modernisation of the Karachi Circular Railway is welcome news. However, whether or not it translates into action soon and lightens the commuting burden of millions of Karachi residents remains to be seen.

Though the launch of the Green Line in January has provided some degree of relief, it may be too early for celebrations. The Green Line is only one of the five bus rapid transit lines planned for Karachi. The federal government is hoping to develop a modernised KCR as a core component of the future Karachi Breeze, the official name for the megacity's bus and rapid transit system.

The authorities envision Karachi Breeze to operate with the five BRT lines connected to the KCR. Only one of those BRT projects — the Green Line — has become functional. The shortest BRT corridor among the five — the Orange Line — is extraordinarily delayed, while no planning or construction seems to have started for the Red, Blue and Yellow Lines.

That is not all. According to the latest reports, the centre also intends to develop the project under public-private partnership on a build-operate-transfer basis. Under this plan, a 43-kilometre-long dual track will be built once Ecnec gives its approval. However, it is not yet clear if the Sindh government has completed its share of the groundwork.

One of the key factors hampering the progress of KCR's revival are the offices and buildings of the federal and provincial utility companies who had failed to inform the railways department about the details of their assets. Moreover, there were also whispers that some of the province's officials were having second thoughts about the project's feasibility. The strained relationship between the province and the centre has not helped matters either. Whatever the reasons for the delay, the centre and province should resolve them at the earliest. The

citizens of Karachi should not have to put up with yet another half-hearted, ill-managed scheme.

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Right to travel

THE Lahore High Court has done well to strike down para 51 of the Passport and Visa Manual 2006 which the federal government invokes to blacklist citizens. Four petitioners had approached the court against being blacklisted and the judge ruled in their favour saying that such blacklisting was unconstitutional. In his judgement, Justice Tariq Saleem said that the Passport Act did not contain any provision for blacklisting and that the right to travel was globally recognised as one of the basic human rights. He said this right could be restricted only under a law made in the public interest, adding that Article 15 of the Constitution expressly stated that the restriction should not only be reasonable but also in the public interest.

By handing down this judgement, the court has struck down a rule that the government was using indiscriminately against citizens on flimsy grounds. Over the years, it has become a norm for governments to slap unnecessary restrictions on people, and especially rival politicians, for reasons that have weak grounding. Discretionary power is liable to be abused, and it usually is. Putting citizens on the Exit Control List for minor reasons is a case in point. Once a citizen is put on the list, it is an ordeal to get off it. People have remained barred from travel for years just because their names once appeared on the list. Such bars on travel have also been used to persecute opponents and put them under pressure for political reasons. It is high time that such practices were reviewed and the government's discretion to put restrictions on travel curtailed. The courts have had to intervene on behalf of citizens to get them off the ECL but this is not the answer to the problem. The government has to review the way this issue is handled and to revise its methodology so that the basic right of the citizen to travel at home or abroad is not violated.

Time and again we have seen the heavy-handed way in which the government handles such situations because those in power do not want to let go of the authority they believe they can wield through their office. The overwhelming domination of the executive in our system has led to this skewed exercise of

authority that tramples on the rights of citizens. It is heartening that the courts are now asserting their powers to check this unbridled use of executive power. By upholding the rights of the people, the courts are acting as an effective check on the abuse of official power. However, a permanent solution to such problems will only be found through a review and reform of laws and regulations that hark back to a bygone era. It is hoped that those responsible for such reform will take their job seriously.

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PTM dharna

LEADERS and supporters of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement are once again on the roads, this time camping out in front of the Sindh Assembly building until their demands are met. Their primary demand is the release from detention of their leader and MNA Ali Wazir. Mr Wazir and other key figures of his movement had been booked for alleged anti-state speeches made at a rally in Karachi's Sohrab Goth in December 2020. On Sunday, members of the PTM marched up to the Sindh Assembly and after a brief stand-off were allowed to stage the dharna. They argued that if the Jamaat-i-Islami — which recently held a month-long protest in front of the provincial assembly against the Sindh local government law — could be allowed to hold a demonstration at the location, there was no reason why they should be treated differently. Here lies the crux of the problem.

Since their rise to prominence in 2018 in defence of Pakhtun rights, the PTM has been in the bad books of the state. It has been treated as an anti-state entity with cases lodged against its leaders, including the one against Mr Wazir. While their choice of words at times has raised questions, the movement has remained largely peaceful. Yet the state has refused to yield, while on the other hand it has acquiesced before violent, extremist movements. This has fuelled resentment, for as a PTM leader pointed out on Sunday, if the state can negotiate with outfits known for their frequent use of violence to forward their claims — why is there no tolerance for the PTM's demands? The state's contradictory approach has also been questioned by the learned judges of the Supreme Court while hearing Mr Wazir's bail petition. Instead of creating fresh crises, the government needs to grant Ali Wazir bail and drop frivolous charges against the lawmaker, while

peaceful movements calling for basic rights must not be termed anti-national simply for disagreeing with the dominant narrative.

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Political games

THE political scene is heating up fast. With a flurry of important meetings happening in Islamabad and Lahore, and PTI allies breaking bread with opposition leaders, there is a fresh churn in static waters. The PDM and PPP leaders are certain that they can bring about a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan while the government is shrugging off this threat rather contemptuously. The major change in strategy of the opposition has come about after a significant shift in the stance of PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif. Till recently, his firm stance was that the only way out of the present quagmire was to hold fresh elections. The PPP, on the other hand, had been arguing that the most prudent way to bring about change was through a no-confidence vote against the prime minister. Maryam Nawaz Sharif has now officially said that Nawaz Sharif has changed his stance and has given the go-ahead to do whatever it takes to get the numbers game going. This has led PML-N president Shehbaz Sharif, PPP leader Asif Zardari and JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman to launch an aggressive political outreach towards all political stakeholders. The most significant meeting so far has been the one between Shehbaz Sharif and the leadership of the PML-Q.

The numbers game is, however, far from clear. On Monday, PML-Q leader and Federal Minister Chaudhry Moonis Elahi sent the opposition running back to the drawing board by telling Prime Minister Imran Khan at an event that his party stood firmly with the PTI and they should not get worried. Government spokespersons used this statement as evidence to argue that their allies were not aligning with the opposition. That may be the situation for now but the very fact that both the MQM and PML-Q have met Shehbaz Sharif holds significance.

The opposition is short of about eight members in order to muster the required strength of 172 to bring down the prime minister, but they argue that many among the PTI ranks are also supporting them. While many factors will determine if the figure of 172 comes within their reach, both the opposition and the government know full well that the deciding factor will be the role of the

establishment. The opposition says it just wants the establishment to remain neutral. The decision to actually move ahead with filing the vote of no-confidence will therefore depend primarily on the opposition's assessment of this neutrality. They are still smarting from the various losses they have suffered in the Senate despite having the numbers on their side. In this respect, the role of the Jahangir Tareen group becomes crucial. The group consists of more than two dozen ruling party MNAs and MPAs and their crossing over to the opposition benches could deal a fatal blow to the government. The coming days are crucial.

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What have we become?

IS there really no end to our days of shame? The savagery that we witnessed just two months ago in Sialkot erupted once again, this time in Mian Channu, Khanewal district, where, on Saturday, a violent mob bludgeoned to death a mentally ill man accused of desecrating holy verses.

Not content with that, they continued to beat the bloodied body of Mushtaq Rajput. The police could do nothing; it was from their custody that the victim had been snatched. They had failed to save a life, just as they had failed to save university student Mashal Khan in 2017, and Sri Lankan factory manager Priyantha Kumara — whose remains were repatriated with state honours — last December.

True, a day after the Khanewal lynching, the police did rescue a blasphemy suspect in Faisalabad from an angry mob that had surrounded his home. But their quick action here, and in some other cases, is overshadowed by a barbaric public mentality for which no law is a deterrent especially in matters of faith.

There is a reason for that — one that we have underscored on these pages time and again. Successive governments have capitulated to the rising forces of religious extremism. From the TLP that has laid siege to the capital on more than one occasion, to the murderous TTP that has left no stone unturned to target men, women, children and security forces, the rulers have been open to engaging with all. What more can strengthen the sense of impunity in the dark forces that are propelling this country towards collapse?

We all knew that the government would swing into 'action' after Khanewal. We've seen it before. Religious leaders condemned the incident. Police rounded up suspects. And while there were no state honours for Mushtaq Rajput who was buried in the local cemetery, the prime minister pledged to crack down with the full force of the law. On what though? The issue goes well beyond the misuse of the blasphemy law.

Certainly, parliamentarians and the ulema should discuss it and revisit it. But when there is anger and toxicity in a society that has been fed on flawed ideologies and regressive narratives fanned by the state, it is time to acknowledge that the damage done is more insidious and deep-rooted than we think. And it will be years before it can be reversed. Only when it realises the futility of resorting to quick fixes will the state be in a better position to fight extremism.

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Proposed SOE law

WITH the IMF preparing to keep a strict eye on every dollar that it plans to give Pakistan under its recently resumed \$6bn programme, it looks like the PTI government has its work cut out for it. Can anyone blame the global lender for being so distrustful of Islamabad's commitment to reforms agreed under its funding programme? Pakistan has entered into 13 IMF programmes since 1988 — the current bailout signed in 2019 being the latest — to tackle its repeated currency crises. Most programmes were abruptly abandoned midway without implementing the actions agreed to.

The PTI government is no exception. It tried to abandon the programme in April last year in order to pursue rapid growth to provide 'relief' to Pakistanis who are dealing with rising costs of living and unemployment. Its return to the IMF, which was preceded by the execution of five 'prior actions', including the withdrawal of substantial tax exemptions and the grant of absolute independence to the central bank, has left many wondering if the government can sustain the reform momentum after the end of the funding facility in September as the country enters election mode. This is not surprising if the Washington-based lender has tied the future financing of \$3bn under the programme to the implementation of more actions and the achievement of the targets.

