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Pollution

What ails our stock market?

Pakistan's stock market is a riddle which nobody has been able to solve. It behaves arbitrarily and is described as a gamblers' playground. Big players turn it in any direction they want with their calculated interventions at critical points. The PSX has been on a downward trend for the last several months, but on December 2, it saw a massive bloodbath.

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Stiff challenges ahead

The Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government has set the national growth rate at about 5pc for the current fiscal year. However, international organizations project the growth rate to be less than half of it. Even if the economy grows according to the government's estimates, it will fail to meet the needs of the majority of the people who have suffered huge job and income losses.

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About Us

Cutting Edge is an independent English weekly magazine being published from Lahore. Its founding editor, Dr Niloufer Mahdi, belonged to one of the top industrialist families of Pakistan — Packages Group. She was the daughter of Syed Wajid Ali and granddaughter of Syed Maratib Ali. In a short span of time it has gained popularity and built loyal readership throughout the country. With the contributions by renowned journalists and literary figures and diversity of issues/topics touched by our magazine, we can confidently claim that it has set not only new trends in local journalism, but has emerged as the most read and credible magazine for men, women, students and opinion leaders from different spheres of life. It also circulated in all Foreign Embassies, Libraries, Hospitals, 5 star Hotels and Government/ Private Departments. Its website, weeklycuttingedge.com, is a premier online source for the analysis of current affairs, providing authoritative insight into, and opinion on, national and international news, business, finance, science and technology, as well as an overview of cultural trends. We have commenced its publication, with an aim to bring the best to our readers; similarly, we intend to offer the best in terms of advertising and promotional impact for our valuable advertisers. The 24-page Cutting Edge is divided among different sections, and we have proportionally divided the space in each section for carrying advertisers' message for the utmost impact.

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Failure on all fronts

Shahid Hussain

Prime Minister Imran and his cabinet ministers often advise people not to worry about rising prices and unemployment in the country and claim the situation will improve in a few months. However, people are not willing to believe them because all their claims have proved wrong in the last three years.

The PTI government had promised to create 10m jobs in five years in its manifesto. Instead, millions of people lost their jobs and their income was reduced as a consequence of bad policies. To rub salt into the wound of the common people, Federal Minister for Information Chaudhry Fawad Hussain recently claimed the PTI government had already provided jobs to over 10 million people in the last three years. It is really a crude joke and tells about the seriousness of the government to solve public issues.

The same is the case with high prices of essentials. The government claims reducing inflation is discussed in every cabinet meeting and all possible measures are being taken to bring it down. However, prices are increasing on a daily basis despite “strict monitoring” and tall claims of the government. It has failed to control prices in three years and the remaining two years could not be different either.

Prime Minister Imran Khan had also promised to reduce electricity and gas prices. Instead, their rates have doubled in the last three years. The government has fixed prices of sugar, flour and edible oil and other items and claims to strictly enforce them, but they are not available in the market at the fixed rates. It has fixed sugar rates at Rs90/kg, but it is not available at the price anywhere in the country. The same is the case with flour and cooking oil. In fact, no government has failed more badly to control prices.

The government claims it is fighting mafias in the country. However, it has failed to take action against them. It appears it is losing the fight against the mafias. It lost against sugar, flour and fuel mafias recently. The same is the case with the dollar mafia. According to Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin, the dollar is at least Rs10 higher than its actual price. He said elements involved in speculative trade were responsible for the depreciation of the rupee against the dollar. Despite identifying the problems, the government has failed to check dollar smuggling and its illegal trade. As a result, the rupee hit a historic low at 177.89 against the dollar in recent weeks. It has further pushed up prices of everything.

Against initial successes and wide celebrations by the government, the current account deficit has widened by \$1.6 billion in October. The State Bank of Pakistan admitted the deficit was higher than September while it continued to increase its size in terms of GDP from 4.1pc to 4.7pc. The deficit has already exceeded the target which was in the range of 2-3pc of GDP for the current financial year. The ballooning deficit has badly impacted Pakistan’s foreign exchange reserves and exchange rate, which has resulted in the depreciation of the rupee by 13.4pc during the current financial year. In terms of dollars, the current account deficit increased by \$1.663b in October, while the deficit for the first four months (July-October) of the current financial year rose to \$5.084b. The reason behind the current account deficit is the growing size of imports. According to the SBP data, the imports in July-October went up by 66.3pc to \$23.484b against \$14.118b recorded in the same period of FY21. The deficit on balance in



goods and services during the period was \$14.845b compared to \$7.546b in the same months of the previous financial year. The government had succeeded in reducing the current account deficit from \$20b in FY18 to \$1.9b in FY21, but the growing size of the recent deficit could be in the range of about \$10b provided the current situation persists for the rest of the financial year. On the other hand, the foreign exchange reserves of the SBP have declined since October 1 by over \$2.2b to \$16.9b.

Meanwhile, an upward swing in consumer prices continued in November as inflation edged up to 11.5pc from 9.2pc, the highest increase noted in the past 20 months influenced by a record hike in fuel prices last month, according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. The massive rupee depreciation fuelled import-led inflation. Inflation measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased to its highest level in 20 months — the period when global oil prices kept rising steadily undermining earlier gains. At the same time, prices of fresh vegetables, fruits and meat have also posted a persistent increase in major urban and rural centres. Average inflation during the July-November period rose to 9.32pc on a yearly basis. Inflation had started declining after surging to 12.4pc in February 2020, mainly driven by a drop in prices of agricultural products. The trend is reversing now on the back of a rise in prices of petroleum products. In 2020-21, annual CPI inflation was recorded at 8.90pc against 10.74pc the preceding year.

The monthly outlook report of the finance ministry shows Pakistan’s inflation rate is driven by demand factors, international commodity prices, exchange rate, seasonal factors and economic agents’ expectations concerning the future developments of these indicators. Year-on-year (YoY) inflation has increased in the last two months. Going forward, this increase in inflation may be tempered by the seasonal profile whose contribution was positive in October but is usually about neutral in November.

According to the government, it has set specific targets to increase revenues and taxes for sustainable growth. It means it will continue to overburden people with taxes in its remaining term.

What ails our stock market?

Nasim Ahmed

Pakistan's stock market is a riddle which nobody has been able to solve. It behaves arbitrarily and is described as a gamblers' playground. Big players turn it in any direction they want with their calculated interventions at critical points.

The PSX has been on a downward trend for the last several months, but on December 2, it saw a massive bloodbath. On that day, stocks recorded their worst single-day fall in more than 20 months, with investors in the grip of a selling frenzy over fears about the economic fallout of a ballooning trade deficit and another rate hike.

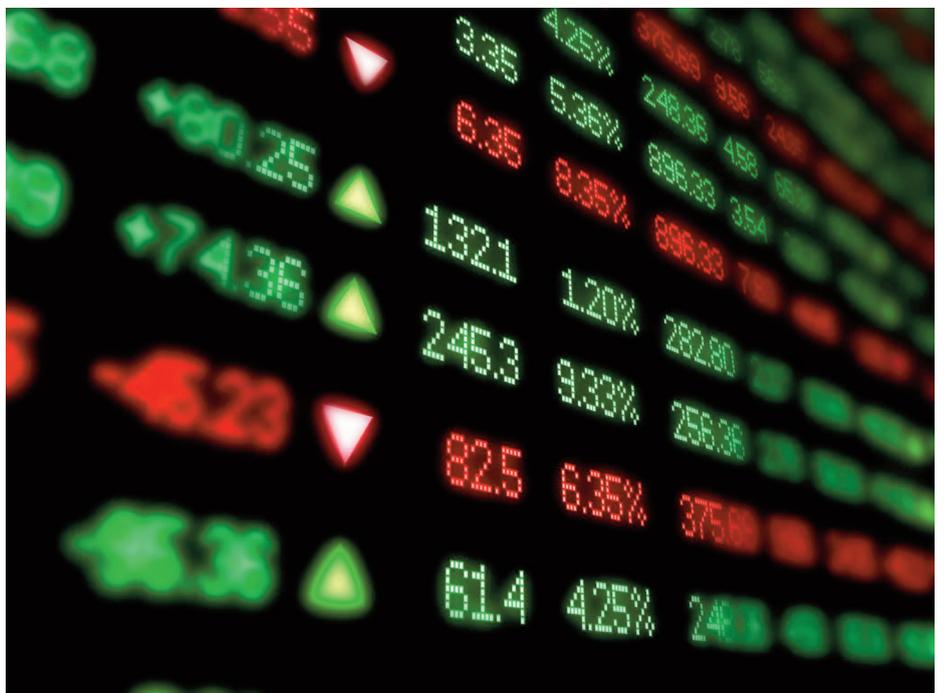
According to market watchers, it was a "Black Thursday" for the country's capital market that suffered its third largest one-day loss ever. With a loss of 2,134.99 points or 4.71 percent, the benchmark KSE-100 Shares Index plunged to 43,234.15 points at the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX), touching a day high and a low of 45,369.14 and 43,089.07 points, respectively.

The market opened on a negative note, marking an intraday low of 2,282 points as investors were concerned about multiple issues, like a soaring trade deficit and higher-than-expected secondary market yields. The decline of 2,135 points, the largest fall in 2021, caused about \$1.9 billion losses to investors. Traded shares, however, increased 145 million shares to 386.75 million shares from 241.06 million shares, while trading value rose to Rs14.06 billion from Rs9.22 billion. Market capital decreased to Rs7.418 trillion from Rs7.750 trillion. Out of 365 companies active in the session, 16 posted gains, 338 losses, while 11 remained unchanged.

Sector-wise, cements were major losers in the trading session as major blue chips closed at their respective lower circuits. Further, technology, energy, and fertiliser sectors followed suit dragging the index further down. The highest increase was recorded in the shares of Unilever Foods, which rose by Rs1400 to Rs20,400 per share, followed by Shield Corp, which increased by Rs19.31 to Rs293.77 per share. A major decline was noted in the shares of Nestle Pakistan, which fell by Rs171.54 to Rs5,350 per share, followed by Rafhan Maize that decreased by Rs124 to Rs9,775 per share.

As noted by market watchers, share prices started to decline following the State Bank's decision to boost its key policy rate by 150bps to 8.75pc at the Nov 19 Monetary Policy Committee meeting. The trend reached its zenith on Thursday with the benchmark KSE-100 index suffering an erosion of 4.7pc of its value in a single day since March last year when Covid-related curbs were first imposed.

A deeper analysis shows that the main reason for the sudden fall was the widespread apprehension over new PBS data showing that the trade deficit had worsened last month, raising the prospect of an increase in interest rates and greater pressure on the deteriorating current account and weakening rupee. Already, the rupee has declined to over 176 to a dollar in the interbank market confirming that the investors' anxiety isn't misplaced. Another factor that contributed to the slump was the expectation



of a higher CPI (Consumer Price Index) number next month due to the low base effect and further devaluation of the rupee.

It may be added here that the country recorded the highest ever monthly trade deficit of \$5.1 billion as exports clocked in at \$2.9 billion and imports \$8 billion. Secondly, the expectation of interest rate increase in the upcoming monetary policy as 3-month T-bill cut-off yields increased 229 basis points to 10.79 percent, 6-month at 11.50 percent, and 12-month paper's yield came in at 11.51 percent.

What has happened at the stock exchange also needs to be seen in the perspective of the larger picture of the economy. The general public feeling is that the government has failed to contain inflation and gradual rupee erosion because of the burgeoning current account deficit. The common man's budget is totally upset and prices have gone sky high. Average headline inflation is anticipated to rise from 9.3 percent in the first five months of the current fiscal year to nearly 12 percent for the remaining months, with more inflationary measures in the proposed "mini-budget" to meet IMF demands. Likewise, the current account deficit is predicted to spike to nearly 5 percent of GDP this year, much beyond the State Bank estimates of 2-3 percent.

The worries over harsh IMF terms also act as a threat to economic stability. The reported stringent Saudi conditions linked to the Kingdom's loan, have made people lose their confidence in the government's ability to bring the situation under control. In the opinion of independent economists, until inflation is brought under control and the rupee's slide is stopped, share prices will remain in the danger zone. An urgent need in this connection is to stabilize the foreign exchange market and bring the cost of money down. Without this, the stock market will remain in the doldrums.

Food insecurity in Pakistan

Nasim Ahmed

Food security has become a top priority item both at the national and international levels. Relevant in this context is the global report on food crises-2021, which predicts that food shortages will become more widespread in the coming years.

According to a report by the World Food Programme, 41 million people around the world are on the verge of famine. Wars and conflicts in various parts of the world – such as the one in Yemen right now – and extreme weather conditions caused by climate change pose a serious threat to food security for an increasing number of people. The situation has further worsened in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic which decimated the world economy and adversely affected agricultural production and food supply chains. To be precise, food insecurity does not just mean scarcity of food but also lack of sufficient funds to get access to food.

During the last few years, food security has become a serious issue in Pakistan. With double-digit food price inflation and declining income, more and more people have become food insecure since the pandemic hit. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), around 43 percent Pakistanis are food insecure, while 18 percent suffer from acute food insecurity. The WFP says that a majority of Pakistanis are incapable of affording healthy, nutritious food.

According to the Global Hunger Index (GHI), with a score of 24.7, Pakistan's level of hunger is categorised as "serious". Pakistan ranked 92nd out of 116 nations in the index, while Bangladesh and Sri Lanka outperformed Pakistan with a ranking of 76 and 65 respectively. The index is based on four indicators, including undernourishment, child wasting, child stunting and under-five mortality rate. While 37.6 percent of Pakistani children are stunted, the proportion of the undernourished population is 12.9 percent, and the prevalence of wasting in under-five children is 7.1 percent.

The report says that as the year 2030 draws closer, achievement of the world's commitment to zero hunger is not possible. Further, the world as a whole — and 47 countries in particular — will fail to achieve even low hunger by 2030. The challenge that Pakistan faces in combating food insecurity is two-fold: increasing food availability while also ensuring that people have access to healthy and safe meals.

Our economic and financial policies have failed to achieve the twin goal. A rapid rise in the population coupled with growing social and economic inequities has created a serious situation. Pakistan produced excess wheat and other food products in the 1980s and 1990s. We could export wheat and were major exporters of basmati rice. And now we are importing these foods.

Pakistan's current per capita caloric availability is 2,300 kilocalories per day; 20 years ago, it was 2,400. Current figures for Nepal and Bangladesh are 2,800 and 2,500, respectively. Our annual population growth rate is over two per cent, compared to 1.2pc in the region. Continued rapid growth



means huge additional pressure on food in an already over-extended and vulnerable agricultural system.

Not too long ago, Bangladesh was overwhelmed by food insecurity and overpopulation. But firm political commitment to support human development changed everything. Family planning services took centre-stage in their development plans as a result of which rapid population growth was brought under control.

Experts say that Pakistan also needs to focus more on human development and population planning. Accelerated efforts to ensure access to reproductive health services, especially family planning, are urgently required. Rural health services, which have not grown significantly in the past 20 years, need to be upgraded through the expansion of the Lady Health Workers network. At the same time, the government should come out openly in support of public opinion change that favours birth spacing. This will require a system of effective public health messaging through the media.

