

The Business

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SOEs losses

Federal Minister for Industries and Production Hammad Azhar has disclosed that the cumulative losses of State-Owned Entities (SOEs) have reached Rs 2 trillion mark. Taken in perspective this figure amounts to 41 percent of total FBR collections projected for the current year, 51 percent of the total revised FBR collections in 2019-20, nearly Rs 700 billion more than the revised non-tax revenue estimates for the outgoing year and a trillion rupees more than the total projected non-tax revenue for the current year, and is only Rs 900 billion lower than the markup for domestic and external debt in the current year and 800 billion rupees more than the allocation for defense during the current year. Instead of taking cognizance of these disturbing statistics and trying to curtail the losses, the present government appears to be focused on a roll-back of the already devolved powers to the provinces; and, more particularly, to revisit the 2010 NFC award that raised the share of the provinces in the federal divisible pool and the 18th Constitutional Amendment that disallowed a cut in the shares of the federating units in a previous NFC award. Incidentally, Sheikh's approach can be supported because had Pakistan Steel Mills (PSM) been privatized during Musharraf's era then the hundreds of billions of rupees that have been released to the entity since, including salaries of the employees, would have been saved.

While in all fairness this government is merely following in the footsteps of its predecessors as neither the PPP government nor its successor the PML-N, achieved any of the objectives outlined in the 10th NFC Award and the 18th Amendment yet this constant postponement accounts for a steady rise in the SOE losses. The PML-N manifesto and subsequent agreement with the IMF in September 2013 as noted in the memorandum on economic and financial policies for 2013/14-2015-16. The PTI prior to forming the government had supported restructuring through the establishment of Sarmaya Pakistan which, through adhering to a policy of meritocracy in appointments, was envisaged to have the capacity to turn loss-making SOEs around. That proposal appears to be floundering 20 months into the tenure for three reasons. First, because of lack of the requisite resources to empower Sarmaya Pakistan; second, unlike the model followed in Malaysia SOEs losses far outpace their assets; and finally with the induction of Dr Hafeez Sheikh as the Advisor on Finance, a man whose stated objective in previous executive positions he held in the country was to privatize loss-making units, the idea of Sarmaya Pakistan is all but dead.

Letters to the Editor

No more wheat

This refers to the news story, 'Country no more self-sufficient in wheat, NA told'. According to National Food Security Minister Syed Fakhar Imam, the National Assembly has been informed that Pakistan is no longer self-sufficient in wheat, as per acre yield or productivity has declined, in spite of the fact that Pakistan is an agricultural state. He went on to elaborate that 25 million tonnes of wheat was produced this year against the target of 27 million tonnes, and to ensure that there is no shortage of the commodity and to keep its price stable, the government had allowed the private sector to import wheat. Our population quantum is more than self-sufficient at some 211 million heads and still growing, whereas the harvest of our staple food crop has actually decreased from a high of 26-27 million tonnes recorded just two or three years ago. This mismatch could cost us dearly in the near future, as issues could erupt such as food riots, price escalation, hoarding of the commodity, etc. There is every likelihood of such an event or events occurring, considering we are adept at 'mismanaging' everything, doing little or no preparatory work, and pushing the blame, simply, on the so-called 'mafias'. So, please start ringing the alarm bells. We must aim to bring our population resource rapidly at par with our available resources, be it in agriculture, industry, services, education, healthcare, housing, or jobs. Why should we try to resolve all other problems rather than the core issue of our ever-expanding head count?

Abbas R Siddiqi
LAHORE

Repetitive TV

The TV dramas being screened on different TV channels these days are becoming boring with every passing day. Normally any drama is of one hour's duration. What is happening these days is that at least the first half of the drama is the repetition of the previous episode. Hence those of us who follow their favourite dramas have to wait for at least half an hour to know the further part of the story. I don't really understand the wisdom behind this. Till recently, TV channels used to quickly show in the first two to three minutes the shortened version of the previous episode. That was better practice instead of wasting half an hour of the viewers.

Cdre (r) Sajjad Ali Shah Bokhari
ISLAMABAD

Automatic savings

It is very difficult to stand in line for hours to receive one's monthly profit from the National Savings Centers. I appeal to the concerned to immediately start automation in the National Savings Centers so that the monthly profit is transferred to customers' bank accounts in order to save the elderly from painful visits to the NSCs.