That political expediency has kept successive governments from dealing with fundamental structural challenges faced by the country's economy is evident in the fact that no administration, military or civilian, has attempted to fix the state-owned enterprises — which have been a huge financial burden on the exchequer — despite being on almost every IMF programme agenda in the last three decades. However, things could be different this time. The IMF has linked the continuation of its programme to the parliamentary approval of a new SOE law, already introduced in the National Assembly last year, by the end of June. The proposed law does not suggest anything radical. Yet, if approved and implemented in letter and spirit, it would pave the way for ensuring transparent management and ultimately disinvestment or privatisation of most SOEs whose contingent liabilities at almost 8pc of GDP are posing considerable fiscal costs and risk to the country's debt sustainability. The progress on SOE reforms must reduce contingent liability risks and improve the business environment. PTI policymakers should have realised from their experience of the last few months the need for sustained progress on the SOE sector, energy and tax reforms — with or without the IMF — and reduction in the footprint of the state on the economy for stabilising the latter, improving domestic productivity and sustaining a faster growth rate. The government's commitment to stick to the economic reforms agenda beyond the IMF programme is going to determine whether its successor will need to turn to the lender of last resort for another bailout.

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Border security

THE interior minister of Iran, Ahmad Vahidi, has concluded an important and timely visit to Pakistan. He held meetings with Prime Minister Imran Khan, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa and Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid to discuss a wide range of issues but focusing primarily on border management matters. The two countries also decided to form a joint working group to deal with these matters. His visit has come at a time when Pakistan is facing renewed terror incidents in Balochistan. Earlier this month, coordinated attacks by Baloch militant groups on FC camps in Panjgur and Naushki led to the precious loss of lives of soldiers and officers. There have been other incidents of violence emanating from Afghanistan where TTP and various Baloch militant organisations are said to have found sanctuaries. Pakistan's border with Iran is relatively more secure but there are

concerns among Pakistani officials that some militant groups may also be crossing this border to launch terror attacks. The fencing of the border with Iran and Afghanistan is a mega project that is near completion and has helped in curtailing not just terrorism but also smuggling and narco-trafficking. However, as these recent incidents of terrorism show, there is much more that needs to be done.

It is a positive sign that high-level officials of Iran and Pakistan are in regular contact. The last few years have seen positive engagement between the two countries. Prime Minister Khan as well as army chief Gen Bajwa have visited Iran which shows the importance that Pakistan attaches to this relationship. Pakistan's diplomatic efforts have also resulted in excellent projects like the border markets that are now operating with success and providing a commercial lifeline to populations living in these remote areas. The challenge is to ensure that such positive engagement does not get adversely affected by fresh bouts of violence that can be connected to groups which can cross the border to escape the authorities. The joint working group can be useful in managing these day-to-day issues and coordinating efforts for counterterrorism. The Iranian authorities should also ensure that their soil is not used by terrorists to launch attacks inside Pakistani territory. Given the significance of the relationship, and the high stakes riding on it, both Pakistan and Iran must step up efforts to forge a tighter bond that is cemented by mutual advantages in all spheres of bilateral relations.

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Waiting for Australia

IT has taken time, much effort and a lot of convincing but when Australia arrive for their tour of Pakistan next month, it will be a watershed moment for the revival of international cricket in the country.

Since international cricket returned to Pakistan in 2015, six years after that unfortunate attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore, a smattering of teams have toured the country. But they certainly don't get bigger — and better — than Australia; and a full-strength Australia at that.

Almost the entire Australian squad that trounced England to win the Ashes will be travelling for the three-match Test series, which starts with the first game in

Rawalpindi. Similarly, their full-strength limited-overs squad featuring players who won the Twenty20 World Cup last year — beating Pakistan in the semi-finals en route to winning the title — is expected for the three one-day matches and the lone T20 in Australia's first tour of the country since 1998.

It will be the first time since early 2006 that a member of cricket's proverbial Big Three will visit the country after England withdrew from their tour last year and the successful hosting of the upcoming series will burnish Pakistan's credentials as an international venue. England are also due to tour Pakistan later this year.

To make the Australia tour successful though, the Pakistan Cricket Board will need to keep its word of improving the fan experience. With Covid-19 restrictions easing, it is expected that stadiums will be at full capacity for the matches. The PCB failed to pull in the crowds during the three-match T20 series against the West Indies in December. While the lack of star power in the touring team did contribute to the fans not turning up, PCB chairman Ramiz Raja admitted that the hindrances faced by cricket enthusiasts in even reaching Karachi's National Stadium were too many. Pakistan's cricket fans have yearned for long for this moment to arrive. Now it has to be ensured they are part of it.

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Altaf Hussain's acquittal

THERE is a surreal disconnect between the verdict returned on Tuesday in a London court and the lived reality of the millions who call Karachi home.

The 12-member jury in a majority verdict acquitted MQM supremo Altaf Hussain on two counts of "encouraging terrorism" under the UK's Terrorism Act 2006. The charges pertained to two separate speeches made by the self-exiled political leader via telephone to supporters in Karachi on Aug 22, 2016. In a statement to this paper, the law firm that represented Mr Hussain said: "... Today he has been vindicated by an English jury. Justice has been done."

Those who for decades suffered the violence that Mr Hussain repeatedly orchestrated at will in Pakistan's largest city even while sitting thousands of miles away, would beg to differ. It was well known that a mere phone call from London would suffice to mobilise MQM militants who would then proceed to paralyse commercial activities in Karachi on the point of a gun. However, the defence

argument that the jury arrive at its decision after applying “a different cultural yardstick” may have been a winning one.

“The way state actors, government, police, other state bodies [act is] completely different to what we experience here,” contended Mr Hussain’s lawyers. Evidently, residents of Karachi cannot aspire to a more civilised political culture than that which they were forced to endure for years on account of complex factors.

Among these, aside from the political expediency of military dictators Ziaul Haq and Pervez Musharraf, was also the Pakistani establishment and the West’s view of the MQM chief and the organisation over which he wielded an iron grip despite being in exile since 1992, as a ‘bulwark’ against religiously motivated extremists in Karachi. The party’s militant wing was thus enabled in creating an environment of fear and intimidation that left virtually no part of the city unaffected.

At the same time, the argument that the state here treats the people differently can be taken a little further. After Mr Hussain was banned from Pakistan’s airwaves following a tirade against the army in 2015, a year before making the speeches for which he was tried in the UK, efforts to cut the MQM down to size began in earnest. In reality, what was set in motion was a ‘minus-Altaf’ formula.

The state, instead of holding accountable those among the party leadership that were accused of serious crimes, which included ordering targeted killings of recalcitrant citizens, co-opted them in political arrangements to be activated when necessary — such as to play the role of spoilers in an election. All that has been achieved by these machinations is further disillusionment and a sense of disenfranchisement among Sindh’s Urdu-speaking populace. Those in the state apparatus that are incredulous at Mr Hussain’s acquittal should ask themselves why so many who have visited violence upon Karachi’s residents are roaming free.

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Polluted Ravi

THAT a study by a British university has found the Ravi that flows through Lahore and other cities of Punjab to be among the world’s three most polluted rivers is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, the detection of vast amounts of active

pharmaceutical ingredients or APIs, emitted during their manufacture, use and disposal into the river is extremely distressing. The study has found pharmaceutical particles including paracetamol, nicotine, caffeine and epilepsy and diabetes drugs in the river. The study conducted in 104 countries across the globe has detected the highest concentration of pharmaceutical pollution in the Ravi flowing through Lahore. This finding underscores the deteriorating quality of life for the city's over 11m residents. It is important to point out here that the provincial metropolis has consistently topped the list of world cities most affected by the winter air pollution. The Ravi did not become the environmentalists' worst nightmare overnight. Decades of unchecked discharge of untreated municipal and industrial wastewater, as well as solid waste along its banks, has virtually changed its definition: it would be more appropriate to call it a massive sewer than a life-sustaining river.

A commission set up by the Lahore High Court in 2012 had reported that 1,200-1,400 small to large industrial units were dumping their chemical and medical waste into the river. On top of that, India too has been diverting a large quantity of untreated toxic waste water into the river through the Hudiyara drain. The commission had recommended the imposition of heavy fines on the polluters and the construction of plants to treat urban and industrial waste water before the latter is discharged into the river. Unfortunately, no action has been taken since. The current government, that counts the conservation of the environment among its top priorities, says it plans to rescue the river by installing water treatment plants. But these plans hinge on the progress of its multibillion-dollar project to build a new Dubai-style city for the wealthy elite, which, environmentalists insist, will increase pollution rather than reduce it. The prime minister claims that the new Ravi city project will save the river. The question is why do plans to save the river have to be linked to this project? The discovery of substantial pharmaceutical pollution in and around the river basin demands immediate action by the government. It must clean up the river whether or not its controversial riverfront city project makes headway.

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Covid restrictions

WHILE it is fortunate that there is a marked improvement in the Covid-19 situation, the NCOC has thought it fit to extend the restrictions in the case of cities with a positivity rate of over 10pc. The cities include Karachi, Hyderabad, Gilgit, Muzaffarabad, Mardan and Peshawar. Among the other curbs it has announced, the NCOC has banned indoor dining and contact sports, while allowing public places including shrines, cinemas and gyms to operate at 50pc of their capacity — and only for those who have received their full dose of the Covid vaccine. The return to normality will depend to a large extent on following SOPS and receiving vaccinations, including booster shots, that the government has been stressing on for so long.

Even as we wait to return to a pre-Covid world, or embrace a new normality, opinions on the duration of the pandemic have been mixed. While a drop in infection rates has been witnessed in several countries in the most recent wave, and there are hopes that the pandemic is in its final stages, some scientists have raised the alarm. According to an infectious disease expert quoted by the Guardian a few days ago, “The idea that virus variants will continue to get milder is wrong. A new one could turn out to be even more pathogenic than the Delta variant, for example”. Perhaps it would be wise not to get our hopes up too much at this point. Apart from continuing with the Covid drill, we should also plan ahead. A look at all that has been adversely affected during the pandemic should lead to coordinated planning by the centre and the provinces in order to evolve strategies for safer living during the pandemic, and at minimal socioeconomic cost. Healthcare resources have been stretched thin, children have not been able to go to school, and jobs have been lost. A government that cares for its people will treat these hard times as lessons to be learned, and resolve to overcome its losses.