Experience shows that the long-term solution to regulating fertility rates lies in prioritising the reproductive health and rights of women. It has been found that both civil society and religious leaders believe that this is a national issue of utmost importance and must be attended to on an urgent basis. But the government has to take the lead and set the tone through clear-cut policy decisions followed by rigorous implementation. The problem of food security is multi-dimensional and calls for an integrated approach by all relevant departments of the government. To avoid future food crises, the government must promote crop diversification, water management, and climate-smart farming to decrease the devastating effects of natural disasters on food security. Prioritising agricultural value addition and preserving subsidies for essential crops are also critical for the country's food security. Pakistan is an agricultural country and it has the potential to feed not only its own population but also export food grains to the Middle East.

Political parties' aversion to local polls

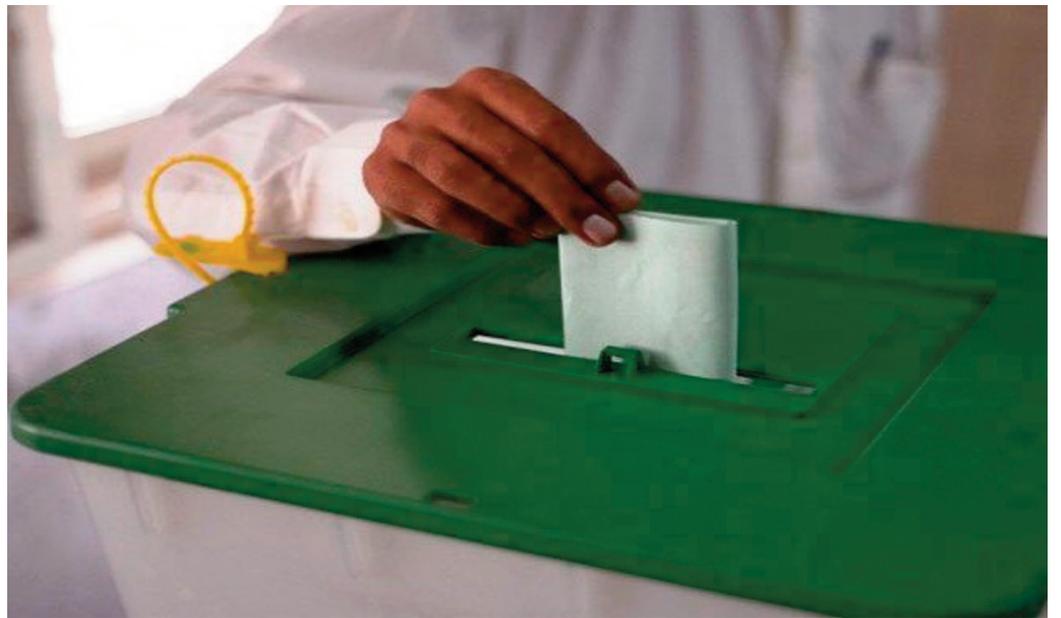
Muhammad Hassan

Prime Minister Imran Khan has directed the chief ministers of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to take steps to hold local government elections. However, the ruling party in the Centre and the provinces has delayed the elections as much as possible, because the time was not suitable for it.

The situation in Punjab is serious, as recent by-elections showed. The Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) will have to cut prices of food and essentials and announce incentives for the common people for any chance of winning the local polls. Prime Minister Imran Khan had promised to empower people through local governments when his party formed the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2013. However, the party has changed the law many times. The law envisaged villages as the basic unit. Over 1,000 union councils were converted into 3,501 village councils/ neighbourhood councils (for the urban areas). Thirty per cent of development funds were promised to the village/ neighbourhood councils and 24 government functions/ departments were devolved. The first polls under the new law were held in 2015, but the system crashed soon after its inauguration. Instead of empowering the local bodies, six of the 24 functions delegated to them were withdrawn. In a new amendment, funds were withheld from the local bodies "to be routed through officers designated by the government". Ten more functions were withdrawn from the local governments, leaving them with only eight out of 24 promised in the LG Act of 2013. More amendments in 2019 to the LG Act abolished the district elected organisation, replacing it with an elected tehsil council. However, the move towards the grassroots level was neutralised by placing the elected tehsil council under the deputy commissioner as the provincial government's principal representative.

Under the law, it is the responsibility of the provincial governments to hold local government polls within three months of the general election. However, elected governments have delayed them on one pretext or the other. The last PML-N government in Punjab was not willing to hold local polls because it feared the PTI and the PML-Q, whereas the PPP has a proven track record of avoiding the elections. According to experts, the PML-N and the PPP had delayed the election to get a better chance to exploit the weaknesses of the system and the PTI is doing the same now.

In Pakistan, provincial governments and legislators want all powers and development funds for themselves. Councillors and nazims are their enemies as they share power with them and become more popular at the local level. It is why provincial governments do not empower them, financially and administratively. Former Punjab Chief Minister Shehbaz Sharif had introduced an ordinance in the province which was a replica of the 1979 system of Gen Ziaul Haq. Under the system, local leaders could not take independent decisions and had to depend on bureaucrats' approval. Besides, the government had empowered itself to dissolve the local governments. All public representatives, elected at the local level, had the least possible administrative and financial authority and were put under the bureaucracy, ensuring that all power remained in the hands of the then chief



minister.

The PML-N and the PPP made several pretexts in the Supreme Court of Pakistan to avoid local polls for almost 10 years. It is a pity that both mainstream parties, which have ruled the country for several decades, do not want to devolve power to the local level, which is the essence of democracy all over the world. The Supreme Court had to intervene to remind politicians of their responsibilities to the people.

Another problem with local polls in Pakistan is that they are a real blessing for tribes and clans, who choose their representatives on the basis of Biradari (caste), instead of any other qualification. However, the polls can resolve many public issues at the local level with larger participation of people and political parties. As all main political parties have avoided holding them, dictators held local polls regularly. Former President Musharraf was the latest example. However, if the polls are held regularly, voting on the basis of clans (Biradari) and other considerations will phase out and people would elect honest and genuine representatives to resolve their problems at the local level.

The PTI is also following in the footsteps of the PPP and the PML-N over local elections. It has delayed them under different pretexts in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the provinces it rules. After the results of recent by-polls in Punjab, the PTI could further delay local polls. If it is forced by courts to hold them, it will have to work really hard to beat the PML-N in the province. It appears it will have to adopt the system of former Chief Minister Shehbaz Sharif to win the polls and control local bodies and their representatives. The ruling party still has some time to improve its chances. It can take measures to reduce prices of food and essentials, which is the biggest problem of people. It can announce development schemes to woo voters, especially in rural areas. However, good governance will remain a dream in the absence of a vibrant local government system.

Prime Minister Imran Khan should hold elections under his vision to empower people at the grassroots level, without caring for the results. It will be a great service to people and democracy, even if his party fails to win.

Pandemic poverty waves

Muhammad Ali

The pandemic has pushed more than half a billion people into extreme poverty in the world and the situation could not be different in Pakistan, though credible figures are not available. As a new variant of the pandemic has surfaced, the situation may worsen. It needs urgent measures not only to fight the health scare but also save more people from falling under the poverty line.

Pakistan is among a few countries which tackled the coronavirus pandemic successfully – a strategy appreciated by global leaders, including philanthropist Bill Gates. A relief package of Rs1,240 billion was announced, including cash transfer, to support vulnerable communities. The timely decisions by the government helped mitigate huge losses. To mitigate the suffering of the vulnerable segments of society during the pandemic, the government launched the Ehsaas programme, the country's biggest ever social safety net, under which Rs145 billion were distributed among 12 million daily wagers. The programme has been enhanced to reach 16 million people.

The government did not impose a complete lockdown to save the vulnerable segment from its serious effects. Still, according to the government's own estimate, at least 10 million more people slipped below the poverty line as a consequence of the pandemic. In a report, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) said that between 1.5 million and 2.3 million young Pakistanis had lost jobs during the pandemic. According to the ADB, the pandemic has pushed an estimated 75 million to 80 million more people in developing Asia into extreme poverty as of last year, compared with what would have happened without the pandemic. Assuming that the pandemic has increased inequality, the relative rise in extreme poverty, defined as living on less than \$1.90 a day, may be even greater. Progress has also stalled in areas such as hunger, health, and education, where earlier achievements across the region had been significant, albeit uneven. According to the report, about 203 million people or 5.2pc of developing Asia's population lived in extreme poverty as of 2017. Without the pandemic, that number would have declined to an estimated 2.6 percent in 2020.

The World Bank fears poverty is expected to increase for the first time in two decades in Pakistan. "The pandemic is also expected to exacerbate Pakistan's human capital challenges," it noted in a report. According to new evidence compiled by the World Health Organization and the World Bank, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to halt two decades of global progress towards Universal Health Coverage. The organisations also reveal that already before the pandemic more than half a billion people were pushed or further pushed into extreme poverty because they have to pay for health services out of their own pockets, and that the pandemic is likely to make the situation worse.

The findings are contained in two complementary reports, launched on Universal Health Coverage Day, highlighting the devastating impact of COVID-19 on people's ability to obtain health care and pay for it. In 2020, the pandemic disrupted health services and stretched countries' health systems beyond their limits as they struggled to deal with the impact of COVID-19. As a result, for example, immunization coverage dropped for the first time in ten years, and deaths from TB and malaria increased. The pandemic also triggered the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, making it increasingly difficult for people to pay for care. Even before the pandemic, half a billion people were being pushed (or pushed still further) into extreme poverty because of payments they made for health care. The organisations expect that that number is now considerably higher.

"There is no time to spare," said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "All governments must immediately resume and accelerate efforts to ensure every one of their citizens can access health services without



fear of the financial consequences. This means strengthening public spending on health and social support, and increasing their focus on primary health care systems that can provide essential care close to home." He added: "Prior to the pandemic, many countries had made progress. But it was not robust enough. This time we must build health systems that are strong enough to withstand shocks, such as the next pandemic and stay on course towards universal health coverage."

The new WHO/World Bank reports also warn that financial hardship is likely to become more intense as poverty grows, incomes fall, and governments face tighter fiscal constraints. "Even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, almost 1 billion people were spending more than 10 per cent of their household budget on health," said Juan Pablo Uribe, Global Director for Health, Nutrition and Population, World Bank. "This is not acceptable, especially since the poorest people are hit hardest. Within a constrained fiscal space, governments will have to make tough choices to protect and increase health budgets," he added.

In the first two decades of this century, many governments had made progress on service coverage. In 2019, prior to the pandemic, 68 per cent of the world's population was covered by essential health services, such as pre- and post-natal care and reproductive health services; immunization services; treatment for diseases like HIV, TB and malaria; and services to diagnose and treat noncommunicable diseases like cancer, heart conditions, and diabetes. But they had not made such advances in ensuring affordability. As a result, the poorest groups and those living in rural areas are the least able to obtain health services, and the least likely to be able to cope with the consequences of paying for them. Up to 90 percent of all households incurring impoverishing out-of-pocket health spending are already at or below the poverty line - underscoring the need to exempt poor people from out-of-pocket health spending, backing such measures with health financing policies that enable good intentions to be realized in practice.

Besides the prioritizing of services for poor and vulnerable populations, supported through targeted public spending and policies that protect individuals from financial hardship, it will also be crucial to improve the collection, timeliness and disaggregation of data on access, service coverage, out-of-pocket health spending and total expenditure. Only when countries have an accurate picture of the way that their health system is performing, can they effectively target action to improve the way it meets the needs of all people.

The two reports offer both a warning and guideposts to all countries as they strive to build back better from COVID-19 and keep their populations safe, healthy, and financially secure.

The opposition's distant threats

Muhammad Zain

The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) has decided to hold an “inflation march” in March next year after threatening to topple the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan through protest demonstrations and mass resignations in weeks and months. It appears the opposition has lost hopes of any success against the government after it was bulldozed by the government and its allies in the parliament.

The opposition aimed to capitalise on perceived differences between the government and national institutions. The opposition parties also believed coalition parties would no longer support the government in the parliament. However, its hopes dashed and it failed to get any kind of support from any quarter and the government bulldozed it in the last session of the parliament by passing a record number of bills.

Now, it appears the opposition has left the government alone to crumble under its own weight and bad governance. It believes rising prices will eliminate any chance of re-election of Prime Minister Imran Khan in the next election. However, its planning has also exposed its inability to attract people despite record high inflation in the country. It accuses the government of being the most inapt set-up in the history of the country, but its inability to mobilise the public against the government also proves that it is the most inactive and ineffective opposition in Pakistan's history.

Though the opposition alliance has announced holding a rally in Islamabad, yet its leaders are not sure whether it would turn into a sit-in or remain only a power show. Time and again, the PDM announced holding country-wide protests against the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) but hasn't yet been able to mobilise people and really trouble the government. Instead, it lost two of its allies – the PPP and the ANP – along the way a year after its formation. On the other hand, the PDM has also decided to take part in upcoming local bodies' elections. Earlier, it believed the “illegitimate” government had no justification for holding local polls.

Earlier, the steering committee of the PDM recommended holding a long march and mass resignations from assemblies to topple the government. However, the alliance failed to reach a consensus on resignations. Reports say PDM head Maulana Fazlur Rahman wants PML-N legislators to resign from the National Assembly, Senate and Punjab Assembly, a condition which most PML-N MPs oppose. The PPP and the ANP had also quit the alliance over the issue. On the other hand, Maulana Fazl believes the opposition's movement against the government will not succeed without resignations from the assemblies. It appears that the PML-N will also leave the alliance and Maulana Fazl and his party would be left alone to hold a “long march” against the government.

It is clear that most PML-N MPs will defy even their leadership and would not resign from the assemblies. On the other hand, the government will delay accepting their resignations through different tactics. With less than two years left to complete its term, the government is in a better position to foil the opposition's plan for early elections. The PML-N, the major opposition party in the alliance, also faces serious rifts. It is visibly divided into two groups, one led by Maryam Nawaz and the other by Shehbaz Sharif.

There is no doubt that the ruling party will miserably lose if elections are held now. People are annoyed at it over high prices and bad governance. The government has devised some plans to provide relief to people. Recently, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced a 40pc targeted

subsidy for the poor on the purchase of essential food items. Under an ambitious Rs1.4 trillion Kamyab Pakistan Programme (KKP), the under-privileged segment would get targeted subsidies on wheat, flour, sugar and cooking oil. The government aims an inclusive sustainable growth setup to benefit all segments of society. Loans will be disbursed among 3.7 million households through microfinance banks and non-governmental organisations would facilitate people in their small businesses. For the first time in Pakistan's history, the government has adopted the “bottom-up approach” to benefit the low-income groups. Farmers will get interest-free loans under the Kamyab Kissan programme. Financing of up to Rs500,000 will be made for businesses. Financing on easy installments will be extended for the construction of houses under the Sasta Ghar scheme, besides linking successful skilled-based scholarship schemes and Sehat Insaf Card with the new programme.