Khalid Mehmood
PESHAWAR

Propensity to easy options

Muhammad Usman

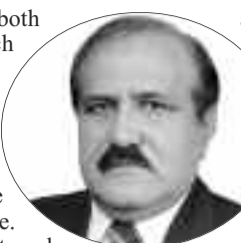
The groundbreaking of Diamer-Bhasha Dam and Kohala Hydropower project and Mohmand Dam are landmark developments for water storage, flood mitigation, irrigation and generation of cheap and clean energy after a long frustrating break of over five decades. Most sadly, intervening period went down the drain, marked with expediencies, indifference and sloth by self-seeking leadership however, there also remained public apathy and helplessness which helped in attainment of their evil designs. Ironically, stone laying of these projects have been performed by a man who is constantly under the butt of contempt and disapproval on one pretext or the other. In an aimless fad, vigorously as well as casually, we are trying to portray him an outright incompetent and clueless man at instigation of same unsavoury lot who have robbed our future.

There is one thing more irresistible before moving further. This is commitment of his government to inquire into every scandal, inimical to collective good and make it public. It is again a breathtaking development in a country where every foul, perpetuated by ruling elite was kept under wraps. This act reminds about pristine age of Islam where uprightness and sanctity of law prevailed albeit it is a first step and has to go a long way to achieve the ultimate end. Notwithstanding their immense importance for socio-economic devel-

opment and rule of law, both initiatives failed to fetch adequate public attention and spotlight on media screen. This is reflective of our sorry state in which we are passing through and impelled me to pen down this discourse.

Without fear of doubt and contradiction, there is no space left for second opinion about abiding conduct of our ruling elite. The plunder and treachery are inseparable particles of their chemistry. They could stoop to any low to satisfy insatiable desires of theirs and their progenies for power and material possession. They have wrecked everything under their watch which could obstruct their way. These include law, justice, institutions and wealth of the country. In process, people got reduced to rubbles and repeatedly gave them wild cards electorally to ransack them mentally, morally and materially. Consequently, as a whole, we stand hallow on these scores. Intellectually, people lost the ability to sift slogans from reality and discriminate between wrong and right.

Time in and time out, wickedly, crooked elite calls them highly awake people to keep them in good humour and blissfully, they also believed so. In reality, largely, at best, stuff of their awareness is superficial. It is evident from the fact that they called a swindler/upstart Zardari, Nelson Mandela. This was an absolute insult to actual Mandela. He must have rolled in his grave for such an



absurd equation. A chicken hearted Nawaz Sharif is called a lion. He has always shown his back in adversity but generosity of people continues unabated. Morally we have weakened alarmingly. We vociferously speak against moral ills but embrace them readily if fraction of them suits to our convenience. Most glaring example is falsehood in which we trade freely even for petty gains. Honesty is no more best policy. The character building is no more special burden of our society. Materially, we again smell too rotten. Its ugliest picture, world saw in coronavirus pandemic when we gleefully fleeced the humanity at sky-high price. Without qualm, our business community makes cartel to suck dry rich and poor alike.

The cumulative effect of above, has left us with a mindset/behaviour which favours those who brought us to this impasse. We have grown exceedingly clever but equally unwise. Its abject manifestation is seen when there is some hiccup in flow of traffic. Instead of waiting in line, we quadruple the lines if space allows even scantily. The net result is a total traffic jam, causing loss to all. Such a mindset has rendered us greedy and grasping. We fondly hope for lotteries. In a rat race, we have also become susceptible to easy compromise/way-out even on clumsy grounds. This is much more on the cards if it on national expense/cost of others. This is what is happening with

change of Imran Khan. Along with him, people clamoured for change. Admittedly, under him, change is not finding its feet for plethora of reasons. Some are of his own making and many are products of others.

The opposition to change is stiff and united within and without. All have ganged up against him for a last ditch battle. After finding no support from powerful quarters, they have now pinned hope on impatience of people and appear to be optimistic. They see fair possibility owing to their propensity to quick fixes. In league with partisan media, they are exploiting this weakness maximally. Unfortunately, people have once again started seeing saviours among proven hounds. The frustration of impoverished people is understandable. In case of middle class/above, it is nothing but unintended expression of above cited psyche of even accepting window dressing if actual one is hard to come by regardless of heavier cost it may extract later. They need to understand that change is never easy. It ought to encounter formidable opposition. Often it is a marathon devoid of short cuts. This is no time for resignation. This is time to stand up and be counted if they want to secure their future. An easy option may/may not give them half loaf but surely no bread next time or earlier if we accept past a guide. The choice is ours.