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Crushing oil prices

THE widespread public anger over the latest increase in domestic petrol and diesel prices was not unexpected. The hefty hike in motor fuel prices has already

stoked a fresh round of inflation, sending the cost of transport, food, clothing and other essential items to new heights, and causing more financial stress to households. The popular outrage against the soaring fuel costs is so cogent that even allies of the ruling PTI have been forced to demand the immediate withdrawal of the increase. The PTI's response has lacked compassion for a vast majority of households already struggling to make ends meet. A minister, for example, has advised people to "use as little fuel as possible". He didn't elaborate how. Should they stop going to work or sending their children to school? Other ministers blame the rising global oil prices for the hike in domestic fuel costs. Indeed, the recent surge in fuel costs this year has been primarily driven by geopolitical factors such as Russia's ongoing military build-up near Ukraine rather than anything in the government's control. The price of the benchmark Brent crude futures is closing in on \$100 per barrel, the highest since 2014. International oil market analysts are anticipating Brent will hit \$120 by June owing to Covid-related supply gaps. Yet the government cannot entirely blame global markets for the pain inflicted on motorists at the pumps.

Besides surging global oil prices, recent FBR data suggests that taxation on petroleum products is the other key factor responsible for the spike in domestic fuel costs. The FBR has collected Rs287bn in indirect taxes from petroleum products in the first seven months of the present fiscal, up by 72pc from a year ago. There is no doubt that the government has given the people some relief by forgoing part of its tax revenues on petroleum products. However, at the same time, it has imposed a 17pc sales tax on crude oil imports and doubled customs duty to 10pc in the budget. Additionally, it has agreed with the IMF to hike the petroleum levy by Rs4 a litre every month till it hits the ceiling of Rs30. That the share of taxes from petroleum products in the total FBR collection has jumped to 8.5pc from 6.5pc last year shows that it remains a major source of revenue generation for it.

The situation is difficult not only for consumers but also for the government since the surging prices in the international market and increasing oil imports are putting more pressure on our meagre foreign exchange reserves. Still, the government should think of further slashing taxes on petroleum products to provide the people some breathing space in a highly inflationary environment. Moreover, it must force the oil-marketing companies importing the bulk of their motor fuel inventories duty-free from China under the FTA to share at least half of this tax advantage with consumers.

High-handed tactics

EVEN for an administration known to be exceedingly thin-skinned, the PTI government's contempt for the freedom of speech has perhaps never been more obvious. And its over-the-top reactions make for bad optics and even poorer strategy.

On Wednesday morning, an FIA team raided the home of media personality Mohsin Baig and arrested him after he allegedly fired his gun at the law-enforcement personnel and roughed up some of them. The action was taken, as per the FIA, after Federal Communications Minister Murad Saeed filed an FIR in which he accused Mr Baig of committing offences against him under the cybercrime law.

Specifically, Mr Saeed's allegations pertain to a TV talk show on which the journalist had alluded to some controversial mention of him in a book by the prime minister's former wife, Reham Khan. The channel on which the programme had aired was reportedly taken off cable networks even before a show-cause notice had been issued by Pemra, as required by the law.

The media environment, and more broadly the right to freedom of speech, has become increasingly constricted in Pakistan. The PTI government's intolerance of dissent and its hostility towards the media has created a situation where journalists are seen as fair game for trolling, character assassination and worse.

Just the day before the raid, television host Syed Iqrarul Hassan levelled serious allegations against officials of the Intelligence Bureau. According to the journalist, the intelligence personnel detained him and his colleagues for hours at the agency's Karachi office after they attempted to expose an IB inspector's alleged corruption and subjected them to extreme torture and humiliation.

One can have reservations about Mr Hassan's brand of journalism, or indeed question whether the talk show host in the earlier cited instance should have stopped Mr Baig from going down the path he did. It can even be demanded of TV channels that they revisit their codes of conduct. But to resort to such high-handed tactics as those meted out to the journalists is completely unacceptable.

Unfortunately, the PTI itself is much to blame for the vulgar and boorish quality of political discourse increasingly on display. Even government ministers have

shown a shocking lack of restraint while making personal remarks about opposition members; yet they are easily offended when the tables are turned. Also, the PTI might consider the wisdom in picking such fights. Sometimes it is better to let sleeping dogs lie.

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Yemen toll

NEXT month marks the completion of the seventh year of the Yemen war, when the Saudi-led coalition intervened to support the government and dislodge the Iran-allied Houthi rebel movement that had taken Sana'a, the capital. For the people of Yemen, these seven years have proved to be a living nightmare, as death, hunger and disease have enveloped them from all sides, while there is no sign of hostilities ending. If anything, in recent days bloodshed has increased. UN officials have said that January saw the highest toll in three years, as over 650 civilians were either killed or wounded in the month. This included a devastating air strike on a detention centre in the northern Houthi stronghold of Saada, causing dozens of fatalities. That atrocity came in the wake of Houthi attacks on the UAE, in which at least three foreign workers — including a Pakistani — were killed. The UN's special envoy noted that there had been an "alarming increase" in air strikes, including those targeting residential areas in Yemen. While both sides have targeted non-combatants, the coalition's repeated attacks — despite having high-tech Western weaponry — have resulted in unacceptable civilian deaths. Moreover, millions in Yemen face famine in the midst of this brutal war.

The aim of the Saudi-led, Western-backed coalition was to restore the Yemeni government. Seven years down the line, this goal seems very difficult to attain in the present circumstances, with the Houthis firmly ensconced in their strongholds as well as the capital. Moreover, as the stalemate continues the conflict risks transforming into a regional war as the Houthis hit targets deeper inside the UAE and Saudi Arabia, while the coalition countries respond with ruinous air strikes targeting Yemen. For the sake of the people of Yemen, an immediate ceasefire needs to be declared by all Yemeni factions and foreign forces. Far too many lives have been lost in this pointless war, and only a negotiated power-sharing agreement, respected by all Yemeni factions and their foreign backers, can resolve the country's crisis.

Finish line in sight

IT is heartening that since Pakistan embarked in earnest upon the polio eradication drive in the mid-1990s, it has remained steadfast in doing its part to rid the world of this scourge. Its efforts are now being recognised. On Thursday, during his first visit to our shores, Bill Gates, whose co-run organisation the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has provided generous support to countries including Pakistan in their fight against the crippling virus, met Prime Minister Imran Khan as well as other government officials concerned with the campaign. Given the role played by the Foundation, he was awarded one of the country's highest civil awards. Shortly before the Microsoft co-founder's visit, this country's anti-polio efforts were in the news when the WHO's Regional Subcommittee on Polio Eradication and Outbreaks noted that the time was ripe for Pakistan to achieve complete eradication.

This country has managed through the years to keep its focus on the long-term vision regarding polio eradication, notwithstanding the considerable challenges. The latter have ranged from widespread vaccine hesitancy and dangerous misinformation to attacks on polio teams and those guarding them. Nevertheless, during the year past, just one case of wild poliovirus was detected (in Balochistan) — a historic low. Now, a final, concerted push is needed to finish off the job. The roadblocks are significant, such as those outlined above. There is also the problem of population movement, especially from across the frontier with Afghanistan which along with Pakistan is one of the two countries where the virus has not been eradicated. Mr Khan referred to the polio situation in Afghanistan when he spoke of the latter as being the “primary source of polio incidence” along the border. Since Pakistan and Afghanistan comprise a “single epidemiological block”, there is much that international polio initiatives can do across the border including persuading the Taliban regime to prioritise the cause. We stand at the brink of success. A final, coordinated push in both countries could win a decades-long war.

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Hostility to Aurat March

IT is that time of year once again when defenders of the patriarchy spring into action with spurious arguments to protect the status quo. This time, Minister for Religious Affairs Noorul Haq Qadri is leading the charge.

He has written to Prime Minister Imran Khan to ask him to ban Aurat March on International Women's Day — March 8 — and declare it as International Hijab Day, claiming that the women's rally held annually to mark the UN-designated occasion contravenes religious principles. Interestingly, the minister in his letter dated Feb 9 acknowledges the importance of International Women's Day in raising awareness of women's rights, but then proceeds to decry as un-Islamic the banners and slogans that often feature at the Aurat March.

This is not only a specious assertion, but a dangerous one in a country already dangerous for women — where a man who murdered his celebrity sister walked free recently, one among many other 'honour killers' who will never see the inside of a prison long enough to pay for their crime. Here there are laws aplenty to protect women, from sexual harassment, domestic violence etc, but regressive social mores and an apathetic legal system remain major obstacles to implementing them. Millions of girls are condemned to a lower quality of life, simply on account of being born female.

According to the latest Gender Parity Index, in which we regularly feature near the bottom, at the current rate it will take 136 years to close the gender gap in Pakistan. And yet, every year without fail, conservative segments balk at the prospect of peaceful rallies of women demanding their rights as enshrined in the Constitution. The opportunistic co-opting by the minister of the hijab row in India simply underscores the illogic of his position. Aurat March advocates women's agency — to pursue a career, to select a life partner, or indeed, to wear the hijab or not. Participants at the annual event, carrying their diverse slogans, illustrate precisely this inclusive, non-judgemental stance.

The government is led by a party which used to take pride in its vocal female support base, one that regularly showed up at its months-long dharna in 2014. The PTI should rein in the retrogressive voices within its ranks and express support for the Aurat March. Yesterday, the president of JUI-F's Islamabad

chapter openly threatened physical violence to disrupt the march. Clearly, misogynistic elements such as these will stop at nothing.

Last year, the lives of march organisers and participants were put at risk by a particularly vicious disinformation campaign. The government is responsible for the protection of all those engaging in their democratic right to protest on March 8. Unlike other recent protests that were met with kid glove treatment by the state, at least the Aurat March will not be the cause of death and mayhem on the streets.

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Gas price disparity

THE passage of the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Second Amendment) Bill must allow the government to implement the weighted average cost of gas to remove the large price disparity between local and imported gas, an anomaly that is adversely impacting the financial sustainability of the two state-owned gas companies. It should also help the authorities increase the import of LNG to cover the growing supply gaps due to rapidly depleting local gas reserves, as well as improve the efficiencies of the power sector. Indeed, it will raise the cost of the fuel for industrial, commercial and residential consumers but will, at the same time, afford the government an opportunity to gradually phase out its huge subsidy expense bill on imported gas. A few weeks ago, the energy minister had stated that gas prices are estimated to rise by 30pc over the next several years. Currently, imported LNG forms about 24pc of the country's total gas consumption, with its share likely to surge to 50pc in two years and up to 80pc to 90pc in another few as local supplies dry up and demand rises.