Another round of stipend is being considered for less privileged people under the Ehsaas programme enabling them to get essential food items at comparatively reduced rates. The government also decided to cut general sales tax and customs duty by half and abolish two per cent additional customs duty on edible oil to reduce its price by Rs45-50 per kg. According to Federal Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umar, no immediate relief is expected in rising commodity prices and it could take at least five months for the abnormal hike in prices to head towards normalcy. “We hope people get relief soon, but according to experts the relief may not be visible immediately and actual improvement may be seen from March,” he told a press conference. Critics say the government has announced similar plans in the past but nothing worked and people continued to suffer because of high inflation and bad governance.

The opposition and many analysts believe cordial relations between the government and the establishment have soured and they are no longer on the same page. The opposition claims it would have ousted the government if the establishment had not protected it since its installation in 2018. It is yet to be seen if the situation has changed now.

On the other hand, the PTI government may not have performed to the satisfaction of the people but still there is no replacement for it in the country. The opposition is divided and its leaders are facing serious cases of corruption and money-laundering. The PPP has confined itself to Sindh while the PML-N is popular in Punjab only. The PTI had formed the government in 2018, when the country was facing the worst economic conditions of its history. It is also a fact that the whole world is facing the worst inflation after the onset of the pandemic. The government is also blamed for the plunging value of the Pakistan rupee against the US dollar, while it is a fact that the past governments had artificially kept the exchange rate high.

Undoubtedly, the threat of the opposition alliance has subsided and the ruling party is certain to complete its five-year term. The PTI is strong in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and may form a government in the province for the record third time, but it will have to work really hard to defeat the PML-N in Punjab in the next election. The ruling party's spirit is still high. However, if elections are held now, it will face a big defeat because people are annoyed at it over high prices and bad governance. However, the ruling party still has enough time to improve its performance and win the general election in 2023.

Stiff challenges ahead

Shahid Hussain

The Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government has set the national growth rate at about 5pc for the current fiscal year. However, international organizations project the growth rate to be less than half of it. Even if the economy grows according to the government's estimates, it will fail to meet the needs of the majority of the people who have suffered huge job and income losses.

The country has seen the highest inflation in its history in the PTI government, with millions of people losing jobs and facing income cuts even before the onset of the pandemic. The pandemic aggravated the losses. The national economy may be recovering but people are still suffering. Bad governance has compounded the situation. However, according to the Pakistan Development Update of the World Bank, Pakistan's economic growth will strengthen to an average of 2.7pc for FY2022-23. The baseline economic growth forecast, however, is highly uncertain, especially given the third and more-contagious wave of the pandemic currently circulating in the country, it warned. "It is crucial to sustain the positive reform momentum to continue to boost the competitiveness of Pakistan's economy and lay a strong foundation for a more robust, inclusive and sustainable recovery. Increasing competitiveness and stimulating private investment and exports will require continued macroeconomic stability, maintenance of a market-determined exchange rate, and improving the business environment to enable all firms, particularly SMEs, to access markets and compete openly in a leveled playing field. The potential for a strong recovery and a growth acceleration is there. Reforms to make it happen need to be further sustained," said Najy Benhassine, World Bank Country Director for Pakistan.

On the other hand, the Asian Development Bank projected Pakistan's GDP at 4pc for the current year, though 2pc more than World Bank estimates but still one percent less than what is budgeted. The State Bank of Pakistan has projected the economy to grow strongly in the range of four to five per cent in the current fiscal year 2021-22, but warned of challenges including exponentially high global commodity prices, elevated import payments, increase in utility tariffs, higher inflation and expansion in services deficit. In its annual report, the SBP economic outlook said economic recovery during FY21 was projected to gain further momentum in FY22. The momentum in growth is evident from the significant increase in machinery and raw material imports, continued expansion in consumer financing, and strong uptrend in domestic sales as seen from high frequency demand indicators during the initial months of FY22.

According to the government's estimates, Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation is expected to remain within a range of 7-9pc. The SBP recommended that better commodity management practices, especially the build-up of reserves for wheat and sugar, would likely contain supply side pressures from seeping into inflation during FY22. Importantly, headline inflation is expected to retreat more visibly in the second half of the year, with the phasing out of the base impact of hike in power tariffs. "These projections are subject to multiple upside risks, including from a greater-than-anticipated increase in global commodity prices and upward revision in utility tariffs. In addition to triggering a sharp increase in domestic prices, these developments may also give rise to significant second-round impacts on inflation," the report said.

In the external sector, pressures from the import side are emerging, with payments exceeding \$6 billion in June, August and September. The surge in imports is broad-based, partly reflecting the increasing pace of economic activity, a further increase in global commodity prices, continued imports of agricultural commodities, automobiles, and many consumption related items. According to the SBP, the current account deficit is projected in the range of 2-3pc of the GDP during FY22. In its report, the World Bank said Pakistan's economy has been growing slowly over the past two decades. Annual per capita growth has averaged only 2pc, less than half of the South Asia average, partly due to inconsistent macroeconomic policies and an under-reliance on investment and exports to drive economic growth. Short periods of rapid consumption-fueled growth

frequently led to sizable current account and fiscal deficits that ultimately required policy tightening, resulting in recurrent boom-bust cycles. In early FY20, following one such episode of external and fiscal imbalances, the country entered a 39-month IMF-Extended Fund Facility. The associated adjustment measures, including fiscal consolidation, contributed to a reduction of the imbalances over the year and improved macroeconomic stability.

However, the containment measures adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic led to a severe contraction in economic activity during the final quarter of FY20. Half of the working population saw either job or income losses, with informal and low-skilled workers employed in elementary occupations facing the strongest loss in employment. As a result, poverty incidence is estimated to have increased in FY20 from 4.4 to 5.4pc, using the international poverty line of \$1.90 PPP 2011 per day, with more than two million people falling below this poverty line. Moreover, 40pc of households suffered from moderate to severe food insecurity. It noted that over the first half of FY21, there have been signs of a fragile recovery. With increased community mobility, private consumption has strengthened, aided by record official remittance inflows. Investment is also estimated to have slightly recovered, as machinery imports and cement sales both recorded double-digit growth rates. On the production side, crop production was relatively weak in the first six months of FY21, as cotton production was adversely affected by heavy monsoon floods. Following the phased lifting of lockdown measures from May 2020 onwards, indicators of industrial and services activity have recovered, with "Large Scale Manufacturing" and business confidence indexes exceeding pre-COVID levels in December 2020. As a result, the majority of the informal workers affected by the crisis are expected to have been able to return to work.

The fiscal deficit widened over the first six months of FY21 (y-o-y), as expenditure growth outpaced an increase in revenues. In line with the recovery of economic activity, total revenues grew by 3.7pc. Over the same period, total expenditures rose by 6.2pc, partly driven by higher interest payments. Public debt, including guaranteed debt, reached 87.9pc of GDP at end-December 2020, up from 86.7pc of GDP at end-December 2019. Output growth is expected to recover gradually over the medium-term, averaging 2.2 percent over FY21-23, mostly due to contributions from private consumption. However, sectors that employ the poorest, such as agriculture, are expected to remain weak, and therefore poverty is likely to remain high.

Major risks to the WB outlook include the possibility of new waves of infections, the emergence of new vaccine-resistant strains, and setbacks in mass vaccinations. In addition, more delays in the implementation of critical structural reforms could lead to further fiscal and macroeconomic imbalances. According to the IMF, as the recovery gains strength, it will be important to accelerate the implementation of policies and reforms needed to address some of the long-standing challenges facing the Pakistani economy. Moody's, in its latest report, said that Pakistan's economy had the potential to grow at an annual rate of 4pc. Fitch Ratings awarded Pakistan 'B-' rating, which reflects weak public finances, external finance vulnerabilities, and low governance indicator scores. "The authorities have made progress in addressing external and public finance challenges over the past few years, despite the headwinds from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, economic uncertainties from the pandemic and political challenges to keeping the reform agenda on track pose risks," it observed.

Undoubtedly, Pakistan still faces grave challenges and the economy will take years to recover. However, the government wants to create an impression that it has put the country on the road to quick prosperity. It has taken really harsh measures to improve the economy in the last three years, but it hurt the common people badly. Now it has relaxed its policy in a bid to win the next election. All past governments did the same. They relaxed fiscal discipline to woo voters ahead of polls but the country suffered in the end.

What next for democracy in Pakistan?

Raza Khan

Ostensibly, the third elected government in Pakistan has almost failed to address the key issues of the country and its people. These issues include providing political stability to the country, ensuring security for a majority of people, putting the economy on track, pulling the country out of internal and external debt and meaningfully negotiating ever-rising extremism in society.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has been in the saddle for more than three years and when it rose to power people in general had great hopes that it would be able to somehow address the issues. A majority of people anticipated that the PTI may be able to overcome them to a great extent. However, the three-year performance of governance of the PTI leaves a lot to be desired. Now from the analysis of the discourse of Prime Minister Imran Khan and his key cabinet members, defeatism is quite evident. This can be ascertained from the fact that the PM and his aides have been putting the blame of all failures of their government on the past governments of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). This is not only tantamount to the admission of the PTI's government failure but also of the previous governments, and thus, of the entire political system and democratic set-up in the country.

It is said that democracy carries an in-built mechanism of self-rectification. However, despite the fact that it is the third elected or for that matter fourth elected government that has been in the saddle in Pakistan since 2002, all of them have largely been unable to provide political stability to the country, ensuring security for its people, putting the economy on track, pulling the country out of internal and external debt and meaningfully tackling extremism in society. Instead, what we are seeing right now is that political instability is more prevalent in the country. The PTI government is ruling mostly by bypassing the parliament and issuing presidential ordinances or passing legislation by bulldozing the opposition. The opposition, on the other hand, is not ready to even have a working relationship with the government. Insofar as security is concerned, no Pakistani today can claim that he or she is completely secure. In other words, there are profound insecurities posed to the lives and property of the citizens. The country's economy is in tatters as the GDP of the country in real terms is negative and there is hyperinflation in the marketplace. The level of extremism in the country could be gauged from two recent incidents. Firstly, the killing of policemen by militants of the Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). Secondly, the gruesome killing by a mob of a Sri Lankan citizen, Priyantha Kumara, in Sialkot, Punjab, where he worked as a production manager in a local industrial unit.

What does all this mean? This is not a simple question to be answered. The extant situation is both due to the crisis of policymaking and governance. As in the parliamentary political system, both policymaking and governance are to be provided by the parliament or the federating units' assemblies, but it seems that the root cause of the problems lies within the political system. The parliamentary political system of Pakistan, as provided in the state constitution, has failed to give birth to governments that have the capacity and willingness to address the issues of society or many other related problems. This needs to be seriously looked into by the political leadership as well as other societal leaders, particularly members of the intelligentsia. It is important to argue whether a political system, which has not been able to give birth to governments that



have the capacity to address the key issues of the state and society, rather let them become aggravated, should continue or not. Political systems are for the country, not the other way round. The fact neutralises the argument of those who think that the parliamentary political system is the ultimate fate of the state and society of Pakistan and it is irreplaceable. It is the country that is sacred and inviolable, not the system, which is running the country and that too so badly.

Although the political system has an extensive influence on democratic consolidation in a country, yet it in turn gets succour from prevailing democracy. In the case of Pakistan, the quality of democracy leaves a lot to be desired. In other words, democracy has not been able to flourish in Pakistan due to several interrelated reasons. The foremost cause of lack of democracy or non-flourishing of democracy in Pakistan has been that the social structure is undemocratic or its key values do not support democracy in them. It could also be described in a way that the culture of Pakistan is undemocratic. This, in turn, has roots in the ultraconservative societal culture of Pakistan. Whatever political system we have in Pakistan was the result of the societal dynamics and among these dynamics ultra-conservativeness and lack of democracy were and have been key features.

So, with the government almost completely failing to rule the country in an appropriate manner so that the main issues of the state and society could be addressed, what could be done to alleviate the woes of the country? The principle must be that the panacea for the failure of democracy is not dictatorship or any other undemocratic regime, rather more democracy. This means that Pakistan's political system does not have the capacity to facilitate the blossoming of democratic culture in the country. The solution to our problems is a democratic culture, not a sham political system, merely using the name of democracy to sustain itself. How could a political system work when there has been unceasing blames from the defeated political parties and groups on the winning parties and groups of rigging elections in connivance with the country's security establishment? Today, the opposition parties are arguing that the solution to the country's problems is in snap elections. This is a completely shallow argument. If elections could provide the country with political stability and economic growth, then we have held four national elections in the last 19 years, with three regimes even completing their stipulated five-year tenure. A new election would bring a new party or a coalition of parties to power and this is what they would really like to get. New faces in the government would not at all be a guarantee of addressing the core issues of the state and society.

Unbelievable rise in extremism

Raza Khan

The lynching of a Sri-Lankan citizen in Sialkot by a mob accusing him of blasphemy has put a stamp of authenticity on the pervasive extremism in the name of religion in Pakistan, which is really a great threat to the state and solidarity of society. If the situation continues, the already squeezed space for saner voices would become unavailable and then Pakistani society would be a completely uncivilized and brutish space with the law of the jungle.

The incident, which took place in the Central Punjab city of Sialkot, has sent shivers down the spine of everyone in Pakistan and every individual has started thinking that he or she may face the same situation one day. The Sri Lankan citizen, Priyantha Kumara, who worked in a factory in Sialkot as production manager, was lynched for alleged blasphemy for removing some Islamic text from a factory machine. The manner he was killed demonstrates that members of the mob were completely bereft of reason. However, more sordid was the role of the onlookers who did not try to stop the mob from killing him. This speaks volumes about the insensitivity of the members of society to the appalling situation of others. The state apparatus was incapacitated, perhaps due to lack of the will to protect Kumara. The incident has further maligned the image of Pakistan, its society, government and people of being intolerant, extremist and religiously jingoistic. This would definitely affect the level of foreign investment in Pakistan, particularly from the close ally China pumping into Pakistan billions of dollars under the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). Several Chinese workers and experts have been killed in Pakistan by militant and terrorist groups. On the other hand, Western countries and their citizens would be further discouraged to arrive and work in Pakistan.

It is important to note that as a state and society Pakistan is faced with multiple threats. Of these, the most important threat that has evolved over decades is extremism. The extremist threat to Pakistani society and the state is not only grave but extensive. More importantly, the extremist threat to Pakistan not only manifests itself in the shape of the formation of radical social attitudes and their translation into violent behavior but also terrorism. The story of the effects of extremism, formation of fundamentalist social attitudes, violence and terrorism does not end here. The fact of the matter is that extremism has seriously affected the normal functioning of society and the state per se. This can be gauged from the Sialkot incident. There is another important aspect. It is generally believed that extremism and radical social attitudes thrive in the countryside with rural mindsets. Industrialization is believed to give rise to more modern social structures that are tolerant and inclusive. However, in the case of Sialkot, which is one of the industrial hubs of Pakistan, the demonstration of such a radical attitude gives rise to many questions.