— The writer, a retired Lt Col, is freelance columnist



Ensuring water security

MARIA KHALID

Water has always been the prerequisite and source of life. Due to the increase in population, the nature of water requirements has shifted to become multidimensional and is not basic anymore. Since Pakistan's formation India has been locked in a pattern of challenging its traditional and non-traditional security. India has been waging an aggressive water war on Pakistan to stop the flow of water on various occasions and of late under the current government, has even threatened to abrogate the Indus Waters Treaty unilaterally. In the same vein, Pakistan has raised serious concerns over the projects on the western rivers that are in violation of the Indus Waters Treaty such as the Kishanganga Dam, Rattle project, Pakal Dul Dam and Lower Kalnal hydropower projects on the Chenab River, among many other such cases in the past, as these reservoirs can be used to create artificial water shortage or flooding in Pakistan. However, this Indian intransigence has continued unabated. Its actions are in violation of the conditions of the Treaty which doesn't allow India to use the waters of the western rivers in non-consumptive ways that deplete the water level downstream or change the course of the rivers. India's antagonistic behavior isn't limited to its agenda to use and divert Pakistan's share of water on the western rivers, it also tries to exert its influence through different mediums. Since the Government of Pakistan announced construction of Diamer-Bhasha Dam, efforts are being made to directly and indirectly sabotage the project which is clearly indicated by overt criticism and covert opposition from the eastern neighbour.

Pakistan is facing serious shortage of water. An acute shortage of drinking and irrigation water is expected in Pakistan by the year 2025 and if the water resources aren't managed, there is probability of a drought-like situation by 2040 which will turn fertile lands into deserts. Being a lower riparian country, it is important for Pakistan to stress on water conservation. During the floods of 2010, 2012 and 2014, 90 MAF water was lost due to the lack of adequate storage besides the devastating effect on crops, livestock and infrastructure. Had that water been stored, it could have been useful during the low flowing period for various sectors. Presently, we have only two big dams in Mangla and Tarbela.

The government has recently initiated the construction of Diamer-Bhasha (8.1 MAF storage with 4500 MW hydropower) and Mohmand Dam (1.239 MAF storage with 800 MW hydropower) which have remained in limbo for decades. In addition to reducing water shortage of the country, improving water storage, production of cheap and affordable electricity and meeting agriculture requirements, it

will add 35 years to Tarbela Dam through the reduction in sedimentation.

Water is crucial to all aspects of development such as food security, poverty reduction and health, and in sustaining economic growth in our agrarian economy, energy generation and industry. It is crucial for the continued functioning of the ecosystem on which the socio-economic development is dependent on as well as the challenges associated with society-water interface. It has a direct impact on the economy, agriculture, irrigation and the availability and provision of cheap electricity. With water availability per person declining over time and demand for food production continuously on the rise, Pakistan is faced with critical concerns regarding its future food security and the likely effects of climate change on the country's steadily growing water demand.

As the planet enters a perilous period of environmental changes that would bring about adverse conditions such as droughts and melting glaciers, we must plan for the longer run and take steps to bridge the water demand and supply in Pakistan. Experts have emphasized on the need to build new water reservoirs to prevent the loss of water and optimal utilization of the available water resources while bringing innovative techniques to the agricultural sector, changing our agricultural practices that lay waste to water.

182,963 million rupees have been earmarked by the government for the big and small projects including the ongoing hydel, water sector projects and new schemes under Annual Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) 2020-21. The water-related problems that Pakistan is facing can be resolved or at least alleviated by good water management that can be achieved by a good quantity made accessible for use by the society as a result of technical arrangements and infrastructure apart from the quantity of water naturally available to the population.

The economic prosperity, daily life of individuals, and agricultural requirements are linked to the country's overall security mosaic.

The country would greatly benefit from the opportunities that would address these challenges vis-à-vis economic and environmental aspects of building new reservoirs including flood control, water supply, hydroelectric power and irrigation.

This would mitigate the greatest emerging threat to its economic viability while securing its future and save the country from serious repercussions. Pakistan as a nation is cognizant of its security requirements and the ground realities as the country embarks on projects of national importance and would not let anything jeopardize that.