Increasing gas prices, especially for residential users, will be a tough decision for the government to make despite parliamentary approval of the law in view of the fast-approaching elections, but it is crucial for the financial sustainability of the gas sector and for making expensive LNG imports feasible. The supply of substantially subsidised imported LNG to wealthy textile factory owners and residential customers is contributing to the soaring inter-corporate debt in the gas sector, which is unofficially estimated to have spiked to Rs535bn at the end of FY21. A recent government estimate suggests that it will pay Rs40bn in subsidies in the first quarter of FY22 on LNG supply to textile and other

exporters. Likewise, the consumption of LNG by residential consumers at a fraction of its import price is said to have contributed Rs100bn to the inter-corporate debt in the last three years. There is no doubt that the financial burden on both industrial and residential consumers of the imported gas will continue to go up with the increase in the share (and import price) of LNG in overall domestic gas supplies. But the trade-offs are always difficult to make. The alternative in this case has to be rationing of the fuel for different consumers at a much greater cost.

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Turning on the heat

THE country's politics is dominated by the hectic efforts of the opposition to bring about a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan. The feverish activity surrounding the issue and the flurry of meetings and consultations between various opposition leaders and government allies is giving rise to a perception that the opposition has something up its sleeve.

This perception is fuelled further by confident statements coming from various opposition members who continue to say that the days of the PTI government are numbered. Such a prediction is in fact linked to numbers.

For the vote of no-confidence to succeed the opposition has to show a strength of 172 members in the National Assembly. The opposition leaders are keeping their cards close to their chest and very few seem to know what numbers are at play within this strategy.

Various options have been discussed. These entail either some of the government's allies crossing the floor to join the opposition, or some members of the ruling PTI switching sides. The opposition says many such members are in touch with them because they believe that their chances of winning their seat in the next general elections are much brighter if they ditch the PTI ticket in favour of a PML-N one. This is easier said than done because the PML-N has its own candidates in almost all constituencies of Punjab.

Negotiations are said to be underway. Despite this confidence, the opposition again suffered a defeat in the Senate earlier this week which goes to show that its parliamentary position remains vulnerable despite it enjoying a majority in the

Upper House. The opposition has undertaken a risky route to oust Mr Khan given that a vote of no-confidence against a sitting prime minister has not succeeded in the past.

Yet the government is nervous. Perhaps for good reason too. The meetings of its allies with the opposition have not led to any definitive outcome as yet but the very fact that the allies were willing to engage in such contact is itself a source of concern for the government.

In addition, it also knows that estranged leader and the PTI's former secretary general Jahangir Tareen has also shown the support of more than two dozen parliamentarians belonging to the ruling party. He too is in a position to bring the required numbers to the opposition's side if he chooses to do so.

The government is vulnerable on many fronts and knows it. Signs of this nervousness are gradually becoming visible. The sudden decision to give more cabinet seats to allies in the federal and Punjab governments, the public outreach by the prime minister, fresh attacks on opponents and the aggressive actions against critics like Mohsin Baig are all clear indications that the government is feeling the pressure.

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Naval drills

INTERESTING, and indeed dangerous, developments are taking place in the region, and Pakistan will have to respond with alacrity and foresight to meet the challenges ahead. Arab countries are establishing fast friendships with the state of Israel — a country that Pakistan, along with others, does not recognise — while attempts are being made to strengthen the anti-Iran alliance under the American umbrella. The recent US-led International Maritime Exercise, a set of naval manoeuvres, this year saw some strange bedfellows, as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Israel were amongst the 60 countries that participated. While the UAE and Bahrain, which also took part, have recently experienced warm ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia has yet to recognise the Jewish state publicly, while Pakistan has also held back recognition as long as the Palestine question remains unresolved. It can easily be assumed that the naval exercise is part of a series of soft steps by the US and our Arab allies to push Pakistan closer to recognising

Israel. As this paper has said before, this prospect should only be considered if the Palestinians are on board, more specifically if a just solution acceptable to the Arab side is reached. Otherwise, it would be akin to rewarding Israel for decades of brutal behaviour meted out to the Palestinians. Secondly, if this is an attempt to drag Pakistan into an anti-Iran alliance, this country must remain wary and stay away from any such misadventure.

The Israeli prime minister was recently in Bahrain on a 'landmark' visit, around the time the naval drills were happening, and Iran was on top of the agenda. Moreover, an Israeli naval officer will now be stationed in Bahrain, literally across the water from Iran. Pakistan must keep a safe distance from such dangerous brinksmanship and let it be known publicly that it will not be part of any anti-Iran coalition. If things get uglier in the region, Washington as well as the Gulf sheikhdoms may pressure Pakistan, but this country must stand firm and do what is in its best interest. Pakistan did the right thing by staying away from the ruinous Yemen war, despite immense pressure applied on it by Arab capitals. Seven years down the line, as that war shows no sign of ending, this country's stand has been vindicated. Instead of joining any partisan alliances, Pakistan must maintain its neutrality, and try and bridge differences between Iran and the Arab states.

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Banks' lending decisions

IN a wider context, a Senate panel's clearance of a bill seeking to amend the law governing banking companies reflects the general frustration at the way banks and other financial institutions discriminate against loan-seekers on the basis of their jobs or professions while making credit decisions. The proposed bill recommends imprisonment and fines for bank executives denying any borrower, including politicians, a banking service on the basis of their social or economic class. The panel has rightly pointed out that the refusal of credit and other banking services for any reason other than the creditworthiness of borrowers or other criteria prescribed by the State Bank amounts to a violation of the fundamental, constitutional rights of citizens.

But the proposed bill will not right the wrongs being done by the banks. Rather, the suggested punishments for bank executives will put needless pressure on

them and hurt the quality of their credit decisions. In 2008, a Delhi court had slammed Indian banks for denying clean loans and credit cards to professionals such as lawyers and journalists on the basis of what in banking jargon is known as ‘negative profile’, even if they were of sound financial standing and fulfilled other criteria. The judge had called it an “act of corporate authoritarianism”, rejecting the defence plea that banks had the discretion to choose their customers. But no one in India felt the need to bring new laws or punish bank executives. The court had directed bankers to follow the central bank’s guidelines in this regard, and consider the “financial standing and creditworthiness” of the loan-seekers while making lending decisions. The same principle should be applied here as well, with the State Bank issuing instructions to banks to give their customers the reasons for the rejection of their applications in writing. Banks that are found to be violating the criteria laid down by the central bank or discriminating out of social or economic reasons should be penalised to ensure that everyone gets a fair deal.

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Acquittal of Qandeel’s killer

WHEN the man guilty of perhaps the most high-profile ‘honour killing’ in the country walks free, what message does that send to those who believe that women who do not abide by ‘accepted’ social norms deserve to be put to death?

The acquittal of Mohammed Wasim in the 2016 murder of his sister, Qandeel Baloch, is a travesty. Soon after the murder, he had confessed to having drugged and strangled the social media star at her home. In the full glare of TV cameras, he claimed he had slain his sister for “having brought dishonour to the Baloch name” with the risqué images of herself that she posted on social media. In fact, he wore the blood on his hands with pride, saying he was not in the least ashamed of what he had done.

In September 2019, a court sentenced Wasim to life in prison, having found that the prosecution had proven its case beyond a reasonable doubt. The judge exercised his discretion as allowed under the law to sentence him to prison regardless of the fact that the parents of the accused had forgiven him by then — something often, outrageously enough, sufficient to allow murderers to walk free.

Soon after Qandeel's murder, which sparked outrage across the country, legislators had passed an amendment to the law. The amendment was an attempt to close the loophole whereby the perpetrator of an honour killing could evade punishment, because the crime, like other types of murder, is a compoundable offence — meaning a crime where a compromise could be effected between the victim's heirs and the culprit. Given that in honour killings, the families of the victim and perpetrator are the same, this is contrary to the very notion of justice.

Under the new law, if there is no compromise or the judge rejects the compromise, a mandatory life sentence is to be imposed. That was an improvement on the earlier law, but clearly, as the latest development shows, it did not go far enough. The outcome in such cases remains unpredictable and the relevant law needs further revision.

The reasoning given by the LHC in its verdict acquitting Wasim includes the following: "No doubt that in the last line [of the confession] he gave a reason of murder of his sister ... but still it does not mean that murder was on the pretext of honour killing as the same was not specifically pleaded by the appellant in his alleged confession."

The government has announced it is "reviewing options" in light of the acquittal. Perhaps it is time for legislators to consider making deliberate murder, whether on the pretext of honour or not, a non-compoundable offence. Only then will those with money and clout be prevented from walking free after taking a life. Surely there must be a price to pay for this most awful of crimes.

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Gujarat sentences

AN Indian court in Gujarat has awarded capital punishment to 38 men for serial bomb blasts in Ahmedabad that killed 57 in July 2008. It is the highest number of death sentences handed in a single trial in India. The convicts were accused of seeking to avenge the mass murder of Muslims in the 2002 Gujarat pogroms. They were accused of having links with a shadowy group of extremists — the Indian Mujahideen, with alleged cross-border links. An appeal is due in the high court and the matter could eventually find its way to the supreme court. It cannot

but be noticed that the Gujarat court's bloodlust in handing down the death sentence to over three dozen men in one go has come at a time when Prime Minister Narendra Modi is desperately canvassing for support along communal lines in tough elections underway in five states, including the prized state of Uttar Pradesh. That Indian law courts of late are being tweaked to accord with the right-wing majoritarian politics of the day rather than securing secular justice for the harassed and hounded masses is not lost on the world. Four supreme court justices had to go public to express their fears for the independence of the judiciary in an increasingly corrosive political climate.

The Gujarat verdict appears to be a new normal in a self-induced climate of blood and mayhem that India is going through — and a significant departure from the time when the family of Rajiv Gandhi would appeal for clemency to the convicts on death row in the former prime minister's brutal murder. In the new normal, politically chuffed sadhus and their powerful patrons can be seen calling for genocide of the Muslims without any agency mandated to keep law and order looking one bit concerned. In the new normal, a daily barrage of mindlessly conjured symbols of hatred mainly targeting Muslims, Christians, Dalits and even Sikhs are served up to a people who have barely recovered from their trauma of lost livelihoods and of far too many family members dead, including those abandoned on river banks or succumbing on footpaths for want of oxygen cylinders, falling prey equally to the deadly pandemic and to official apathy. India started out as a promising democracy that proudly flaunted its cultural mix and its formidable religious mosaic. The right-wing lurch has singed its core institutions, among them, sadly, its judiciary.