Extremism has various forms and manifestations. It could be racial, ethnic, nationalist, gender-based, and above all, religious. History is testimony to the fact that Adolf Hitler demonstrated unprecedented racist extremism and put the peace of the world in danger. The example of ethnic radicalism unprecedentedly manifested itself in Rwanda between Hutus and Tutsis. In India, extremism on the basis of the Hindu chauvinist ideology, Hindutva, has catapulted fundamentalists, like Narendra Modi, to the position of the prime minister of the country. In Pakistan, extremism is present in all its forms and manifestations and importantly the state and its institutions have no vibrant policy to counter it despite the formation of the

much-touted National Action Plan after the sordid Army Public School Peshawar terrorist attack in December 2014. Noticeably, it is extremism that results in terrorism instead of the other way round. So, if the country has a plan for fighting terrorism, it does not mean that extremism could be countered. In fact, the nature, scope and profundity of extremism in Pakistan are such that it would require an all-out state and societal response to counter it. However, the state and society are far away from even agreeing to take on extremism. The release of TLP militants, who killed policemen in Lahore during a protest, is a case in point. This lack of agreement mainly has two reasons. Firstly, both state and society are unable to understand the graveness of the extremist threat. Secondly, there is no will to fight extremism, fundamentally because of fear. Here, the need arises to educate and apprise both people and policymakers about the threat level of extremism and its nature and forms.

The gravest of the extremist threat in Pakistan is the prevalence of large-scale radicalism in the name of religion within the country as was evident during the recent TLP protest and lynching of Kumara in Sialkot. There are innumerable groups and individuals, who have been part of the extremist enterprises. In the last many years, the government may have been able to launch some large-scale successful military operations against terrorists and militants. However, the extremist organisations, institutions and networks, which have been behind these terrorists and militants, are still very much intact. The magnitude and strength of the extremist organisations and networks is so huge that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for the security agencies to dismantle them.

Keeping in view the sensitivity of the question of religion in Pakistan, successive governments often chose not to take action against leaders of extremist networks. This has been the case with almost all successive federal and provincial governments and other state agencies due to which extremist networks have been growing in scale, size and scope without inhibition. Resultantly, several extremist networks have become monstrosities and the entire extremist enterprise as a proverbial Hydra. In particular in Punjab, there has always been a lack of enthusiasm about taking on extremists and what we see today are incidents, like TLP attacks on state officials and the killing of Kumara.

Leaders of radical religious groups and networks are cognizant of the anti-state and anti-social nature of their activities and they remained embroiled in the activities primarily because of their economic and social benefits. The control structure of extremist religious groups and networks is elaborate, intricate and extensive. Most of the extremist networks are controlled by bodies of individuals who have intimate relations with each other often of teacher-pupil. These networks of individuals, in turn, are controlled by the high-profile social, political, economic, and above all, religious elite.

The support structure of extremist networks in Pakistan is also varied and complex. The biggest ground level support to extremist webs comes from the conservative sections of society, which back the genuineness of the agenda and argument of the organizations. As this section makes up the largest part of Pakistani society, extremist groups capitalise on this support. This support is critical for the survival and growth of these groups. Unless the state clearly come up with a policy to tackle extremism and in this connection educate society, it would be impossible to end the scourge.

Reliefless prosperity

Husnain Shahid

As supply chain and health issues subdue global growth, Pakistan is expected to progress more than national and international forecasts. Its growth rate for the current fiscal year could be about 5pc, as it has successfully tackled the pandemic while its agriculture produce, exports and industry are rising. There are distinct signs of an economic recovery but its fruits have not reached the common man.

The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) reported “historic high” tax collection during November, which surged by 35pc to Rs470 billion against the target of Rs408 billion. According to provisional figures, the FBR has collected net revenue of Rs2,314 billion during the first five months (July-November) of the current fiscal year 2021-22, which has exceeded the target of Rs2,016 billion by Rs298 billion. The 36.5pc growth comes despite the “daunting challenges, compelling constraints posed by the coronavirus pandemic, and sporadic tax cuts announced by the government as relief and price stabilisation measures,” it said in a statement. The collection stood at Rs1,695 billion during the same period last year. The revenue board stated that after collecting over Rs4.7 trillion and exceeding its assigned revenue targets set for the tax year 2020-21, the FBR has successfully maintained the momentum set in July 2021. “The tax collection posted historic high growth in the first quarter of the current fiscal year,” it revealed, adding that during the first four months (July-October), the FBR far surpassed its revenue target by Rs233 billion. “This spectacular performance in the first five months of the current fiscal year clearly shows the FBR is well on its way to achieving the assigned target of Rs5,829 billion for the year,” the statement read.

Overseas Pakistanis sent the highest-ever \$8 billion remittances during the first quarter of the current fiscal year, registering a growth of 12.5pc over the same period last year. The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) reported that with inflows of \$2.7b in September, workers’ remittances had continued their strong momentum and remained above \$2b since June 2020. “This is the 7th consecutive month when inflows recorded around \$2.7b on average,” the SBP noted. In terms of growth, remittances increased by 17pc in September compared to the same month last year, while compared with August inflows it was 0.5pc higher. The country had received record remittances of \$29.4b in FY21 which helped it curtail the current account deficit.

Pakistan’s exports had the fastest growth rate in South Asia during November. The country’s exports grew by 33.5pc compared to Bangladesh’s 31.3pc and India’s 26.5pc growth. Pakistan’s exports during the month under review jumped to a historic monthly high of \$2.903 billion as compared to \$2.174 billion during the corresponding period last year. The figures surpassed the government’s target of \$2.6 billion. During the first five months of the current financial year, Pakistan’s exports increased by 27pc to \$12.365 billion, as compared to \$9.747 billion recorded in the same period last year, against a target of \$12.2 billion for the period. The government has set a target of \$38 billion for exports of goods and services for the ongoing fiscal year whereas it is optimistic that exports would exceed \$40 billion in the current fiscal year.

The World Bank has warned that Pakistan’s growth would depend on implementation of key structural reforms, particularly those aimed at sustaining macroeconomic stability, increasing competitiveness and improving financial viability of the energy sector. The current account deficit is projected to widen to 2.5pc of GDP in FY23 as imports expand with higher economic growth and oil prices. Exports are also expected to grow strongly after initially tapering in FY22, as tariff reform measures gain traction sup-



porting export competitiveness. In addition, the growth of official remittance inflows is expected to moderate after benefiting from a Covid-19 induced transition to formal channels in FY21. Despite fiscal consolidation efforts, the deficit is projected to remain high at 7pc of GDP in FY22 and widen to 7.1pc in FY23 due to pre-election spending. Implementation of critical revenue-enhancing reforms, particularly the General Sales Tax harmonisation, will support a narrowing of the fiscal deficit over time. Public debt will remain elevated in the medium-term, as will Pakistan’s exposure to debt-related shocks, it added.

Pakistan’s economy is expected to continue recovering in fiscal year 2021-22, with real GDP projected to rise by 4pc, according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It said that the 4pc growth forecast was based on the assumption of recovery in private investment as consumer confidence and business activity improved amid the ongoing vaccination rollout and various economic stimulus measures announced in the budget for FY22. The ADB said that the 4pc growth rate was contingent on the resumption of structural reforms later in the year in an ongoing programme under the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Extended Fund Facility. It said that the outlook for agriculture was encouraging in view of the government’s ambitious Agriculture Transformation Plan. Growth in the industry is forecast to improve in FY22, driven by fiscal incentives announced in the FY22 budget, a substantial rise in the budgeted development spending and strong private consumption underpinned by adequate agricultural harvests, strong remittance inflow and pickup in earnings as social restrictions are reduced and most economic activity resumes. Enhanced growth in agriculture and industry and expected improvement in domestic demand are projected to boost growth in services, strengthening their contribution to the overall growth in FY22.

According to the latest data, Pakistan has produced 27.5 million ton wheat against a target of 27.3 million ton, while production of maize was 8.9 million ton against the 8.5 million ton target. Pakistan also produced 87.7m ton sugarcane against 81.m ton last year, rice 8.8m ton (8.4m ton last year) and cotton 8.5m ton (7.1m ton last year). The government believes agriculture facilitation measures and the encouraging performance of major and minor crops will further ease out the inflationary pressures as it would further increase the supply of food items to the market.

Rising food prices and unemployment remain the biggest issues of Pakistanis. The government will have to check food prices urgently as people cannot wait for long for it. If the economy is really improving, its fruits should also reach the common people.

Pakistan's flourishing mobile phone industry

Asim Nisar Chaudhry

Pakistan is faced with the problem of a worsening trade deficit – imports far in excess of exports. The import bill stood at over \$7.5 billion in November this year. In view of this, the government is trying to identify items whose import can be slashed or banned. CBU (Completely Built Up) car imports have been banned, while other luxury items face the axe.

In the last few years, mobile phone imports have increased rapidly. Therefore, experts advised the government to start the manufacturing of mobile phones in Pakistan. Last year, the government approved the first-ever Mobile Device Manufacturing Policy (MDMP), paving the way for local assembly and manufacturing of mobile phones.

The Engineering Development Board (EDB), an attached department of the Ministry of Industries and Production, prepared the draft policy to develop and promote mobile phone manufacturing in Pakistan as part of the Electronic Products Manufacturing Initiative (Make in Pakistan). The policy, which was prepared after consultations with local representatives of multinational manufacturers and their market players, was approved by the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) in May, 2020.

The local mobile phone market is said to have the potential of 40 million handsets, which is now near realization, following the successful launch of the Device Identification, Registration and Blocking System (DIRBS), which helped curb the smuggling of mobile phones in the country. Experts agree that the government's new policy does have the potential to boost local production, as it would lead to localization, indigenisation of mobile phones' parts in a phased manner.

The prominent features of the policy include the removal of regulatory duty for completely knocked down (CKD) and semi-knocked down (SKD) manufacturing by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA)-approved manufacturers under the Input/Output Co-Efficient Organisation (IOCO). The policy also includes the removal of fixed income tax on the CKD/SKD manufacturing of mobile devices up to \$350. The cabinet also approved the removal of fixed sales tax on the CKD/SKD manufacturing of mobile devices.

Under the new policy, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) allowed the activation of handsets manufactured in the country under the important authorisation of the IOCO in the CKD/SKD kit. Moreover, the activation of completely built units (CBU) through notified routes after the payment of all levied duties and taxes as fixed by the government from time to time was also allowed. Under the new policy, a research and development allowance of 3 per cent was given to local manufacturers for exports of mobile devices. Besides, locally assembled or manufactured phones would be exempted from 4 per cent withholding tax on domestic sales. The local industry would ensure the localisation of parts and components as per the roadmap included in the draft policy.

The new policy has encouraged investment in local mobile phone manufacturing. As of now, a total of 16 local companies are manufacturing mobile phone devices in the country. Most of them are gradually shifting towards new evolving technologies. The PTA's strong monitoring has also curbed the smuggling of mobile phones as non-compliant devices



are non-functional in the country. That is why the import bill has risen significantly in the last one year. The yearly bill was on average \$771 million during FY17-19 and that has increased to \$2.1 billion in FY21. This is due to the conversion of \$1 billion from informal to formal imports.

According to an estimate, the average price of a smart phone imported in Pakistan is \$115 over the last 12 months. Over 80 percent of Pakistan's phone market (by value) is for \$200 and below phones. A majority of these phones are now assembled in Pakistan. In terms of the smart phone policy, there are duty incentives for cheaper phones (in dollar value) to boost assembly in Pakistan. The duties on expensive phones have been increased to convert the usage towards less pricey phones. These steps are already reducing the share of expensive phones in the local market.

According to industry sources, Pakistan imported -- in the form of semi knocked down (SKDs) and CBUs -- about 16.3 million phones in the past 12 months (Nov20-Oct21) for \$1,874 million. The average value of a phone is computed at \$115. The low price of phones is constant across all brands – barring the iPhone. The average price of an imported Samsung phone is \$180-\$209. But the iPhone is expensive with an average price of \$776. However, not all phones being imported are new. There are second-hand sets as well.

It is encouraging to note that the local manufacturing and assembly of mobile phones is gathering momentum. Almost all well-known brands now assemble their phones in Pakistan. During October 21, 80 percent of the phones imported were in the SKD form i.e., out of 957,008 phones imported in Pakistan in October, 76,217 units were in the form of SKD kits. The assembly of phones has created a large number of jobs in Pakistan.

As per industry experts, the local production of mobile phones should graduate from the assembly stage to manufacturing at the earliest possible in order to cut our import bill. To this end, it is important to convert SKD to CKDs as soon as possible. At the same time, the authorities concerned must work out a detailed plan to discourage imports and incentivize local manufacturing.

Growing e-commerce in Pakistan

Asim Nisar Chaudhry

Despite rapid strides made in the last few years, Pakistan's e-commerce market is much smaller in size as compared to other countries. There are many factors hindering the growth of e-commerce in Pakistan, including customer trust, payment and logistics problems. But there are also tremendous opportunities which can be exploited with careful planning.

E-commerce is universally recognized as a useful vehicle for youth entrepreneurship and employment and must, therefore, be encouraged and incentivised by the government through appropriate policy tools. According to a report, the government has now decided to lay the foundation of Pakistan's first e-commerce university.

Disclosing the good news, the Special Assistant to the Prime Minister (SAPM) on E-Commerce Aon Abbas Buppi told the media last week: "The first e-commerce university will enhance the capabilities of e-commerce stakeholders not only in Pakistan but also in the emerging global e-commerce segment." He hoped that the establishment of the e-commerce university would provide employment opportunities to the youth so that Pakistan could become a part of the global supply chain which would enhance its economic strength. He also said that the government would establish the first e-commerce web portal of Pakistan in a bid to curb illegal trade. He informed the participants in a seminar that the e-commerce portal would be created with the help of Chinese giant Alibaba and transparency would be brought to the sector.

All over the world, e-commerce has witnessed exponential growth in the wake of the Covid pandemic. According to an estimate, global online sales in 2021 are expected to be 19.5 per cent, compared to 13.9 percent in 2019, a 45 percent increase in two years. The trend has also increased in Pakistan. According to data published by the State Bank of Pakistan, the number of registered e-commerce merchants in Pakistan increased from 1,707 in 2019-20, to 3,003 in 2020-21, a 76pc increase.

At present, Pakistan's e-commerce trade figures total around \$4.5 billion, but given the right incentives the total could easily reach \$9 billion by 2023. In Pakistan, e-commerce is dominated by business-to-consumer (B2C) companies and the transactions are mainly conducted in three main sectors, general e-commerce, groceries/quick(q)-commerce and fashion.

Most of the activities are confined to quick commerce/groceries, where Foodpanda and Airlift are the main players. Both companies maintain stocks at different strategic locations to ensure delivery within 30 minutes in major cities. Many start-ups are also entering the field but since maintaining stocks all across Pakistan is not easy, new firms have to mobilise large amounts of money to start businesses. Munchies, Carrefour, Al-Fatah, Metro, Grocer app, Hum mart, Cheetah and Bykea are some of the players which are active in the field.