The writer is Editor of the English Monthly Hill of ISPR

The fallen Buddha

RAFIA ZAKARIA

Three years ago, Pakistan was celebrating statues of the Buddha. One of the world's oldest sleeping Buddha had been unearthed in Bhamala in Haripur. The unveiling of the sleeping Buddha was strategic, meant to highlight the end of an era. The ravages of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were now over, as was their theatrical destruction of ancient relics that are a part of world history. No longer would Pakistan be known as a place where the unthinking destruction of world history occurs, no longer would Pakistan be a place where there was no tolerance for the religious relics of other faiths. Even then opposition leader Imran Khan made a statement noting that the issue "is a question of preserving these heritage sites, which are an asset for the country".

That was in 2017, just a year after the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Antiquities Act was passed. The legislation made it mandatory for anyone who found ancient artefacts to immediately inform the government. Even more importantly, it made it a crime to "destroy, break, damage, alter, injure, deface or mutilate or scribble, write or engage any inscription or sign on, any antiquity or take manure from any protected antiquity or important antiquity". Even more crucially, the act specified that any person committing these crimes could be imprisoned for five years or fined Rs2 million, or both.

It is now time to enforce the act. Earlier this week, a video surfaced on social media showing a group of men unearthing an ancient Buddha sculpture. Then a man takes a hammer and starts destroying the relic. Other men can be seen watching and making videos of the destruction. The act was allegedly carried out at the behest and provocation of a cleric who had told the men that even their nikah would be rendered invalid and they would no longer be considered believers if they did not immediately destroy the statue.

After everything was over and the statue had been destroyed, police arrested four men under the Antiquities Act. The director of archaeology and museums, Abdul Samad, declared that those who had destroyed the statue would be duly punished. A few hours later, officials tweeted that the four men responsible for the vandalism had been arrested and were in police custody.

The Buddha, of course, is destroyed. It had been found accidentally, and it is evident from the video that it was in good condition when it was found. It will never be in good condition again. Even after the men have been punished, put in prison for five years or been made to pay Rs2m, the destroyed piece from so long ago will never be whole again. That is the thing with things that are destroyed; they can never be returned to what they were. If the unveiling of



the sleeping Buddha discovered in 2017 is any evidence, Pakistan's rediscovered respect for history was supposed to represent the turning of the page on the age of the TTP. The new tolerant Pakistan, equipped with the particular legislation on protecting antiquities, was not supposed to do such a thing. And yet, as these recent events point out, the production of a tolerant Pakistan has not been so easy. Clerics in villages are still saying the same things that they have said to incite people to violence — against people, against objects and against history — as they have done before.

Solutions are hard things to find. On the provincial government's part, a law has been passed and is being enforced. After all, how are the police to know that such a statue has been found and, then, in the current mess of the pandemic and heat and deprivation, respond and protect such an object? Then, there is the fact that while the TTP's hold has to some relative extent been reduced, little can be done about the people who still exhibit TTP tendencies. Even as governments change and wars end, people can remain the same, hold on to the same prejudices and believe that the mere existence of a historical relic is a threat to their beliefs.

Given the importance of unveiling the sleeping Buddha in 2017, our governments evidently realise that there is international import to the discovery and restoration of the ancient relics that are found in Pakistan. In this respect, simply and only passing a law, whose existence is unknown to most of the people who would and could find such a relic in the rural areas of northwest Pakistan, cannot be the solution. The edicts of clerics in mosques and their incitement to force the destruction of antiquities cannot be countered so easily.

If Pakistan is really turning the page on its terrible 'Talibanised' past, it should make a more sincere effort. The area where the Buddha was found is one where hundreds of ancient relics have been excavated. It would make sense for the government to provide some funds for their excavation and proper storage in a museum. Acts such as these would state clearly and for all that Pakistan accepts the part of its heritage that existed before Islam. If this sort of rational thinking is not possible, the excavated objects could be given away to a museum in a country that does not feel threatened by its own history.

It is easy to say that the era of the TTP is over. It is just as easy to unveil a Buddha and declare that the new Pakistan is able to respect history and a heritage that is pre-Islamic. Much more difficult is the project of transforming a culture that has been so corrupted with religious obscurantism that inanimate objects are a danger to its very existence, its idea of itself.