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Taxing tobacco products

OF the many health scourges that the modern world must contend with, perhaps the most insidious, and therefore all the more difficult to contain, is the consumption of tobacco, particularly in cigarettes. Developed countries have made fair progress in raising awareness about and curbing the menace. On the other hand, developing countries have tended to lag behind, despite their efforts. Pakistan, for example, made a promising start several years ago when some interventions were put in place to curtail the easy availability of tobacco products

and increase knowledge about the dangers of their use. These include a ban on smoking in public places, pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs and severe restrictions on sale to minors. How far this country has yet to go, however, was spelt out at a seminar organised by the Pakistan National Heart Association held in Islamabad on Friday. Presenting data from a 2021 study conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Panah representatives emphasised that the use of tobacco products cost the country Rs615bn a year in terms of loss of productivity and the burden on the healthcare system. Meanwhile, the revenue collected through this channel is a mere Rs120bn. And yet, no increased taxes have been imposed on this sector over the past three years.

The economic argument, while compelling, presents just part of the picture. In Pakistan, tobacco claims over 170,000 lives every year — health and potential lost needlessly because of an addiction that brings even the addicts little joy. The power of the tobacco lobby globally is considerable as is the peer pressure that leads many young people to become hooked for life. For these very reasons, foolproof laws and stringent enforcement are needed in every country to stamp out the practice. Raising taxes and therefore making these products discouragingly expensive is the most obvious route, in addition to the measures already in place. With the population skewed heavily towards the young, Pakistan simply cannot afford to let this scourge continue.

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Killing free speech

THE PTI government has triggered another controversy by promulgating a presidential ordinance that is a clear threat to the freedom of expression. On Sunday, Law Minister Farogh Nasim had announced in a press conference that the ordinance amended the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act that had originally been legislated by the PML-N government in 2016.

At that time too, media and civil society organisations had protested the contents of the law and warned that it would be used to curtail the space for free speech. The PTI government has now gone many steps ahead in making this draconian law even more restrictive; its scope has been broadened to include state institutions, like the military and judiciary, as aggrieved parties.

The latest amendments give the authorities the powers to arrest anyone accused of promoting or broadcasting fake news. The courts will have six months to decide whether or not the complaint is genuine but during this period the accused is liable to remain in incarceration unless given bail. This means that anyone can be arrested by the authorities on vague charges. This can lead to wild accusations resulting in random detentions.

Frustration at the government's refusal to budge on the matter was visible yesterday when the country's top media bodies walked out of a meeting with the information ministry.

Such laws have no place in a democratic society. However, with each passing day, it is becoming increasingly clear that the PTI government is making a mockery of democratic norms. The inexplicable postponement of the session of the National Assembly by the government now makes sense — it was done so that this draconian ordinance could be promulgated, bypassing parliament. It is ironic that the government is resorting to such high-handed tactics to silence its critics when the world is moving towards decriminalising defamation as an issue. The mal-intent of the government is thinly disguised.

Editorial: The govt is vulnerable on many fronts and knows it

The raid on the house of media personality Mohsin Baig and the manner of his arrest indicates that the government intends to use Peca to hound people in this manner. Armed with these latest amendments, it can run amok and unleash a wave of repression against those who do not validate its point of view. This casts a dark shadow on the state of constitutional democracy in Pakistan and makes the citizens vulnerable to greater persecution.

The amendment is a crude attempt by the PTI government to browbeat its opponents and it must not be allowed get away with it. The opposition, media, civil society and all segments of the citizenry must exercise their democratic rights to oppose this ordinance and ensure that it is rolled back. The judiciary too must play its role to ensure that the government is not allowed to trample on the constitutional rights of citizens for its narrow vested interests. Peca is a bad law. It should not be made worse.

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Regional trade

THAT Razzak Dawood, Pakistan's top commerce official, favours the resumption of trade with India supports speculation that the two neighbours might be engaged in behind-the-scenes talks to improve bilateral ties. He is of the view that both countries should revive trade ties, which were terminated in the wake of India's cancellation of autonomy for occupied Kashmir in 2019, since it is advantageous for all, especially Pakistan. Earlier this month, top businessman Mian Mohammad Mansha had also expressed similar views, saying that ongoing backchannel talks between the two states could yield positive results. It is encouraging to see both government officials and businessmen supporting improvement in bilateral relations and regional trade in South Asia, one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. It is an established fact that regional trade is one of the most crucial tools for economic progress and increased competitiveness of countries in various parts. According to a 2018 World Bank report on trade among the Saarc nations, Pakistan and India "collectively represented 88pc of the regional GDP, but the trade between them was valued at a little over \$2bn". This could be as high as \$37bn, it added.

That intraregional trade in South Asia is among the lowest at about 5pc of the total trade compared with 50pc for East Asia and the Pacific regions means that it could be a while before impoverished Saarc can reap the benefits of shared land borders. Multiple factors including tariffs and para tariffs, real or perceived non-tariff barriers, broader trust deficit, political and territorial disputes, terrorism and higher connectivity costs have prevented Saarc nations from trading with one another. But the long-standing Kashmir dispute between Islamabad and New Delhi is the single-most important reason for the negligible regional economic connectivity. This has forced Pakistan and other Saarc countries to look towards the West and elsewhere for trade prospects. There's growing realisation across the region that stronger trade ties and mutual economic dependence can over time build an environment of mutual trust, and help neighbours settle their political and territorial disputes in an amicable manner. Europe understood this after fighting two world wars and eventually coalesced into a large, strong economic bloc with a single, common currency. Why can't South Asian states learn from its example and collectively work for the future of their two billion citizens? This will not happen overnight but the revival of trade across Wagah could be a first step.

Unsafe city

AN epidemic of street crime has afflicted Karachi, but other than issuing statements, the authorities seem helpless as armed thugs loot and pillage across the city at will. Moreover, it appears that criminals are getting ever more brazen, almost taunting the law enforcers to try and stop them.

A particularly appalling episode occurred on Saturday night, when armed crooks set up a picket on the Korangi Causeway and looted citizens. While police say around a dozen commuters were held up, social media reports claim nearly 100 people were looted. Though the artery links a major industrial area with the rest of the city, parts of it are pitch dark at night due to non-functional street lights, thus creating 'ideal' conditions for muggers to waylay commuters.

This is just one of countless spots in the city where armed criminals are active. Another tragedy illustrating the seriousness of the street crime wave was the brutal murder of Athar Mateen in North Nazimabad last week, as the media man was gunned down reportedly while trying to prevent a mugging bid.

In a city where a large number of policemen and Rangers personnel are available, it is difficult to understand how armed criminals manage to rule the streets. One of the reasons cited for the recent change of Karachi's police chief was rising street crime. Indeed, the figures don't paint a rosy picture.

According to one report, at least 16 people have been killed in street crime incidents in the current year while the CPLC says over 13,000 have been robbed of cars, motorcycles and mobile phones this year. Over 50,000 instances of street crime occurred last year.

It is obvious that urgent measures are needed to crack down on gangs of street criminals. Successful models of eliminating violent mugging and armed robbery used by more advanced police forces elsewhere should be replicated in Karachi to put an end to this epidemic of crime, and help protect the lives and property of helpless citizens.

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Ordinances replace debate

THE ECP's apprehension about the new ordinance that amends the election law is understandable. The controversial move paves the way for parliamentarians and elected office-holders to campaign during elections, making it very easy for the state machinery to be used to influence the outcome of the polls.

It is a prospect that, on the face of it, might appeal to politicians on both sides of the aisle, as it would allow government as well as opposition legislators to canvass for candidates of their choosing in various local bodies, provincial or National Assembly elections. But this, according to the ECP, contravenes the law that assigns the task of framing a code of conduct for the polls to the commission.

And yet, even if this somewhat amoral decision had to be taken, in whatever 'greater national interest' the government had in mind, it would have been far more appropriate to at least take on board all stakeholders and evolve a consensus, which might have lent the move a veneer of legitimacy.

Since coming to power in 2018, the PTI has regrettably placed greater reliance on presidential ordinances to bring in laws of its own liking. By one reckoning, this government has introduced more than 75 such measures since 2018. In the same period, 376 bills were laid before the Lower House, of which 108 were passed into law while 126 await the assent of the Upper House.

It is true that the Constitution asserts that if the president is "satisfied that circumstances exist which render it necessary to take immediate action", he may promulgate a law through an ordinance. But this provision exists in anticipation of an extraordinary situation and cannot be a substitute for the process of debate, consideration and voting that any draft law put before parliament undergoes.

Unfortunately, bypassing elected representatives to approve a contentious law has become something of a norm for the PTI government. It has been especially apparent in the case of the electoral process and the absence of robust parliamentary discussions on measures to align the conduct of elections with the spirit of democracy.

For instance, the Constitution asserts that the prime minister must consult the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly on ECP nominations. However,

the PM's public refusal to engage with the opposition leader has delayed appointments. Such obduracy leads to situations where key decisions, which are supposed to have the input of all stakeholders, are being made unilaterally.

The reason consultations on key appointments are legally mandated is because it is always better to have the buy-in of all political actors before embarking on a legislative route that is viewed as contentious or difficult. If Prime Minister Imran Khan and his team stop shadow-boxing with the past and look to plot their own course, things would run much smoother.

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'Missing' girls

THE data on the 'missing' girls from Sargodha — and its adjoining districts — recovered by the police since Jan 5 confirms that Pakistan's girl abduction crisis is worse than most of us think. The Sargodha police claim that they had recovered, or traced, 151 girls who went missing over an unspecified period of time, maintaining that the vast majority of them were now living as married women while 21 had been rescued from brothel houses across Punjab. The data was submitted to a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court, hearing the case of the disappearance of an 18-year-old woman in August 2020. She is yet to be traced in spite of the arrest of 16 suspects. The staggering numbers also surprised the judges, who deemed the abductions a failure of the police, forcing Justice Maqbool Baqir to remark that it was "a matter of great abuse" that despite FIRs the recovery was so lax.