Pakistan's lifestyle is different from the US and Europe. Most people



do their own shopping. There is also the question of trust. There is a general feeling that online shopping is not trustworthy.

The biggest player in e-commerce in Pakistan is Daraz, which has the financial backing of Alibaba and has been spending huge sums of money to bring e-commerce to the forefront through special deals and sponsorships. Daraz is known for its efficient service and quick delivery. But it has yet to overcome the challenge of trust as reflected in its low scoring in surveys conducted by relevant international agencies. To meet the challenge, Daraz launched DarazMall in 2019, where only established brands sell their products to customers.

Needless to say, a lack of trust is the biggest hurdle to the growth of e-commerce in Pakistan. There are some bad experiences due to which people refuse to pay in advance. Cash on delivery is still the preferred method for payment for the majority of online orders, which further compounds the problems for ordinary vendors. A lack of liquidity retards the growth of the business.

For e-commerce to grow in Pakistan, these problems need to be tackled. To this end, digital payments need to be made easier, and special safeguards must be put in place to protect customers. Ethical business practices must be strictly implemented to gain clients' trust. One way to do this is to enable customers to claim refunds and return the products if they are not satisfied.

The good aspect is that the e-commerce situation is gradually improving in Pakistan. The Covid pandemic provided a big boost to online shopping and the trend has continued. Apart from big players, small enterprises have sprung up all across the country. Everything considered, e-commerce has a bright future in Pakistan.

Punjab's 'Special' Education Policy

Rasheed Ali

On December 4, 2019, the then Punjab Special Education Department's secretary Syed Javed Iqbal Bukhari had said: "Today is International Day of Persons with Disabilities – and I am happy to mark this day with the introduction of our policy, and sharing with the world the achievements of our youths chronicled in these success stories".

On the same day after two years (2021), special education teachers and critics wonder what is the use of launching the new policy if not even a single clause of it is implemented.

Senior officials at the launching ceremony of the "first-ever" special education policy had claimed that the people with disabilities would have access to an inclusive and improved education system that meets their needs. But Ms. Summaiya Haroon*, a senior teacher at a high school for special children in Lahore, says the school had only received an official letter about two years back and then nothing was heard of it. She wonders how an official letter would help implement an "inclusive and improved education system" for the students with disabilities. However, Provincial Minister for Special Education Chaudhry Muhammad Akhlaq believes giving a new policy for special education is, in itself, an achievement, as the Special Education Department had been functioning without any formal policy since 2003.

The new policy had promised increasing the number of educational institutions dedicated to the Special Education Department (SpED), and making the role of the research and development unit more central in providing analyses for better decision-making. A spokesperson for the SpED says the promises made in that regard are being fulfilled with the passage of time. She says in the fiscal year 2020-2021, the department set up five Special Education Centres, strengthened seven and upgraded four others to secondary level.

According to official data, there are a total of 302 special education institutes at primary, secondary, and university levels, with the capacity to cater to around 35,000 special students. The department has more than 600 buses for the pick-up and drop-off service to both teachers and students, and 42 hostels, offering accommodation to 2,000 special students.

The people with disabilities make up 13.4% of the total population of Pakistan, accounting for approximately 28 million people. According to the Punjab Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 17.9% of all children between the ages of 5 and 17 in the province have one or more functional disabilities. Since the establishment of the SpED in 2003, the department has been imparting education to children with disabilities through 294 institutions, including degree colleges, training colleges, schools, vocational institutes and special education centres, having an enrolment of above 32,345 (20,404 boys and 11,941 girls).

However, is there any match if the department says 294 educational institutions are serving a population of 28 million people with disabilities? People concerned have serious doubts about the authenticity of the official data of persons with disabilities. They believe actual figures might be much higher than the reported figures.

The spokesperson, however, has a point to justify the performance of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government in Punjab. She says it takes some time to mitigate the effects of years of neglect and clarifies that all possible measures, including budgetary allocations, are being taken to ef-

fectively meet the educational needs of the persons with disabilities. During the fiscal year 2021-22, Rs755 million had been allocated for the Special Education Department, which was 36% higher than the last year's budget of Rs555 million). Last year, there were a total of 14 Annual Development Programmes (ADPs), while the new budget came up with 25 fresh ADPs, including five ongoing and 20 new schemes. In this fiscal year (2021-2022), key initiatives include the construction of nine purpose-built buildings of special education institutions in Gujranwala, Attock, Faisalabad, Mianwali, Lodhran, Muzaffargarh, Sialkot, Sheikhpura, Kasur and Vehari. Altogether, in the last three years, 14 institutes have been upgraded and 17 new customised buildings constructed as special education centres, the spokesperson says.

A few months ago, Minister Akhlaq Ahmad had informed the media about "the biggest and signature project of the Special Education Department" which was the establishment of a special education children's village at Sharaqpur in Sheikhpura district. The special children's village will not only provide accommodation and food but also ample and customised facilities for extracurricular and physical activities. Moreover, all advanced level free co-curricular and recreational facilities will be provided to the children all over Punjab. The minister said the mega project would provide the best environment to every special child of the province. The spokesperson tells Cutting Edge that a helpline, 1162, has been established for providing guidance to the parents of differently-abled children and lodging their complaints. The best aspect of the helpline is that when the data of a new child is received, it's added to the system and a proper follow-up is ensured, from enrolment in a special education centre to resources and feedback.

The minister had said that due to a lack of proper awareness about special education institutions, the admission rate to the centres was quite low. In fact, children with disabilities were 10 times less likely to visit a school. "We are working with the aim to bridge the gap. In the same context, our officers started a door-to-door awareness campaign to increase enrolment in our education centres; resultantly in just three weeks, 4,000 special children were admitted to our institutes," he had claimed.

The spokesperson says that for ease of parents, the department has launched a mobile app that helps identify the geographical location of the SpED centres, submission of forms for online admission and the provision of information about all services being provided by the Special Education Department. To ensure the safety of the special children, adds the spokesperson, closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras have been installed in schools and buses. Over 2,976 cameras have been installed in special education institutions in Punjab, whereas 807 are in buses alone. In three years, the department has added 63 new buses to the system to provide safe and secure pick-up and drop-off services to the students of special education institutions.

However, Ms. Summaiya is not convinced. She says there might be data to paint a rosy picture on paper, but the situation has not changed yet. She hopes the Special Education Policy 2020 will be translated into reality in the coming years to change the on-the-ground situation for the special children.

**Name changed on request*

Give them rights through the law, not promises!

D. Fatima Khan

It was October 13, 2021; the venue was Charing Cross (in front of the Punjab Assembly building), The Mall, Lahore, and dozens of persons, sitting on the road with white canes in their hands, raising slogans for regularisation of their services in government departments, and fulfilment of the promises, made with them by successive governments.

The sit-in continued for a week, but nothing constructive happened on part of the government, except for an “attack” on the protesters on October 19, by a group of around 70 traders from a nearby big market. They pushed the white-cane holders away from the road, as the Eid Miladun Nabi procession was set to pass through the road and the sit-in was a hurdle to its way. Eight special persons were hospitalised after injuries.

The sit-in continued for over two weeks until the protesters got dejected, and even the media also lost interest in covering it. Most of the sit-in participants left the venue after falling ill or for other reasons, and the media didn't know when all of the white-cane holders had left the protest venue one after the other, and the road was cleared for normal flow of traffic. What a great strategy on part of the government!

And after the passage of around 37 days of the “failed sit-in”, Prime Minister Imran Khan appeared on TV, reiterating his government's commitment “to transform the lives of those with disabilities by offering them equal opportunities in education and employment”. In his message on International Day of Persons with Disabilities on Dec 4, 2021, he gave the disabled persons good news that a bill to empower and enable them surmount all barriers was ready.

The Prime Minister must be appreciated by all special persons for giving them the great news. Otherwise, something worse might also have happened to them. Last year, on February 13, 2020, the Sardar Usman Buzdar-led Punjab government had “locked” at least 70 people with visual disabilities at a shelter house in Lahore for “planning” a protest demonstration outside the Chief Minister's House.

Various “would-be” protesters complained about maltreatment at the hands of the police. “The police trapped us; they hit us and even tore off our clothes,” a protester told the electronic media. “I just asked the police to open the gate, and they responded by choking me,” another white-cane holder told a reporter. The riot police were deployed outside the shelter home following the “chaos”. And earlier, in November 2019, the special people called off their week-long protest after the government had assured them that their demands would be met within 35 days. The visually impaired people have been holding annual protests in Lahore for the last seven years.

These are a few glimpses of how the government and society take the visually impaired and other special persons and how sensitive they are to their needs. Muhammad Ashraf, a daily-wager employee at a government department for the last six year, has been part of the sit-ins during the past years. “You can't even imagine how much contempt, mockery and even scorn we have to face at the hands of the police and the public while holding a sit-in,” Ashraf shares his agony with the writer. Most of them would say: “Hafij ji, tumhen koi kaam nahin, rozana yahan aa kar beth jatay ho? (O blind men, don't you have anything else to do; every other day, you stage a protest here and block the road?). “I believe they would have never been part of any protest demonstration to get their rights. How would they

know what it means to sit on a road for many days and nights and not only experience insults but also physical abuse many a time,” adds the man in his early thirties, in a gloomy voice. “We may be blind, but the government is deaf, dumb and blind. They don't listen to our grievances despite the passage of many years,” says Muhammad Ashraf.

“Every time, they tell us, from the prime minister and the chief minister, to their representatives, who come to us asking us to end the protest, that legislation is in process. That the job quota for special persons will be increased and all daily-wagers would be regularised. None of them has told us during the past five, six years that legislation has been completed and our jobs have been regularised,” he says helplessly.

And what about the implementation of the existing laws, concerning the safety of workers? According to the All Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Workers Union (CBA), more than 200 workers die and almost double of them become disabled on average every year due to non-implementation of safety laws. The union leaders say that due to a lack of safety regulations implementation at the workplace, Pakistan is being termed one of the most dangerous countries for field staff on the basis of a high number of deaths and disabilities in mines, textile, chemical, transport and other industries.

And last but not the least, there is a specific sector which needs immediate attention of the government, to save the future generations from disabilities. Only a few people would know that a Pakistani scientist, Prof. Dr. Aurangzeb Hafi, was offered British citizenship and two million pounds sterling for providing the original manuscript of his research about the prevention of disabilities among unborn babies. He was contesting for the prestigious international title “Man of the Year 2003 in Interdisciplinary Sciences”, and the offer was made to him by the London-based International Scientific Council.

Later, on the basis of his scientific discoveries, Prof. Hafi was declared sixth among “Top of the Top Ten” most impactful persons of the world. And fewer people would know that Prof. Hafi had been running a campaign for over seven years seeking legislation against the use of teratogens substances in medicines as an ingredient, which cause physical and chemical abnormalities during the embryonic stages. The professor says there are dozens of medicines containing teratogens, which have been banned in the US, Sweden and other Scandinavian countries. But, in Pakistan and other developing countries, these medicines are still being prescribed and used without realising their lethal effects on the baby at the embryonic stages. He has prepared a list of about 380 medicines containing teratogens in his annotation conspectus inquiry titled “Embryonic-latrogenesis Causality Annotation Broadsheet (EICAB)”, which had been submitted to the United Nations for stressing the need to launch a forceful campaign in developing countries to make legislation on the issue and raise awareness about its usage and its consequences. He wants the government of Pakistan to legislate on the issue to bring to an end the pharmaceutical barbarianism in the country.

The writer is a physician by profession. She worked as an intern at the Capital Health (New Jersey) & the Mount Sinai St. Luke's Hospital (New York). Rights and gender issues are the areas of special interest to her. She can be reached at: fatima23393@hotmail.com

Help kinnow in the face of challenges

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

Like the past, the kinnow season has already started in the country from December 1, but all people related to the crop, especially exporters, are in a state of uncertainty this year. They are really worried about the visible decrease in the produce due to climate change and various other issues, and a massive increase in freight charges, which would adversely affect the export of the citrus fruit.

According to the official data, the annual production of the citrus fruit hovers around 2.4 million to 2.5 million tonne, but this year the production may remain restricted to just 1.7 million tonne. "It is almost 30% less production than the previous year," Khair Muhammad Tiwana, vice president, Kinnow Growers Association, Sargodha, says. Besides other reasons, the old orchards of kinnow are unable to resist the effects of climate change, he tells Cutting Edge by telephone. He admits that most of the kinnow orchards have reached their natural age and local growers do not have adequate knowledge of cultivating new varieties of kinnow and the tendency is likely to squeeze its yield and export in future. He suggests the Punjab government focus on developing new varieties of citrus which should have the quality to better resist the impact of climate change.

Nadeem Akhtar Abbasi, an official at the Department of Horticulture, Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi, says that citrus, being a perennial crop, is more vulnerable to changing environmental conditions. He tells Cutting Edge that erratic weather behaviour in Pakistan has deteriorated the physical and biochemical quality parameters of the citrus fruit. He says a study was conducted recently in three main citrus groves of the Punjab province to assess the impact of climate change on the citrus industry of the country. The study found out that climate change has triggered pests' infestation, disease incidence and water overuse, ultimately increasing input costs. More heat and drought stress and fog were observed in Vehari and Toba Tek Singh and yield reduction and low quality were recorded in the districts than Sargodha, he added. The official says that climate change has directly affected the citrus industry and the scientific approach is required to address the challenges.

However, Citrus Research Institute (CRI) Director Muhammad Nawaz Khan Mekan does not agree that citrus growers are totally unaware of the impact of climate change on their orchards. He tells Cutting Edge that the institute is properly guiding the farmer community across Punjab about horticulture, soil preparation, prevention of diseases and methods for better yields, etc. He says that agricultural scientists in Punjab have developed 10 varieties of citrus so far and got them registered. The director says citrus fruit is cultivated on 500,000 acres of land in Punjab, out of which 250,000 acres belong to Sargodha and adjacent areas.

Khair Muhammad Tiwana endorses the CRI director's assertion, saying Sargodha district has a distinction in the production of kinnow, known for its great taste and delicacy. According to an estimate, Sargodha produces 96 per cent of kinnow produced in the country and its orchards sprawl over hundreds of thousands of acres of land. The economy of Sargodha and Bhalwal heavily depends on kinnow and there are around 250 kinnow processing centres in the region that employ over 250,000 people, Tiwana says.

He says kinnow is also cultivated in Pothohar and South Punjab districts of Bhakkar, Layyah, Dera Ghazi Khan and Mankera. In Sindh province, it is cultivated in Sukkur, Nawabshah and Khairpur districts, and in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, in Peshawar, Mardan, Swat, Hazara, Nowshera and Swabi districts. In Balochistan, it is cultivated in Sibi, Makran and Kech areas.

Kinnow tops the list of fruits which are exported to other countries. All Pakistan Fruit and Vegetable Exporters, Importers and Merchants Association (PFVA) patron-in-chief Waheed Ahmed says Pakistan produces 2.5m tonnes of kinnow every year and exports it to around 50 countries, including Russia, Ukraine, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, The Philippines, The United Arab Emirates, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. However, he fears that the export of the fruit is likely to be limited only to 300,000 tonnes this year with an anticipated decrease of 35 per cent in its production compared to the previous year and a significant increase in sea freight costs.

He says that due to these reasons, the export of kinnow to the markets of Russia, Canada, Ukraine, Indonesia, and The Philippines is likely to decrease significantly this year, as Pakistan exports 50pc of its total export volume of kinnow to these countries. He says that preparations for the fruit's export have not yet started even though the season has commenced from Dec 1. Last year, the export of kinnow was 450,000 tonne against the target of 350,000 tonne, when the sea freight charges to Russia, an important international market, were \$2,500-3,000 per container. However, this year the cost has gone up to \$7,000 per container. Similarly, the sea freight charges to The Philippines and Indonesia, which were \$2,000 per container last year, have now increased to \$4,000-5,000 per container, Waheed Ahmed tells Cutting Edge.

The PFVA patron-in-chief says land routes are a better alternative to export kinnow via Iran and the Central Asian Republics, but the government has failed to take measures to use the option. He says the cost of transportation via land routes is the same as the cost of sea freight despite the TIR (Transports Internationaux Routiers, International Road Transport) convention, under which Pakistan is availing the privilege to transport trade goods via land routes. He says Pakistani kinnow would sell in the Russian market due to being low-cost as compared to the fruit from Morocco and Turkey. The price of a 10kg carton used to be \$5-6 less than the cost of 10kgs of the same fruit from the two countries. However, now due to a sharp increase in the charges of sea freight, the rate would almost be equivalent to the prices of the fruit from other countries, making it very difficult to remain competitive.

Waheed Ahmed says Iran is a promising international market for Pakistani kinnow, but it has been closed for the last 10 years due to non-issuance of import permits by Iranian officials. Last year, Iran issued import permits for a limited period of time, but this year nothing has been done by the government so far, he regrets. He urges the government to negotiate with Iran for the export of at least 80,000 tonnes of Pakistani kinnow for neutralising the damage of other international markets. This is the only option at hand to save the kinnow export business this year, he believes.

Bridge gaps by storytelling

Huma Mir

These days, parents have turned to the convenience offered by technology to keep their tender-age children busy or motivate them to sleep. Well, let's admit it. It's really easy for children to fall asleep after watching a video or their favorite cartoons. These things may be considered a simple pleasure of childhood but nothing compares to the beauty of storytelling by us to our kids. As a parent and a caregiver, how much time do we spend telling stories and listening to stories with our children? Too little indeed!

Storytelling plays a critical part in early childhood education (ECE) and preschoolers' overall learning and development. Whether it is as simple as talking about your childhood real-life experiences or sharing a funny story about your day, storytelling offers several advantages to children.

Take a look at this list and learn about the benefits of storytelling for young minds.

Implants virtues: When we invest adequate time for storytelling, young children show a keen interest in listening to these interesting stories. By doing it regularly, you are instilling virtues they can carry with them as they grow old. Tell them stories with characters whose values they can compare and carry our stories with meaningful messages related to daily life. Taking time to do this inculcates valuable personality characteristics in children and helps them learn about kindness, empathy, wisdom, honesty, compassion and more concepts for holistic development.

Develops listening skills: It isn't always easy to hold a child's attention for a longer period. Many kids find it hard to concentrate on something for an extended period. They either interfere and do more of the talking or their minds end up wandering somewhere else. However, doing storytelling with your child can help improve their listening and concentration skills. They will become more attentive and learn how to increase their focus on a certain topic.

Fosters imagination: When children listen to a story, it makes them imagine and relate various characters, the plot, the setting, etc. It's way different from watching something on a screen. Storytelling encourages children's imagination to run around as the story unfolds. They can imagine the story whatever they want it to look like in their brains. It can even enhance their creativity and critical thinking and make them open to new ideas.

Increases cultural understanding: Telling stories opens the eyes and minds of young kids to notice new things – places, cultures and traditions. It makes them imagine being in the place of the story's characters, which develops their feelings of kindness, honesty and empathy as they



try to comprehend their actions.

Enhances communication skills: Reading and telling stories to children always improves their ability to express themselves. It encourages them to communicate their thoughts, feelings and ideas. When doing storytelling, make sure to encourage the little brainy to ask questions or discuss their thoughts. As we continue to indulge in a storytelling activity with the little ones, they will have a larger vocabulary bank as they pick up new words.

Sharpens memory: Storytelling is an excellent way to sharpen a child's memory and ability to sequence events. When we read them a story, we can do a review or ask them to recall some of the details related to the start, middle and end of the story. Ask them questions and assess how much information they have retained.

Makes learning easier: Telling stories to little preschoolers is a stepping stone for future academic learning. It's a good way to prepare them for school because it makes learning easier and natural. As mentioned earlier, storytelling helps increase a child's focus and concentration which are very important as they begin attending school.

Improves social skills: Through storytelling, children learn how to pay attention and listen actively to the person talking. By learning to be a more patient listener, improves their attention span too. It also opens their minds to other people's thoughts and understanding how every person's opinion varies.

Storytelling can bridge many communication gaps for young children about several new things and concepts connected with daily life and the world around them. Telling stories to them give them plenty of opportunities to learn wonderful ideas and situations they have never encountered before. Given all the stated benefits, parents and caregivers have all the reasons to spend adequate and planned time telling stories with young minds to the fullest.

(The writer is a Lahore-based senior educationist and freelance writer)

Remembering US-backed state terror in El Salvador

Belen Fernandez

Forty years ago, on December 11, 1981, one of the worst massacres in modern Latin American history commenced in El Salvador, in the village of El Mozote and its environs.

Some 1,000 civilians, most of them women and children, were slaughtered over a period of several days by the Salvadoran military's elite Atlacatl Battalion, which had been trained, funded, and equipped by the United States. A Jacobin Magazine tribute published on the 35th anniversary of the massacre recalls some of the gruesome scenes: "The soldiers entered the house and began slashing the children with machetes, breaking their skulls with their rifles and choking them to death. The youngest children were crammed into the church's convent, where the soldiers unloaded their rifles into them."

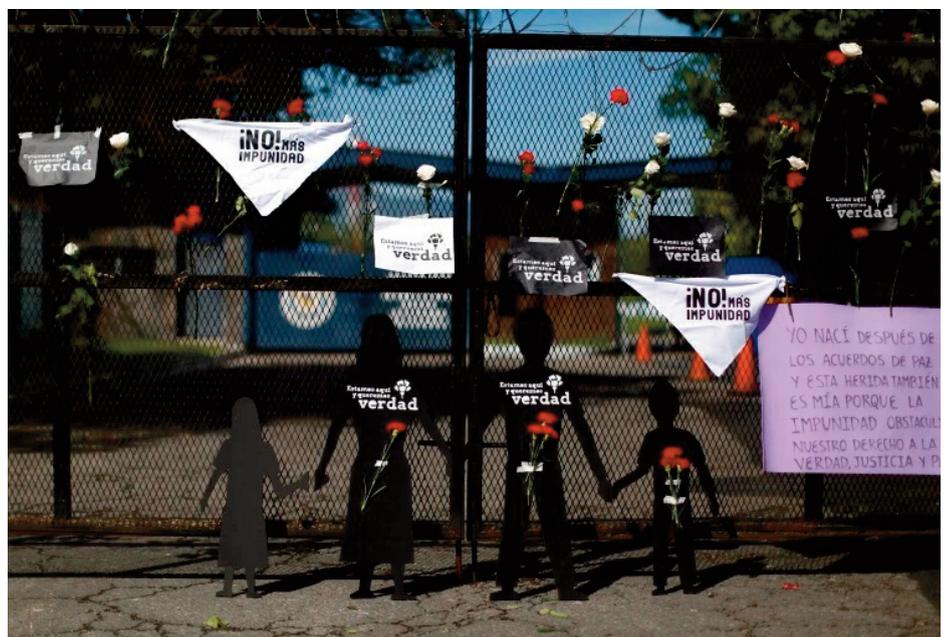
The bloodbath took place in the context of El Salvador's civil war of 1980-92, which ultimately killed more than 75,000 people – with the vast majority of atrocities perpetrated by the right-wing state in collaboration with paramilitary outfits and death squads. Joining in the collaborative effort, naturally, was everyone's favourite Cold War superpower to the north, the US, which throughout the course of its existential battle to make the world safe for capitalism has managed in the process to destroy countless human lives.

Between 1980 and 1982 alone, US military aid to El Salvador soared from \$6m to \$82m and would later skyrocket to more than \$1m per day. The continued overzealous funding was made possible in large part by the shamelessness with which officials from the Ronald Reagan administration lied to cover up Salvadoran state terror, including at El Mozote. The administration also waged a campaign to discredit the few journalists intent on exposing the truth, such as former New York Times correspondent Raymond Bonner, author of *Weakness and Deceit: America and El Salvador's Dirty War*.

In a new documentary titled "Massacre in El Salvador", Bonner and photographer Susan Meiselas reflect on the whole sordid affair in El Mozote, where they arrived together in January 1982 to find a "ghost town" and a severely traumatised woman named Rufina Amaya, one of the sole survivors. Amaya, whose blind husband and three daughters – aged five years, three years, and eight months – had perished in the slaughter, would later recall overhearing a conversation between soldiers of the Atlacatl Battalion: "Lieutenant, somebody here says he won't kill children", said one soldier. "Who's the son of a b**** who said that?" the lieutenant answered. "I am going to kill him."

Near the beginning of the "Massacre in El Salvador" documentary, a video clip features President Reagan – a former Hollywood actor – delivering the following lines in an apocalyptic tone better suited to the silver screen than to reality: "Very simply, guerrillas are attempting to impose a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship on the people of El Salvador."

Never mind that massacring 1,000 civilians is not any way to go about "saving" them from the spectre of communism – or from the guerrillas' dangerous attempts to bring some semblance of equality and justice to a country that had long suffered from the tyrannical rule of an exceptionally brutal elite. To be sure, the US has never had a problem with brutal right-wing



tyranny – as long as profits keep flowing in accordance with US interests.

Now, four decades after El Mozote and nearly three decades after the official end of the civil war, the latest Salvadoran tyrant – President and Twitter star Nayib Bukele, who has even bizarrely self-identified as the "world's coolest dictator" – is doing a fine job of ensuring that justice in the country remains ever elusive. In addition to blissfully converting El Salvador into a Bitcoin dystopia, Bukele has pursued various other actions befitting a, well, dictator – like firing five Salvadoran Supreme Court judges as well as the attorney general earlier this year.

Significantly, he also fired Judge Jorge Guzmán, who had been investigating the El Mozote case since 2016, when a post-civil war amnesty was reversed. The amnesty reversal had opened the possibility that the perpetrators of the massacre might finally be held accountable for their crimes – and that people like Maria Rosario, who lost 24 members of her family in the rampage, might obtain the emotional closure that human beings generally require in order to move on with their lives.

And yet responsibility for El Mozote extends far beyond the individuals from the Atlacatl Battalion who macheted and beheaded their way through the village and its surroundings. The US is also directly responsible for this as well as other episodes of state terror in El Salvador and many other territories across the world.

Thanks to the perks of imperial privilege, however, history and accountability are simultaneously disappeared – except, of course, when things like 9/11 happen, and then the global populace is commanded to "never forget". The notorious Elliott Abrams, who was appointed in 1981 as Reagan's assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs, dutifully promoted the US version of "human rights" by denying that the El Mozote massacre had ever transpired. Years later, he would continue to maintain that the Reagan administration had enjoyed a legacy of "fabulous achievement" in El Salvador. But while 40 years of murderous impunity is an achievement indeed, it is anything but fabulous.

The new US nutrition aid strategy undermines Africa's hungriest

Siera Vercillo, Alex Park

At last month's COP26 climate conference in Glasgow, US officials touted a new strategy to counter malnutrition in Africa – a problem that will only become worse in the face of climate change.

"We know that no one entity alone can tackle the threats to food security posed by climate change," Samantha Power, head of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), said at the conference (USAID leads the United States' Feed the Future initiative to modernise agriculture and improve nutrition around the world, especially in Africa). "That is why we are partnering with developing countries, with smallholder farmers and businesses, with universities and researchers at home and abroad, with Congress and with our counterparts in the US government – we must build a broad coalition to develop climate-smart solutions to end malnutrition and hunger."

But while officials like Power have emphasised their commitment to working with various local and international partners in their effort to end malnutrition and hunger in Africa, they have yet to acknowledge how the US is increasingly failing the group best placed to address Africa's malnutrition and food security problem: smallholder farmers. Since Feed the Future began in 2010, agencies like USAID have espoused a central role for smallholder farmers in their programmes, and for good reason: rates of malnutrition and many of the resulting maladies, like childhood stunting, are higher in Africa than on any other continent, and, since they make up a majority of the world's poorest people, smallholder farmers and their families tend to disproportionately suffer. At the same time, smallholders make up 80 percent of the world's farms and grow more than half of food calories in the Global South – much of it from diverse and nutritious foods.

But despite paying lip service to smallholders in Africa, the US never truly supported them. Over the past decade, its programmes elevated the interests of commercial farmers while pushing smallholder farmers to produce nutrient-poor commodity crops or leave farming altogether. And today, as climate change adds further urgency to the cause of agricultural transformation, organisations like USAID seem to be shifting their focus further away from supporting Africa's most vulnerable – and most important – farmers.

Ahead of COP26 and just weeks after the UN's Food Systems Summit in October – an event widely excoriated for giving food corporations a place of privilege – the US government released a new strategy document that framed nutrition as a technical problem for agro-processors to solve. In a list of "strategic pivots," the US government said it would deprioritise its support for those growing a major share of Africa's diverse foods – the small and medium-sized farmers – and focus instead on the factory-scale agribusinesses that can process commodity crops and manufacture nutrition in the form of added vitamins and minerals.

"While work at the household level remains important, particularly for rural populations," it said "focusing on households alone without addressing food systems is insufficient to make meaningful progress against widespread malnutrition." Instead of "focusing on households" by helping small farmers grow more nutritious food, the US will devote more resources to "large-scale fortification" – a technical term for funnelling low-nutrition crops to factories which can blend them with vitamins and minerals, often for



sale as packaged foods.

Far from expanding the US's food security effort to help farmers grow food that is inherently secure because it is nutrient-rich, biologically diverse, culturally appropriate and environmentally sustainable, the new plan will be as reliant on commodity crops like maize and rice as before. In the way the US's agriculture plans to date have encouraged farmers to rely on factory-synthesised chemicals to add nutrients to African land, its new nutrition plan promotes a reliance on factory-synthesised vitamins and minerals to add nutrients to African food.

US officials apparently believe the mistake was not encouraging smallholder farmers to grow the wrong crops in the wrong way, but putting farmers at the centre of a nutrition plan in the first place. Thus, the new focal point for assistance will be the factory, not the farm. But what can be gained from marginalising smallholders in a plan to reduce malnutrition? Smallholders have long been growing nutritious food in Africa. In West Africa, for example, farmers have been growing biologically diverse, nutrient-rich, indigenous crops like cowpea and fonio for generations. These crops are well suited to household nutritional needs, as well as the biodiversity of the local environments.