That the police had started to pursue these disappearance cases only after the court had ordered them to shows that they aren't doing enough about the increasing number of young girls or women who go missing from different parts of the province. Since the missing girls and women usually belong to underprivileged families, the law enforcers don't even recognise their disappearance as cases of abduction. In most instances, the police don't register FIRs let alone investigate the cases. The majority of such cases are dismissed as 'elopements' without an inquiry. Few are treated as kidnappings and even fewer are investigated. None of such incidents are considered part of the growing internal or external sex trafficking networks operating in the country. It is hard to give an exact number for girls abducted for, or lured into, sex trafficking since we

have little data on this scourge as these incidents remain underreported or are registered by police under crimes unrelated to trafficking. But the number taken for sex trafficking must be very large as is revealed by the Sargodha police data. A 2021 US Department of State report on trafficking in persons in Pakistan also points out that the country does not “fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of internal — and external — trafficking” and that the law-enforcement agencies accord low priority to combating this menace. Unless the law enforcers start treating such abductions as cases of trafficking in persons and ramp up efforts to match the scale of the problem, the crisis will keep worsening.

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Reviving Iran deal

AS negotiations in Vienna enter their final stretch, there is indeed hope that the Iran nuclear deal may be revived, paving the way for the resolution of one of the Middle East’s major crises. The Iranian foreign ministry’s spokesman told the media on Monday, talks have made “significant progress” though he added the caveat that nothing is final “until everything is agreed”. The Iranian official also observed that the remaining issues were the “hardest”. According to the details available, Iran is expected to regain access to billions of dollars in funds frozen because of the near collapse of the deal following Donald Trump’s unilateral withdrawal from the agreement, while it is expected to free Western prisoners. Indeed, the renewal of the deal may help improve the currently tense situation in the Middle East as Tehran, the Arabs and the West engage with each other to resolve their differences. However, for the deal to succeed, Iran should have access to world markets, especially for its petrochemical products, and crushing sanctions should be lifted. Moreover, it would be unwise for the West to couple the nuclear issue with concerns over Iran’s support for groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis. Clumping all these issues will only complicate matters, and efforts to revive the nuclear deal may collapse once more.

Of course, there will be irritants standing in the way of peace between Iran and the West. For example, the Israeli foreign minister has been quoted as saying that “we are more unhappy with (the emerging) deal”. Israel’s unhappiness here is immaterial, as it is not a party to the deal, while it has no leg to stand on as it is

believed to be the only nuclear-armed state in the Middle East currently. Western negotiators must not be swayed by hostile anti-Iran rhetoric and should give Tehran a fair deal if they expect its cooperation. Meanwhile, it is incumbent on Iran to consider the best deal available in the interests of peace.

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In choppy seas

WITH chances growing of a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan, the leadership of the ruling PTI has assigned to its governments in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa the responsibility of reaching out to disgruntled party lawmakers. The objective is to remove their grievances and keep them from supporting the combined opposition's move.

On his return from Moscow, the prime minister is also likely to open communication channels with his estranged friend and party leader, Jahangir Khan Tareen. Although he has fallen out with his leader, Mr Tareen still has a significant hold over a number of national and provincial PTI legislators from Punjab and could prove to be the decisive factor in the success or otherwise of the opposition's efforts to bring down Mr Khan.

Officially, PTI leaders have dismissed the opposition's efforts against him as a 'storm in a teacup'. They have maintained that the government can easily defeat such a motion. Some claim that many opposition lawmakers have already promised to support the ruling party in case of a no-trust motion.

It is difficult to say who — the PTI or the combined opposition — enjoys the support of the majority of the lawmakers in the National Assembly, but it is clear that Mr Khan is skating on thin ice at the moment. Chances of his government successfully bringing back dissenters at this stage do not appear too bright. Apparently, angry PTI lawmakers, who were lured away from the PML-N and PPP just before the 2018 elections with the help of the establishment, have already made their decision, otherwise the opposition parties would not look so confident. As far as PTI allies PML-Q and the MQM are concerned, they will not take too long to switch sides if they see the PM standing on weak ground.

If the opposition is successful in its plans, the PTI would have no one but itself to blame. In its rule of three-and-a-half years so far, the government has made

many mistakes, both political and economic. Rather than taking responsibility and improving his party's performance, Mr Khan has blamed his government's failings on the opposition. That's not all. Close friends and colleagues have been thrown under the bus for the failures of the administration. Mr Tareen is one such example.

There are others who feel hurt because they were denied political positions they were expecting before the party's ascension to power or a share in development funds for their constituencies. Some have long been voicing their concerns over the political fallout of the rising cost of living due to elevated food prices and general inflation on the party's chances in 2023. However, Mr Khan is not one to acknowledge danger even when it is clear and present. This approach has paid off in the past. But will it in the weeks and months to come?

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Peca amendment

THE courts have already given an indication, it seems, as to the legal merits of the reprehensible amendment to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, made by the PTI government via an ordinance last week. While hearing a petition filed by the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists against the move, the Islamabad High Court yesterday restrained the FIA from making arrests under Peca's Section 20, which gives the law-enforcement agency a wider ambit following the amendment. Among effecting other changes that have rendered a draconian law even more so, the ordinance makes online defamation a non-bailable, cognisable offence and increases the jail term to a maximum of five years. It is the kind of legislation that only the most autocratic regimes still have on their statute books. The claim by government spokespersons that the amendment is needed to counter 'fake news' is in itself disinformation at its most egregious. A paranoid dispensation is leaving no stone unturned to muzzle any critical voice against it. However, the path it has taken is likely to boomerang, as inevitably does all legislation that goes against constitutionally protected rights.

Some saner voices in the government are urging it to take a different direction. Among them, in fact, is none other than Federal Minister for IT & Telecommunication Syed Amin Ul Haque, which indicates that a few select individuals were behind the ill-thought-out move. In a letter to the prime minister,

he has suggested that the government withdraw or review the ordinance. "...It is through the media that the government is able to project its image to the public. By pushing forward with these amendments without consulting the relevant stakeholders, in this case media practitioners, the government will stoke anger and resentment within the journalistic community. ... It is only through dialogue and deliberation that media practitioners and the government can establish procedures to curtail fake news... ." Even the country's top law official, Attorney General for Pakistan Khalid Javed Khan, while speaking to a news channel, said that the ordinance "will be draconian if it comes into force as it is", adding that it will be regulated before implementation. That does not inspire confidence, and it should not. The very existence of such a law is a travesty, aside from making a mockery of all that Imran Khan and his party colleagues had to say about it when it was first enacted by the PML-N government.

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Rangers in Karachi

PERHAPS rattled by the public outcry against the recent wave of murders and armed muggings, numerous solutions are being offered by those in power to tackle Karachi's street crime epidemic. Among these is Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed's offer to post paramilitary Rangers at the city's police stations. The minister's proposal came after a PTI MPA from Sindh wrote to him highlighting Karachi's lawlessness. This is an unimpressive solution, and at best a stop-gap one. After all, the Rangers have been deployed in the city since the late 1980s, when ethnic and political violence resulted in a breakdown in law and order. Despite the force's decades-long deployment, there has been no noticeable difference in Karachi's crime rates, save for a few patches of calm. Moreover, this city in the past has also seen army deployment and curfews to control rioting and bloodshed. While the use of military and paramilitary forces may give temporary relief, these are not long-term solutions to control violent crime in the metropolis.

Only an effective police force can curb street crime and to make efforts towards this end Sindh's police force must be revamped. Senior officers themselves have admitted to the presence of black sheep in the force. Strict checks on performance are required, with any policeman found to be involved in illegal

activity being shown the door. Moreover, the concept of community policing needs to be introduced, where officers familiar with the city's neighbourhoods are deployed to keep a check on crime and interact with citizens. Moreover, the force needs to be staffed with well-trained, dedicated and honest police officers who have a passion for public service; unfortunately, so long as the police remains under political influence, such officers may not become a permanent feature of the force. To control the immediate severity of the street crime crisis, help can perhaps be taken from the Rangers. But in the long run, effective and sustainable police reforms are the only solution to the problem.

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Ukraine invasion

UNLESS speedy efforts at de-escalation are made, the crisis in Ukraine has the potential to morph into a catastrophic conflict that will consume Europe. Early on Thursday, Russia launched an invasion of its western neighbour — a move the US and its European allies had been predicting for weeks.

The background behind the hostilities is lengthy, as Cold War-era ghosts have seemingly been revived in a new confrontation pitting the West against Russia. In a nutshell, Russia has not been happy with growing Western overtures towards Ukraine — with Moscow and Kyiv both being former components of the Soviet Union — and had been warning that any attempts to include Ukraine in Nato would entail consequences.

However, the Ukrainian government and its Western supporters had vowed to take their relationship forward. The immediate trigger for the hostilities has been Russia's intervention on behalf of breakaway pro-Moscow elements in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, whom Vladimir Putin claims have been subject to "genocide by the Kyiv regime".

With regard to Pakistan's position in this conflict, Imran Khan is the first world leader to meet Mr Putin in the aftermath of the invasion. While the timing of the prime minister's Russia visit is unfortunate, the prime minister did use the opportunity to express his concern over the situation. Clearly, Pakistan needs to maintain its neutrality. The invasion, and any subsequent military showdown

between the West and Russia, will likely reignite the bloc politics of the Cold War, and Pakistan needs to play its cards right and avoid taking partisan positions.

Meanwhile, the war rhetoric is menacing. Mr Putin has warned that attempts to take on Russia will be met with an “instant” response while US President Joe Biden has threatened to “hold Russia accountable”. Comparisons are also being made to World War II, in which the Russian people suffered immensely. The prospects are, therefore, grim and chances for a larger conflict strong.

It is true that neither side is without blame here. Russia should not have launched the assault targeting a sovereign country, while the Western side also failed to show maturity and engaged in sabre-rattling where diplomatic foresight was required. Russia should accept that the USSR is history and its former components are free to chart their own destinies, without needing permission from Moscow.

For its part, Nato too needs to shed its Cold War mentality and dispel the impression that it is trying to surround Russia from all sides. Hostilities must be ended forthwith, while a ceasefire needs to take effect. Russia should recall its troops, while the West needs to support de-escalation efforts. Unless a wiser course is taken, a conflict of global proportions cannot be ruled out, with nuclear-armed adversaries trying to flex their muscles in public view. The UN and non-aligned states must act swiftly to prevent a dangerous conflagration.