The idea that smallholders should remain central to efforts to improve nutrition is also well supported by research. Studies from around the world show smallholders can not only improve their own health, but the health of agricultural land by growing more diverse and nutritious food. A recent review of hundreds of studies on the subject from around the world led by Cornell University's Dr Rachel Bezner Kerr found that using indigenous seeds to grow a variety of culturally appropriate foods, in combination with livestock and agroforestry, can improve people's diets, particularly for small to medium-sized farming families who eat the foods they grow themselves. Other field-level changes like botanical pesticides and organic fertiliser can increase yields and stabilise production over the long term, reducing costs and increasing profitability for farmers while freeing up cash for other foods and allowing for more varied diets. Agroecological farming models have also been shown to improve childhood growth in some places – a widely accepted measure of nutritional health.

To save our planet, we need to criminalise ecocide

Nina de Ayala Parker

Fear without choice is debilitating, but fear as a motivator for change is a cause for hope.

As last month's 26th session of the Climate Conference of the Parties (COP26) slowly falls off the news agenda, every single one of us must continue to remember what has been promised there, and do everything we can to ensure those promises are delivered. We must also continue to demand more. To survive, we need to transform social, economic and technical aspects of our way of life. We can no longer afford to be complacent.

As Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate noted in her recent book *A Bigger Picture*, species are going extinct at a rate greater than the time of the dinosaurs. And as Mia Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados, explained in her opening speech at COP26, island nations are now facing a death sentence. One powerful solution to break this bloody chain of damage is to get "ecocide" recognised as a serious crime in international law.

The word ecocide combines the Greek "oikos", meaning house/home (and later understood to mean habitat/environment), with "cide", meaning to kill. It literally means "killing one's home". In legal terms, ecocide is defined as "unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts".

Criminalising ecocide would give everyone on this planet the ability to hold companies and governments to account for starting or continuing with the extraction of fossil fuels. An ecocide law could give us a fighting chance to save our future. From extended draughts in the dry corridor in Central America, to rising sea levels in the Ganges deltas, to climate-exacerbated conflicts in the Sahel and exponentially increasing flooding in Europe, there is no denying that we are at the height of a man-made crisis.

Nine major cities could be under water by 2030 if we do not drastically change society now – imagine a world without Amsterdam, Bangkok, Venice or New Orleans. And right now, in most of the world, no one is held responsible. It's time to change the laws. It's time to protect our home. Everyone should know the word "ecocide", especially the biggest polluters on our planet, the 20 companies – the Chevrans, Exxons, BPs and Shells of this world – who are responsible for a third of all carbon emissions.

If ecocide were to be criminalised, we could not only punish mass polluters for the damage they cause, but also prevent the advent of new fossil fuel companies and projects. Criminalising ecocide will thus slow down our fossil fuel consumption as we transition to green energy. In a world where ecocide is a crime, not species but exploitative profit-driven fossil fuel companies will become extinct.

As Farhana Yamin, environmental lawyer and participant in climate negotiations for more than 30 years, explained in her recent *Manifesto for Justice for COP26 and Beyond*, "the atmosphere, ocean, soils and forests don't get to negotiate. Smaller countries and Indigenous people are nature's custodians. Mother Earth may be mentioned in the Paris Agreement, but she lacks any legal standing."

It is also true that poorer countries, Indigenous peoples, small-scale farmers, children and the poor did not cause the climate crisis, do not get much of a voice in climate negotiations, but will suffer the consequences of climate change. Not only will criminalising ecocide be part of the solution for saving humanity, but it will give the most vulnerable in society, and na-



ture itself, a voice.

Right now, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) lists four crimes: Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity, War Crimes and Crimes of Aggression (recently added). The statute can be amended to add a fifth crime: Ecocide. Any state which has ratified (officially agreed to) the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) may propose an amendment. There are currently 123 of these "states parties". For the amendment to be considered, a majority of those present and voting at the next annual assembly of the ICC should agree to do so.

The ICC Assembly works on a one-state, one-vote basis. The voice of a small Pacific Island is therefore just as powerful as that of a large nation – and there are far more small island states than there are "large" nations. There has never been a more suitable time for this discussion. States will want to be seen to be taking this issue – and therefore this amendment – seriously.

To transition from proposal to law, at least a 2/3 majority of states parties (currently 82/123) must be in favour of the amendment. Once the law is adopted into the statute, the crime exists. States parties can then ratify (officially submit their agreement) and enforce the crime of ecocide into their own national law.

COP26 is now over, but what enforceability is there in place to prevent corporations and states from breaking commitments made? There is a gaping black hole of accountability and enforcement. A law on ecocide could fill that hole. Ecocide law will be preventative, and will also offer accountability. It will allow environmental lawyers to cite "ecocide" when holding a company or government to account. If ecocide were to be recognised in law, companies would struggle to start new fossil fuel projects like oil fields – because oil fields harm surrounding ecosystems and result in ecocide.

We are against the clock. The campaign to criminalise ecocide is not a new one. "Stop Ecocide" was the brainchild and life's work of the incredible late lawyer and activist Polly Higgins. Today, lawyers, campaigners, and activists are taking up Polly's work to once and for all get "ecocide" into the law books as a lifeline for humanity and vulnerable ecosystems on our precious blue planet.

Barriers to seeking psychiatric help

Research continues to highlight mental health disparities in Pakistan. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), mental health disorders make up four per cent of the total disease burden in Pakistan, with depression and anxiety leading the list of such disorders. With scarce resources for screening and treatment of psychiatric disorders, many are left with little to no option for proper assistance in these matters. Moreover, Pakistan has only 0.19 psychiatrists per 100,000 inhabitants, according to WHO estimates; one of the lowest numbers in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Stigma, a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, is one of the many barriers in the way of seeking professional help in terms of mental health in our society. A study conducted by clinical psychologists Keziban Salaheddin and Barbara Mason concluded that stigma and negative perceptions surrounding mental health and help-seeking may explain why young people are reluctant to approach others for help. Improving awareness in society about the available services and resources, and facilitated screening for psychological distress at the level of primary care services seem to be necessary for improving mental wellbeing. Shifting our thinking about therapy will shift how people seek help and talk about emotional and mental health issues. As a professional psychotherapist working in the United States, I have seen how this shift in thinking changes things positively. Pursuing therapy or treatment is not a sign that a person is emotionally weak and that only a professional can help them. In fact, it is a sign of strength that one is worthy of an unbiased, safe, and productive space to process their experiences and come out feeling healthy on the other side of the process. Just like a heart attack is a blood circulation crisis, depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation are mental health crises. Dislodging ourselves from the idea of hiding mental health issues will free our society of the barriers holding us back. Research shows us that untreated depression leads to higher rates of suicide, while treatment for depression is 70-80pc effective. Statistics support the efficacy and effectiveness of the treatment, yet the resistance to admitting and acknowledging help is the larger disease. The willingness to seek out resources is part of the larger discussion in terms of normalising the treatment of mental health issues. Mental illness does not discriminate on the basis of gender, race or socioeconomic status. Awareness and advocacy around issues related to mental health can start in the home. As a licensed therapist, I have seen first-hand how many families are hesitant in seeking help or admitting that they are seeing a therapist. People “fear” what others might think owing to a lack of understanding around mental health issues. Families routinely hide or minimise psychiatric symptoms in fear of the judgment that may come their way. This only exacerbates a condition that needs to be addressed before it is too late. Advocacy and awareness across all levels is essential in changing our attitude towards mental health. Seeking professional help for psychological needs should and must be done with the same ease that we seek out help for our physical ailments.

Sheema K. Majiduddin
Karachi

SBP transparency

Recently, the governor of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) shared the reasons behind the policy rate hike by 1.5 per cent, and for bringing forward the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting. This approach needs to be applauded. Such transparency and data-sharing with the stakeholders over major policy decisions should be institutionalised for all government departments. Furthermore, policies having an impact on businesses should be discussed upfront with the relevant stakeholders and their views should appropriately reflect in the policies and reasonable time should be given for subsequent implementation of those policies.

Moin Mohajir
Karachi

The education gap

Education plays a pivotal role in the personality development of children. The developed world spends much of its budget on early childhood education. However, the situation is quite different in Pakistan which spends only two per cent of its GDP on education. There are 52 million children aged 5-16 years in Pakistan, of which 22.8 million (44pc) are out of school. The Covid pandemic has only added fuel to the fire. Though the government took timely action and launched the TeleSchool programme in collaboration with leading EdTech platforms, this only benefited the students having elite backgrounds. The students from interior Sindh and Balochistan remained deprived of this benefit due to multiple reasons. They either did not have the sufficient gadgets to pursue their education while at home or their course contents did not match with those that were being taught. Resultantly, the education standard of the marginalised areas of Pakistan further declined. And this will have a severe impact on the literacy ratio of Pakistan. Last month, World Children’s Day was observed with the slogan of helping children to recover from interruptions and learning losses experienced owing to the pandemic. It is time Pakistan devised some effective mechanism to bridge the educational gap that the pandemic has created. Otherwise, the whole nation will have to face the music in the shape of increased illiteracy, unemployment and backwardness in all aspects of progress.

Javeriya Mahar
Hyderabad]

Dengue prevention

Dengue haemorrhagic fever is another crucial challenge to the country as it has already taken many precious lives. Of all the cases reported in Punjab, the majority has been recorded in Lahore which is a troubling indicator. Mosquito-borne diseases, like chikungunya, yellow fever and zika may also spread if due preventive action is not taken. People must take precautionary steps to keep themselves safe, while the government should take care of the rest.

Muna Manzoor
Kalatuk

ROUND UP

Our guide to keeping you updated on the latest news and reviews from around the world

Movies, Books, Science, Health

01 Science

Ancient giant orangutans evolved smaller bodies surprisingly slowly

Bruce Bower

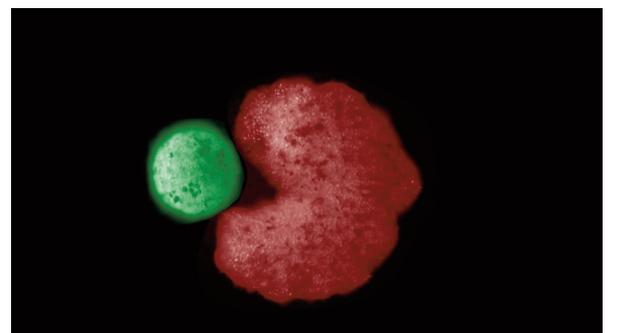
Giant orangutans that once dwelled in mainland Southeast Asian forests belonged to a single species that gradually shrank in size over nearly 2 million years, a study suggests. Today, orangutans are found only on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo. But their ancient, super-size kin roamed forests in what's now southern China and northern Vietnam. Fragmentary Asian fossils of uncertain age have long indicated that these massive, now-extinct orangutans shrank over time. And biological anthropologist Terry Harrison of New York University suspected — based on a small number of fossils from widely different time periods — that the apes rapidly evolved from a larger-bodied species to a different, smaller-bodied species roughly 400,000 years ago as the climate cooled. But an analysis of 600 ancient orangutan teeth unearthed in 10 caves in southern China supports a different evolutionary scenario, Harrison and colleagues report in the *Journal of Human Evolution*. From around 2 million to 111,000 years ago, the shapes of the teeth remained largely the same, suggesting all were from a single orangutan species. But tooth sizes progressively declined. Using tooth measurements, Harrison, paleoanthropologist Yingqi Zhang of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing and colleagues estimate that the ancient orangutans' average body mass started out around 96 kilograms, close to double that of orangutans today. By around 111,000 years ago, the ancient apes' average body mass was almost 80 kilograms, which still exceeded that of modern orangutans by nearly 25 kilograms. Fossils of other ancient Asian animals, including rhinos and monkeys, also show declines in body size over the same period.



Tiny living machines called xenobots can create copies of themselves

Laura Sanders

Tiny “living machines” made of frog cells can replicate themselves, making copies that can then go on to do the same. This newly described form of renewal offers insights into



how to design biological machines that are self-perpetuating.

“This is an incredibly exciting breakthrough,” for the field of biologically based robotics, says Kirstin Petersen, an electrical and computer engineer at Cornell University who studies groups of robots. Robots that can copy themselves are an important step toward systems that don't need humans to operate, she says. Earlier this year, researchers described the behaviors of the lab-made living robots, called xenobots. Plucked out of frogs' growing bodies, small clumps of skin stem cells from frog embryos knitted themselves into small spheres and began to move. Cellular extensions called cilia served as motors that powered the xenobots as they cruised around their lab dishes. That cruising can have a bigger purpose, the researchers now report in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. As the xenobots bumble about, they can gather loose frog cells into spheres, which then coalesce into xenobots themselves. This type of movement-created reproduction, called kinematic self-replication by the researchers, appears to be new for living cells. Usually, reproducing organisms contribute some parental material to their offspring, says study coauthor Douglas Blackiston of Tufts University in Medford, Mass., and Harvard University. Reproduction, for instance, requires parental cells to get started. Other types of reproduction involve cells splitting or budding off from a parent. “Here, this is different,” Blackiston says.

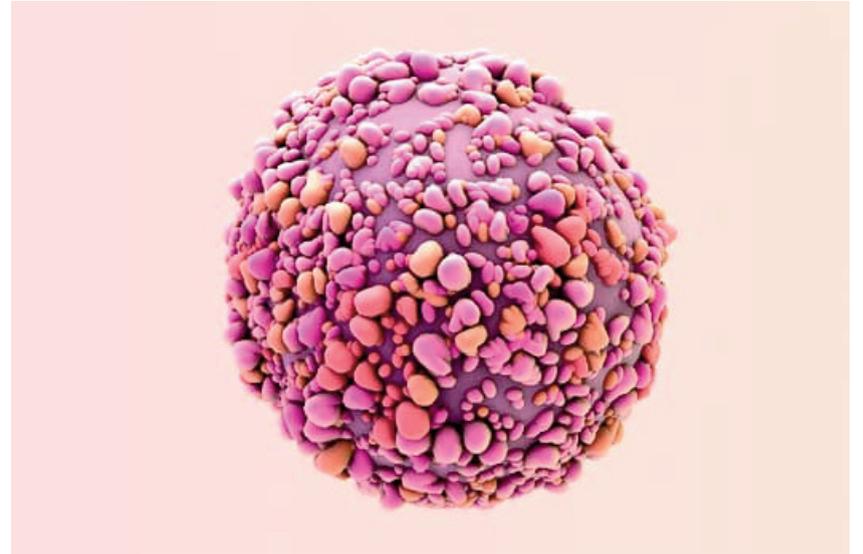
In COVID battle, Omicron may outrun Delta, experts say

Brenda Goodman

The genetic changes found in the new Omicron variant show that it could be passed more easily from person to person than Delta, according to the latest threat assessment from the United Kingdom's Health Security Agency, which has done some of the best and fastest analyses of coronavirus variants in the world.

Another new report, from the Network for Genomic Surveillance in South Africa, supports that assessment. It shows that Omicron has quickly outpaced Delta in South Africa. In October, 80% of all coronavirus samples sequenced in that country were from the Delta lineage. Omicron wasn't even part of the mix. In November, 75% of sequenced viruses have been Omicron, with 22% Delta. In the new U.K. report, scientists write that Omicron's mutations appear to help the virus replicate more quickly in the body and may help it bind more tightly to the ACE2 receptor on human cells.

Based on structural modeling of viral genetic changes, the report says the virus has mutations that change the shape of all four of the sites where neutralizing antibodies lock onto it, making it likely that it can evade natural immunity. Indeed, early research from South Africa suggests that people who have already been infected with the coronavirus may be getting infected again with Omicron. Based on the same structural modeling, it's highly likely that Omicron has escaped at least some of the protection peo-



ple get from COVID-19 vaccines, although laboratory testing and epidemiological studies are needed before we can know that for sure. The modeling also suggests that monoclonal antibodies may not work as well against this variant, but lab tests are needed for clarity on this point, too.

First malaria vaccine a major milestone despite hurdles ahead

Kaitlin Sullivan

The parasite that causes malaria can kill a person within 24 hours of symptoms appearing. Patients' symptoms are flu-like, including a fever, headache, and chills. It all starts with a microscopic poke.

During the first 15 years of this century, worldwide efforts to curb malaria cut cases by 40%, and deaths fell by more than 60%. But in 2015, that progress plateaued. Since then, malaria has been quietly rising after cases had been falling steadily for over a decade. Scientists know the parasites that cause malaria have evolved to resist drugs for as long as we've had them. These mutations have historically popped up first in Southeast Asia's Greater Mekong Delta, and then spread to Africa, elsewhere in Asia, and South America from there -- but this time it's different.

In October of this year, the World Health Organization endorsed the first-ever malaria vaccine, the protein-based RTS,S/AS01. The four-dose vaccine, advanced by landmark COVID-19 prevention efforts, is a major milestone that scientists have painstakingly worked toward for decades. But experts say the vaccine alone is not yet enough to stop malaria infections.

"The vaccine can regain the momentum in reducing disease, but it cannot replace drugs, it's not effective enough," Fidock says. The fact that malaria is caused by parasites, rather than bacteria or a virus, is at the crux of why it's been so difficult to develop a vaccine against it. The *P. falciparum* parasite has roughly 5,300 genes "that it can use to evade anything the host can throw at it," says Dyann Wirth, PhD, a professor of immunology and infectious diseases at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

For comparison, the largest viruses have around 200. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, has just 11. The new malaria vaccine will be most effective when it's used along with existing prevention methods, including bed nets, chemical insecticides, and the frontline artemisinin-combination treatment, or ACT. The threat of resistance remains. "Just as the



virus that causes COVID has mutated, the parasites do the same. They are living elements that also want to survive, and the only way to survive is to mutate," says Pascal Ringwald, MD, who leads the World Health Organization Global Malaria Program's Drug Resistance and Containment Unit. Parasites also need to be targeted during multiple stages of their life cycle, which involves two hosts: the mosquito and the infected human. Attacking at different stages in their life cycle appears key for effective vaccine treatments. "You cannot depend on one vaccine, but you can use multiple vaccines to target different life stages of the parasite. So if you have a parasite that is resistant to a vaccine in one stage, you can target it at another stage," says Solomon Conteh, a molecular virologist with the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

West Side Story

Helen O'Hara

This is the first, full Steven Spielberg musical, and it seems he has been depriving himself and us all. From the opening shot, set to the eerie, lonesome whistle of 'Act I: Prologue', there's barely a frame that isn't beautiful or a beat that feels off. His camera sweeps over a demolition project and recalls Soy Cuba's famous one before descending a crane to ground level. In other words, Spielberg literally comes in like a wrecking ball, emphasising that the setting is a turf war for vanishing turf that both gangs are, ultimately, destined to lose.



Despite the period setting and dance-fighting, this is a recognisable world, one where police are harder on communities of colour than their white counterparts and where a trans boy struggles for acceptance among toxically masculine peers. Tony Kushner's script has adopted elements of both the stage show and 1961 film to create a sharper version than we've seen before, and Spielberg also freshens things up in small ways. Now Puerto Rican characters speak in quick Spanish among themselves, except when specifically reminded to practise their English by the assimilationist Anita (Ariana DeBose), and Spielberg doesn't 'other' them by adding subtitles. Amid gang warfare, poverty and exclusion, love blossoms between reformed Jets brawler Tony (Ansel Elgort) and Maria (Rachel Zegler), sister to the Sharks' leader Bernardo (David Alvarez). Their union fuels the conflict between the Jets and Sharks, led by Riff (Mike Faist) and Bernardo respectively, both magnetic, charismatic leaders.

Blue Bayou

Pamela Hutchinson

Justin Chon, writer, director, producer and star of Blue Bayou, may be best known for his role in the Twilight films, but since his Sundance-lauded debut Gook in 2017, he has made films that combine melodrama with social



commentary and low-key aestheticism. So it is with this tear-jerking, New Orleans-set tale of a Korean-American unexpectedly facing deportation. The film's laudatory aim is to illuminate the precarity of adopted immigrant children in the US. Chon and Alicia Vikander, as Antonio and his pregnant wife Kathy, turn in fine performances marred only slightly by a touch of the histrionic (him) and a border-crossing accent (her). There's a hint of magic realism in enigmatic flashbacks; raw-edged, luscious 16mm cinematography; a smart child performance from Sydney Kowalske as Antonio's stepdaughter; and a welcome cameo by Vondie Curtis-Hall as the family's immigration lawyer. Sadly much of this good work is drowned out by over-explained symbolism and a lazy recourse to glowing sunsets over the Mississippi River that coat the film's bitter pill in jam. There are scripting issues too. Antonio is beset by cartoon villains: his tight-lipped mother-in-law (Geraldine Singer), implicitly a bigot, and a pig-ignorant cop (Emory Cohen) as spectacularly thick as he is malicious. Most disappointingly, wonderful actor Linh Dan Pham plays a Vietnamese-American stranger who appears intermittently to offer Antonio solace despite her own travails: a Manic Pixie Dream Immigrant, if ever there were one.

The Hand of God

Alex Godfrey

There's an explosion of colour in The Hand of God, director Paolo Sorrentino's brazenly autobiographical love letter to the Italy of his youth, and a reckoning with the childhood experiences that



changed his life. There's an adorable breeziness to the first half, where everything is bright and everyone is fabulous, where Italy is to die for, and where familial banter takes no prisoners. Hormonal teenage boy Fabietto Schisa (Filippo Scotti) serves as Sorrentino's fictional avatar, navigating this beguiling eco-system, and it's an idiosyncratic, idyllic coming-of-age, to some extent recalling Bernardo Bertolucci's Stealing Beauty. For quite some time, not much happens, and doesn't need to: life just drifts by, and it's a pleasure to behold, Sorrentino in love with everybody's faces, and flooding it all with romantic, rose-tinted glasses. Or does he? There are cracks. Some of these people are damaged, and some less obviously than others. More so as the years pass. There is failure and disappointment and weariness. "Don't look at me," says an older lady. "There's nothing to see." Then, around halfway through, paradise is punctured, as tragedy invades the bliss, and Fabietto, thrown a crippling curveball, must grow up quickly. From there, the colour dials down and things change course, as he learns some life lessons from an eclectic, eccentric parade of unlikely role models who hand down their own experiences to this curious and malleable kid.

The Summit of the Gods

Kambole Campbell

It feels like an increasing rarity to experience animation like The Summit of the Gods, a mesmerising combination of sheer scale and quiet contemplation. Though it at first stumbles over some lengthy exposition and its



elliptical editing can get confusing, it's a mighty feat of adaptation. Director Patrick Imbert distills five volumes of the manga by the late artist Jiro Taniguchi and Baku Yumemakura (the manga itself adapted from Yumemakura's novel), into a tight but epic 90 minutes. Even in that truncated time, Imbert maintains the core of the man-versus-nature story as well as its relatively patient pace. The animation embraces naturalism, combining simple but expressive drawings with nuanced character acting, and contrasting cluttered human spaces with the expansiveness of the mountain range. As well as that detailed attention, the comic's sense of mythic grandeur remains in the overwhelming scale of the mountain, placing us right beside its characters in their sense of awe. Imbert maintains this immersion through some incredibly intricate sound design and excellent voice work, in the dubbed and subbed versions alike. For the sake of practicality, the drawing style is a little simpler in the film than its source; Taniguchi's dense and rugged linework would be too complicated to put in motion, but Imbert finds an appropriately expressive halfway point. The Summit of the Gods pours that meticulousness instead into depicting the natural world with photorealistic detail.

04

Books

Here's to us

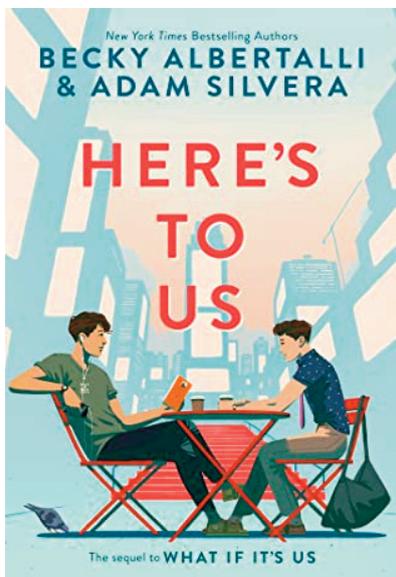
Adam Silvera

In the follow-up to their charming New York Times bestseller, *What If It's Us*, best friends Adam Silvera (They both die at the End) and Becky Albertalli (Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda) reunite to give Arthur and Ben another shot at true love.

From the creator of *13 Reasons Why*, *What If It's Us* is soon to be a feature film! Ben has spent his first year of college working on his fantasy manuscript with his writing partner Mario, who is a great Spanish tutor. So why can't he stop thinking about the fact that Arthur's back in town two years after they called it quits?

Arthur is in New York for a dream internship on Broadway, with a boyfriend back at home that he couldn't be happier with. But when he comes upon Ben cuddled up with a mystery boy, he starts to wonder if his feelings for Ben ever truly went away. Even as the boys try to focus on their futures, they can't seem to help running into each other in the present. Is the universe forcing them to question if they're actually meant to be? Possibly not. After all, things didn't work the first time around. Possibly yes. After all, the sparks are still flying. Sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith and raise a glass.

Here's to celebrating old friends! Here's to embracing new beginnings! Here's to believing in second chances!



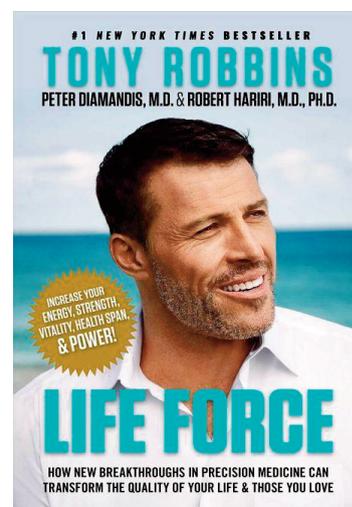
Life Force

Tony Robbins

What if there were scientific solutions that could wipe out your deepest fears of falling ill, receiving a life-threatening diagnosis, or feeling the effects of ageing? What if you had access to the same cutting-edge tools and technology used by peak performers and the world's greatest athletes?

In a world full of fear and uncertainty about our health, it can be difficult to know where to turn for actionable advice you can trust. Today, leading scientists and doctors in the field of regenerative medicine are developing diagnostic tools and safe and effective therapies that can free you from fear. In this book, Tony Robbins, the world's number one life and business strategist who has coached more than fifty million people, brings you more than 100 of the world's top medical minds and the latest research, inspiring comeback stories, and amazing advancements in precision medicine that you can apply today to help extend the length and quality of your life.

This book is the result of Robbins going on his own life-changing journey. After being told that his health challenges were irreversible, he experienced firsthand how new regenerative technology not only helped him heal but made him stronger than ever before. *Life Force* will show you how you can wake up every day with increased energy, a more bulletproof immune system, and the know-how to help turn back your biological clock. This is a book for everyone, from peak performance athletes, to the average person who wants to increase their energy and strength, to those looking for healing. *Life Force* provides answers that can transform and even save your life, or that of someone you love.

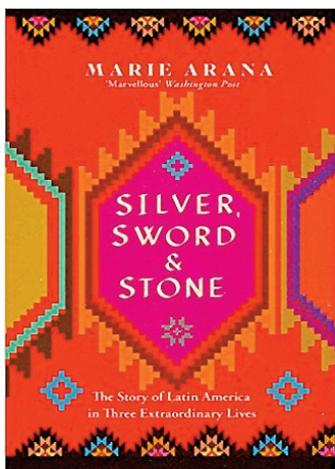


Silver, Sword and Stone

Marie Arana

The timeless stories of three contemporary Latin Americans whose lives represent three driving forces that have shaped the character of the region: exploitation, violence, and religion.

Leonor Gonzales, a miner's widow, lives in a tiny community perched in the Andean cordillera of Peru, the highest human habitation on earth. Carlos Buergos is a Cuban who fought in the civil war in Angola and was among hundreds of criminals Cuba expelled to the USA. Xavier Albó is a Jesuit priest from Barcelona who emigrated to Bolivia, where he works among the indigenous people. In *Silver, Sword and Stone* Marie Arana seamlessly weaves these stories with the history of the past millennium to explain three enduring themes that have defined Latin America since pre-Columbian times: the foreign greed for its mineral riches, an ingrained history of violence, and the abiding power of religion. What emerges is a vibrant portrait of a people whose lives are increasingly intertwined with our own.

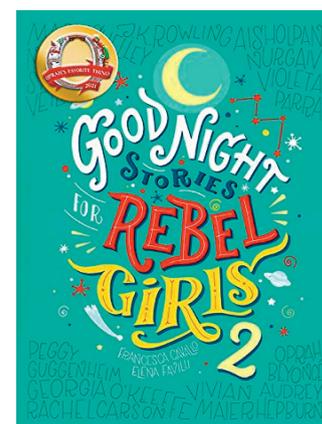


Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2

Francesca Cavallo

As Oprah says on Oprah Daily, "Reading can inspire you to do great things—what a great gift for a preteen! This series features boundary-breaking women and includes stories about some who have moved me the most—like Toni Morrison. They even included me!"

In this book, readers will embark on an empowering journey through 100 new bedtime stories, featuring the adventures of extraordinary women through the ages, from Nefertiti to Beyoncé. The unique narrative style of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* transforms each biography into a fairytale, filling readers with wonder and a burning curiosity to know more about each hero. *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2* boasts a brand-new graphic design, a glossary, and full-page, full-color portraits of each subject, created by the best female artists of our time.



SAFEX

SALON RAZOR



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اسٹرا



سیفیکس

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