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Verdict delivered

ONE of the most closely watched murder trials in Pakistan’s recent history has ended and, given the circumstances of the gruesome case, the verdict is largely what many hoped for.

A court in Islamabad yesterday handed down the death penalty to Zahir Jaffer, the principal accused in the murder of Noor Mukadam, and sentenced two co-defendants, both members of his household staff, to 10 years in prison.

All others, including Zahir’s parents and six Therapy Works employees, were acquitted. The case had kept the nation in thrall ever since 27-year-old Noor was

found slain and decapitated in the capital city on July 20 at the perpetrator's residence.

The CCTV videos that surfaced later offered incontrovertible, and heartbreaking, evidence of how Noor had tried to repeatedly flee the house but was dragged back inside each time by Zahir, with the gardener and watchman — who were convicted yesterday — helping to send the woman to her death.

During the course of the investigation and trial several issues surfaced in the public discourse, including violence against women, the criminal justice system's capacity to actually deliver justice and, most regrettably, the character of the victim.

While the defence has the right to adopt whatever strategy it deems fit, how unfortunate it is that casting aspersions on a woman's character is seen as the easiest way to weaken the prosecution's case, by subliminally suggesting that the victim's own actions had contributed to her terrible fate.

Such is the predicament of all women in this patriarchal society, regardless of socioeconomic background. Despicable calumny of this kind ought to be disallowed in a courtroom, for it has no relevance to cases of gender-based violence.

Also read: Zahir Jaffer confesses to killing Noor, claim police

The fact that Noor's grief-stricken father had to repeatedly vouch for her character in front of TV cameras to counter what was being said in the courtroom should make everyone's head hang in shame.

Fortunately, the judge ruled on the quality of the evidence laid before him, which the police had done well to gather despite reported pressure on different fronts. While Dawn does not support the death penalty, no matter what the crime, Noor's murder is certainly deserving of exemplary punishment.

It must be said, however, that the comparable social status of both families may have had a bearing on the outcome. In a country where murder is compoundable, and an offence against the individual rather than the state, killers with money and clout can, and do, walk free.

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Tree plantation drive

ANOTHER spring and monsoon tree plantation drive has kicked off in a number of cities in continuation of the federal government's flagship 10 Billion Tree Tsunami project. Since its launch in September 2018, the project has made some progress and won international recognition. The World Economic Forum launched its One Trillion Trees initiative in January 2020 modelled after the Pakistani project. There is no doubt that progress on the plantation drive has been on track. The federal climate change ministry hopes to have planted at least 541m trees by the close of this year and 3.9bn trees by the end of 2023. With one of the highest deforestation rates — between 0.2pc and 0.5pc — the country is bound to benefit from the plantation drive in the long run. The project might also prove to be decisive in improving the country's forest cover that currently stands at just below 6pc, as opposed to the internationally recommended 25pc. However, despite the success of the campaign so far, there are big questions that remain unanswered. For instance, what has the PTI government done to check the activities of the timber mafia that has shown few signs of stopping its destructive activities? In 2014, the PTI-led government in KP, in fact, removed the decades-old ban on forest cutting. Ironically, the same government, after the 'successful' execution of the Billion Tree Tsunami project — the predecessor of the ongoing project — had also claimed to raise the national forest cover.

On the other hand, NAB in 2020 had launched multiple investigations into the provincial-level 10 Billion Tree Tsunami project on grounds of alleged abuse of authority, misuse of funds and problematic survival of the planted saplings. It takes several years for a sapling to become a tree and they must be protected. Unless these problems are addressed by the authorities, the success of the plantation drive will remain limited even if the government exceeds its target of planting tens of billions of saplings across the country.

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Digital census

PLANNING for the country's first-ever digital census set to be conducted in August appears to be in full swing. Switching to modern methods, if the exercise goes as planned, will help reduce rampant gerrymandering, end delimitation disputes in Karachi that are often responsible for ethnic tensions, clarify the resource distribution landscape and make financial needs and allocations more transparent. It will also provide insight into the country's other demographic woes. According to the census road map revealed by Planning Minister Asad Umar, the headcount this year would be conducted on an 'as is where is' basis. This means that the requirement for possessing a CNIC in order to be counted has been waived. People will be counted as residents of the city or town they have lived in for the past six months. At least theoretically this seems like a workable method for obtaining a more accurate estimate of the number of people residing in large cities that continuously receive migrants from smaller towns — though factors such as the constant movement of families travelling from urban centres to their native villages would have to be factored in. Inter-provincial migration challenges are most pronounced in Karachi, where politicians often accuse each other of doctoring the census results. Meanwhile, the number of languages used in the census forms has been increased from five to 10. Mr Umar appears confident that the census data would be released by the end of the year, with plenty of time for the results to guide the next electoral exercise.

One aspect that remains unclear is the role of the National Database Registration Authority in the census. Nadra's mention in news reports on consultations among various government departments is conspicuous by its absence. Even without the requirement of CNICs for this census, Nadra's data can be used to verify or cross-check any potential irregularities in the upcoming headcount. Moreover, detailed census information can also be used at a later stage to remove discrepancies and irregularities from Nadra's data and improve its record-keeping.

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Highest deficit

PAKISTAN'S current account woes are going from bad to worse, with the country posting a record high monthly deficit of \$2.55bn in January. The deficit has expanded mainly due to soaring imports, falling workers' remittances and surging debt payments. State Bank data shows that the trade deficit rose 9pc while remittances dropped 15pc month-over-month. Debt payments more than doubled in the second quarter of the present fiscal to \$4.07bn from \$1.66bn a year ago, according to a report. However, the bank doesn't look too worried about the widening current account gap. The January deficit surged owing to "imports in kind — like Covid vaccines — that are fully financed", the bank tweeted. Excluding imports in kind, it added, the deficit should have been around \$1.6bn, much lower than \$1.93bn for December. The bank estimates the current account deficit to stay at 4pc relative to GDP for the fiscal year. Financial analysts say the ratio could widen to 4.25pc. So does this mean that all is well with the external sector? No. Medium- to long-term risks to external-sector stability remain. For one, oil price volatility, which is rising due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, continues to pose a major threat to Pakistan's fragile capacity to pay its bills and debts. The share of petroleum products in the import bill during the first seven months of the ongoing fiscal was 25pc. This is likely to soar if global prices remain elevated over the next several months or even weeks.

Running a current account deficit should not be a cause for worry per se so long as foreign capital flows into the economy are brisk enough to finance imports. The trouble is that foreign inflows have been drying up fast, with exports and FDI unable to match the rapid increase in the import bill owing to soaring global commodity markets. The trade deficit in goods and services increased to \$27.35bn during the first seven months of the current fiscal against \$14.81bn in the same period last year. Consequently, the government has to borrow left, right and centre to finance its import bill and debt payments despite a significant growth in home remittances in the last three years. Growing pressure on the foreign exchange reserves of late compelled it to accept harsh IMF conditions for the resumption of the stalled funding programme and raise interest rates to protect the home currency. Further weaknesses in the current account could force the bank to boost rates again, which may adversely affect economic activities.

Each time the external account comes under pressure, the authorities introduce piecemeal emergency measures, such as restrictions on imports. These actions may be work temporarily but are not a durable solution to the problem. Unless structural reforms are implemented to boost exports and woo FDI, we will periodically continue to face long periods of bust after every brief boom in the economy.

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CII on blasphemy

FOR a change, the Council of Islamic Ideology has taken a position that no one with either a religious or secular mindset should find controversial. On Wednesday, following a meeting presided over by its chairman, Qibla Ayaz, and attended by 17 religious scholars, the statutory body issued a statement to say that violence against anyone on allegations of blasphemy is “inhuman and contrary to Islamic principles”.

It called for expeditious legal proceedings against those guilty of lynching Sri Lankan citizen Priyantha Kumara in December last year in Sialkot over allegations of blasphemy. The horrific murder, in which a mob beat the victim to death and set his body on fire, laid bare on the international stage the simmering issue of religiously inspired violence in the country which intermittently claims Pakistani lives. Perhaps it was the glare of this global spotlight, and the negative consequences that could ensue from it, which prompted the CII to issue a statement that would have been equally relevant much earlier.

Violence stemming from blasphemy allegations is nothing new in the country. It has targeted non-Muslims disproportionately, and not even spared the mentally handicapped. In fact, the very first lynching on this count after Mr Kumara’s murder was that of a man in Khanewel who was known to suffer from mental health problems.

However, the remedy suggested by the CII to address such bestial violence — the constitution of a national commission to make recommendations for preventing such incidents — is a superficial one, Band-Aid for a cancer that has metastasized. The problem is far too deep-seated to be resolved by a group of experts in law, sociology and psychology.

Many opportunities to address religious extremism in the country have been squandered because it required taking difficult decisions and the resolve to stand by them. In fact, we have regressed. The state has 'mainstreamed' an ultra-right group that is at the vanguard of the murderous witch-hunt against alleged blasphemers. In any case, the government should not look to the CII for remedies.

More often not, the body has issued extremely controversial statements in the past. For example, it has said there should be no minimum age for marriage and that DNA should not be considered primary evidence in rape cases, not to mention rejected any meaningful legislation on domestic violence. The fact is, through this platform, ultra conservative unelected elements can, with a single statement, dilute or derail progressive legislation.

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Position on Ukraine

IT is hard to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine. President Vladimir Putin has produced a long list of reasons why he made the decision to launch a full-scale attack on a neighbouring country, but none holds up to any real scrutiny.

He has calculated that the gains from his actions will outweigh the costs that Russia will have to bear. History's verdict may take a while to be rendered but the international community's is already out. By an overwhelming majority, nations across the world have criticised Russia's invasion and called for the hostilities to cease immediately.

Mr Putin is unlikely to heed that call as his forces close around the Ukrainian capital Kyiv. Experts agree that the Ukrainian military — though defending its country valiantly — will face defeat at the hands of the far superior and larger Russian army.

In such a combustible scenario, Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Moscow has raised many eyebrows in Western capitals. Mr Khan held a scheduled meeting with President Putin as Russian forces were intruding into Ukrainian territory. The timing and optics of the meeting were less than perfect, to say the least.

Prior to his departure for Moscow, there were voices in Pakistan and abroad suggesting that Mr Khan should postpone the visit because it would have an adverse impact on Pakistan's relationship with the US and European nations. However, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi explained after the visit that there was proper consultation with relevant experts and stakeholders on this very point and the conclusion was that the trip should proceed as planned.

To an extent this is understandable as Pakistan has invested deeply in its relationship with Russia for many years and the summit meeting symbolised a crucial scaling up of these ties. Russia is a key player in the region and holds importance for Pakistan not just for political reasons but also for its energy needs. The Pak Stream project that will build a gas pipeline from Karachi to Kasur is a joint venture between the two countries and is in the final stages of being signed.

That said, Pakistan cannot afford to be bracketed in the Russian 'camp' at a time when global politics is once again reverting to blocs. It is in Pakistan's interests to remain neutral and stay away from getting sucked into Great Power rivalry. This is why Islamabad should now balance Mr Khan's visit by taking a clearer position on the invasion and call for the immediate exit of Russian forces from Ukraine. It should state clearly that it opposes the attack on an independent country as a principle. It can take this position without having to sabotage its ties with Russia. After all, Pakistan has kept its relationship with the US on track while criticising Washington's support of Israeli persecution of Palestinians. It is a test for Pakistan's diplomacy.

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Indian media concerns

EVER SINCE he took off his lapel mike during a controversial tenure as chief minister of Gujarat, and walked away from a grilling TV interview with Indian anchor Karan Thapar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shunned media scrutiny. Mr Thapar wanted to know if the prime minister would consider apologising for the horrific pogroms against Muslims in Gujarat that took place under his watch in 2002. Modi parried the question and stalled further damage with two approaches to keep the media at bay. He has refused to hold a single press conference even though he heads the world's largest democracy, inflicting

his unusually ill-informed ideas on a captive audience through one-way radio monologues. And he unleashed every coercive agency at his command to tame unrelenting critics. Rana Ayyub has been one of the victims, facing the music as a doggedly investigative woman journalist who has challenged the misogynistic march of Hindutva that the prime minister is leading. It is no secret that women journalists have to face a tougher challenge from Hindutva that thrives on sexual innuendos and dire threats of bodily harm.

Ms Ayyub's daring investigation into the state-backed violence against helpless men and women was published as the 'Gujarat Files'. Her exposé helped land the current home minister and Mr Modi's closest aide in jail. She also exposed the murder of a minister in Mr Modi's cabinet, apparently because he knew too much about how the pogroms were given the green light allegedly by the chief minister himself. A senior police officer that approached the Indian supreme court with evidence corroborating Ms Ayyub's claim is in jail. Ms Ayyub herself has been accused of misappropriating money she collected for the poorest victims of Covid-19, a charge she has robustly denied. Her struggle is part of a larger fight by an independent media to retrieve the freedoms and spaces stolen in the name of national interest. The Indian government like other autocracies is accused of using Israeli spyware to rein in the media. Several public intellectuals are lodged in prisons, robbed of their rights with the help of the software that doctored their laptops. With the Indian media under assault, foreign journalists and UN bodies have stepped in to help. "Had it not been for the international media, I was left to battle this fight for dignity alone," says Ms Ayyub. "This is what solidarity and journalism of courage truly means."

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Another case against MNA

THE long-drawn-out saga of cases against Ali Wazir speaks volumes for the state's appetite for vendetta. Mr Wazir, a leader of the PTM movement and National Assembly member, was arrested in Peshawar last year and handed over to the Sindh Police who wanted to detain him on charges of making anti-state speeches during a Karachi rally. In November, it appeared that Mr Wazir's ordeal may be ending, as he was granted bail by the Supreme Court in one of the cases against him. The apex court's observations during the bail hearing in

2021 raised hopes that the lawmaker's travails might soon be over. The bench had noted that individuals are released after negotiations and that perhaps the issues voiced by Mr Wazir could be discussed in parliament.

But alas, that optimism was snuffed out this week, as it became clear that Mr Wazir is now at the centre of a fresh controversy. The MNA, who has been languishing in custody since December 2020, has been formally charged by the Sindh Police in yet another case of sedition. His predicament is plain for everyone to see: he is the target of a state-approved campaign at the hands of those hell-bent on punishing him. Fellow activists and supporters have cried themselves hoarse protesting his arrest. Just recently, hundreds of workers marched from Sohrab Goth to the Red Zone in Karachi demanding his release. Many are camping outside the Sindh Assembly, but the PPP provincial government, whose leaders have voiced only tepid unease at his detention, does not seem overly concerned about such victimisation. Mr Wazir, it seems, is one of those unfortunate souls who is condemned to forever suffer the state's wrath for being out of line. Despite the state's patience and magnanimity towards many others, including TLP leaders and activists who have often indulged in violence, no such affability has been reserved for the elected parliamentarian. Such persecution is unacceptable and must be condemned roundly by all those who claim to be democrats.

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Stranded woman

GETTING caught up in foreign legal systems is rarely a pleasant experience for citizens of this country. And if bilateral relations are testy — as they are between Pakistan and India — then the ordeal worsens. The case of Sumaira, abandoned by her husband and living in an Indian detention centre, can certainly be described as a lengthy nightmare, and were it not for the intervention of a senator, her case might not have made it to the news. As per reports, the Pakistani woman married an Indian national in Qatar and was later taken to India by her husband without a visa. She was arrested by the authorities there and has been awaiting confirmation of her Pakistani nationality since 2018 after completing her sentence. Senator Irfanul Haq Siddiqui highlighted her plight and says that her citizenship certificate has finally been issued after he raised the

issue for the second time in the Upper House a few days ago. The Foreign Office says it is actively pursuing her case to ensure early repatriation.

It is indeed shocking that Sumaira had to wait for nearly four years to get her citizenship status confirmed, that too after the intervention of a lawmaker. One can only imagine the plight of those Pakistanis imprisoned abroad who have completed their sentences but are still rotting in jail because they lack a 'source' or adequate knowledge of foreign judicial systems. The government needs to ensure that Sumaira and her daughter are brought back to Pakistan as early as possible. Moreover, as has been highlighted frequently in these columns, Pakistan needs to do a better job of assisting citizens imprisoned abroad, or facing unfamiliar legal systems. There have been many cases where Pakistanis have been languishing in foreign jails after completing their sentences, simply because they lack knowledge of the foreign legal systems concerned. Pakistani missions abroad need to actively monitor such cases and help citizens navigate foreign systems so that they can defend themselves in court, and return to the country without delay.

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Whereabouts unknown

THERE are disturbing implications behind the staggering numbers, and they speak volumes for the low priority accorded to women's well-being in Pakistan. According to police data, more than 40,000 women were abducted in Punjab between 2017 and January 2022. That means 8,000 females each year, around 650 each month, go missing. The police claim they have recovered or traced 37,140 of them while the whereabouts of 3,571 remain unknown. However, what appears to be an epidemic of missing women only surfaced in the course of Supreme Court proceedings involving the abduction in 2020 of Sobia Batool, an 18-year-old from Sargodha. When the police leapt into action on the court's orders, they recovered from various parts of Punjab no less than 151 kidnapped females belonging to Sargodha alone. Of those, 21 were freed from prostitution dens. The police also tracked down 20 bodies of unidentified women in morgues across the province and engaged forensic science services to identify them. The 10 results thus far obtained show that Sobia Batool is not among them — but at least some families will finally get closure.

What was unearthed within the short span of time in which the Punjab Police actually did its job indicates this is merely the tip of the iceberg. Who knows how many women continue to be held against their will, living in misery and humiliation with no hope of rescue? As a report in this paper recently indicated, law-enforcement apathy is much to blame, especially as victims are often from the lower socioeconomic strata. Even if they deign to register an FIR, the police appear reluctant to investigate the abductions and instead tend to dismiss such cases as elopements without even trying to find out whether an elopement is genuine or a pretext for luring a woman into something very sinister. Human trafficking is a very real problem, and women can be trafficked for sex within the country — as the Sargodha police's endeavours recently uncovered — and abroad. There's also corruption: it is well known, for instance, that prostitution dens cannot do business without cops being paid off to look the other way. That said, there is also a dearth of resources and training, including sensitisation towards the many forms an 'abduction' can take. Given the scale of the issue, it would make sense to have a department within law enforcement, with a preponderance of female cops, dedicated to pursuing cases of missing women.

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PPP on the move

THE PPP's 'long march' on the capital that kicked off from Karachi yesterday appears to be more of a mass mobilisation drive in preparation of the fast-approaching 2023 elections than a strategy to oust Prime Minister Imran Khan. We know well that such protest campaigns don't bring down a party in power. The PPP isn't the only one whose engines are trying to groan back into life to make the party relevant to voters ahead of the polls. Others, including the ruling PTI itself, are also slowly moving into election mode.

The PDM, the multiparty opposition alliance of which the PPP was a major part until a year ago, has announced its support for the march ever since the opposition parties decided to join forces in order to overthrow the PTI set-up through a vote of no-confidence against the prime minister. The PDM too is planning to march on the capital on Pakistan Day unless the opposition introduces its planned no-confidence motion in the National Assembly earlier. In a tit-for-tat response to the PPP's long march plans, the PTI and its allies from

the province also took out a rally against the Sindh government on Saturday from Ghotki to Karachi. Such activities are expected to gain momentum whether or not the opposition's move against Mr Khan succeeds.

that said, it must be pointed that the combined opposition, which has not been able to pose a serious challenge to the government in the last three-and-a-half years inside or outside parliament, now appears to have found a clear objective.

But it remains undecided if it wants fresh polls in case the no-confidence move succeeds or an interim period between now and the next general elections. The PML-N so far has not seen any merit in the present assemblies continuing. The PPP, on the other hand, is of the view that the assemblies should complete their five-year tenure, especially because the opposition needs the support of the PML-Q, a government ally at the centre and in Punjab. The PML-Q is believed to have demanded the continuation of the assemblies and the office of Punjab chief minister in return for lending support to the opposition. The PML-N feels that both the PPP and PML-Q could collude to use this interim period to create support for themselves in the province, which remains the PML-N's stronghold.

If the opposition parties fail to win over the PML-Q, they will have to depend on a rebellion from within the PTI, with dissenters agreeing to resign from the Assembly or vote with them — again at the cost of their seats. Hence, the success of the vote of no-confidence largely depends on which side the PML-Q and other PTI allies throw their weight. If the opposition's move is to succeed it has to come to an agreement on the post-PTI arrangement sooner rather than later.

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