

The Business

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PIA's reputation

PIA, and with it Pakistan's reputation continue to pay a price for the speech Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan delivered in the National Assembly after the PK-8303 crash in Karachi claiming 97 lives. He had declared that 260 of 860 commercial pilots in this country had fake or dubious licences, adding "they did not take the exam themselves" and had someone else to sit it on their behalf. As a result, first the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) suspended PIA's flights to the EU countries for six months, followed by the UAE. Then several other countries, including Vietnam, Malaysia and Kuwait, even Ethiopia grounded Pakistani pilots voicing concern over their licences. In an unsurprising development, the US Department of Transportation (DOT) also revoked the special permission granted to PIA to operate special flights. According to a DOT notification, the action follows "recent events identified by the Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority that are of serious concern to aviation safety." The government is desperately trying to control the damage, achieving success in the case of the UAE agreeing to allow resumption of regular PIA operations to the emirate. Foreign Secretary Sohail Mehmood held a video conference with Spain's State Secretary for Foreign Affairs to offer the assurance that necessary steps are being taken to secure the highest level of flight safety in PIA operations.

In this business the winning factor is traveller confidence, which takes years to build and just one instance to shatter it. After flights to all international destinations are resumed, people may think twice before opting for PIA. The International Federation of Air Line Pilots was not so wrong when it averred that the minister's speech was "on the brink of being reckless not just for the individuals named, but for Pakistan and its ability to continue operating international air services." That, of course, is not to say that the government should have left the cheaters to stay on but that the weeding out process should have been conducted in a discreet but effective manner. In fact, the Aviation Minister said that the investigations into the licences scandal were started long before the tragic crash of PK-8303. In that case, the way to go about it was to complete the investigations and punish the wrongdoers rather than to highlight a sensitive weak point in the aftermath of a horrendous tragedy. Besides, it is not enough to focus only on the pilots. The regulator, Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority (PCAA), must be held to account for its role in landing the national carrier in dire straits. It is about time the government launched a thorough inquiry into the PCAA's affairs without any further loss of time.

Letters to the Editor

EV policy

Pakistan is planning on starting an Electric Vehicle revolution. But without a plan this evolution will take longer to materialize. The government should concentrate on introducing EV scooters first. Forty-five percent of Pakistan's population own motorbikes and they are cheaper to manufacture and export. Scooters also operate better as EV. Pakistan should introduce standard changeable battery packs for the EV scooters. Shops can be set up where these battery packs are charged and the user can replace their depleted batteries with fully charged ones for a payment and without waiting for the charging. The batteries lose their charging power eventually in their life but there are companies in Pakistan that repair these batteries by cleaning their electrodes through machines and avoid the destruction of batteries in future. For EVs, the battery is the main component. And to ensure a good company's battery is used, the government can invite top companies to propose their products, and agree to set up a manufacturing unit in Pakistan in two years for use of their batteries as the standard for EV scooters in Pakistan.

Shahryar Khan Baseer

PESHAWAR

Dam issues

This refers to the letter, 'Dam joy' by Dr Najeer A Khan. The writer seems to be in support of big dams, ignoring the risks and threats associated with them. While many countries across the globe are moving towards small dams, and are utilizing other valuable options for overcoming water and energy challenges, the authorities here in Pakistan stick with big dams, as if they are the sole panacea to all the prevailing crises of the country. A big dam project or reservoir is not something that needs to be enjoyed, as it poses a serious blow to the economy as well as threatens environmental standards, according to various statistics. In addition to this, the dam-break incidents in China and Brazil and the havoc they unleashed there should be taken into consideration before initiating such costlier and risky projects.

Abdul Hafeez Jatoi

HYDERABAD

Lessons learnt?

The simple answer to your question in the editorial, 'Mafias galore?' is that we should not expect a person to destroy the very crutches he used to gain power and needs to hold tightly to keep it. It should also be a rude awakening for all those who thought that compromises on the means were justified if the end being sought was noble. This has never happened in history and will never happen in the future. No mistake, however, is grave if we learn a lesson from it and not repeat it in the future.

M Shahid Rahim

BAHAWALPUR

The economy under the PTI

SHAHID MEHMOOD

When it comes to the PTI's economic performance, discussions tend to be one-sided (either for or against). In a recent article in these pages, Mohammed Zubair ('The two-year scorecard', July 19), ignored his own party's faults during 2013-2018.

For example, while decrying the growth in public debt under the PTI, he did not mention the fact that a major portion of accrued debt was used to repay debt accrued under the PPP and PML-N. Further, the fall in GDP is strongly correlated with a fall in trade deficit, which had risen to a historical high of more than \$50 billion, partly due to Ishaq Dar's insistence to keep the rupee to dollar parity at Rs100. As the PTI rightly took steps to reduce the deficit, a fall in GDP was expected, made worse by Covid-19.

For me, the PTI government's major weakness was its unrealistic proclamations before coming to power, assuring the people that it had a set program of reforms and a capable team ready to set the economic direction right. Two years down the line, it's clear that they neither had a team nor a program. In promising outlandish and unrealistic scenarios, the PTI dug itself a hole from which it will be difficult to come out till it remains in power. Economic management in these two years has been influenced by 'imported' ideas. Two failed ventures – the chicken breeding program for poverty alleviation and 'Sarmaya-e-Pakistan' – amply reflect this fact. The former was inspired by Bill Gates' advocacy, while the latter was inspired by the Malaysian success in turning around its loss-making public entities. In the case of chicken breeding, the ground realities suggest that breeding chicken at home has long

been given up, even in rural areas. If it were such a potent weapon in poverty alleviation, nobody (especially in rural areas) would have given up on it. Yet, against all the evidence, the program was launched with much fanfare. Today, it's rare to even hear about it even from the government's overzealous PR spokespersons.

Similarly, the sarmaya concept was doomed from the very start because Pakistan and its public-sector entities are quite different from Malaysia. Expecting that the entrenched interests would give up so easily turning them around was nothing but naivety. In this exercise, no lesson was learned from previous such exercises and why they remained futile? The PSEs still bleed fiscally, more than ever. By now, the 'sarmaya' company is only a name. Another case of mindlessly diving into the unknown without taking into consideration ground realities is the case of special economic zones (SEZs). In the zest to create newer SEZs, no consideration whatsoever was given to the issues plaguing the already established ones (like under-utilization of resources and service provision issues). If the already established SEZs are finding it difficult to operate, what logic is there to establish new ones?

The touchy issue of inflation remained unmanaged, and has been a continuous blot on the PTI's economic team's performance. Here, the fault lies in poor understanding of the value chains that underpin working of the different sector sectors of the economy (like food production and distribution and oil supply). Raising interest rates only exacerbated the situation because it was never a demand side phenomenon but supply side issues that made it worse. And of course, like its predecessors, Khan's government has never given serious thought to two

fundamental but largely ignored causes of Pakistan's economic malaise: its continuously rising population and low overall productivity in almost every sector of the economy. The former applies a seriously crushing pressure on already dilapidated state of service provision and increases carbon footprint, while a worrying implication of the latter is that an 'agrarian' country like Pakistan now has to import large quantities of food items.

Last, but not the least, while the PM is on the lookout for 'out-of-the-box' solutions, his economic management relies on tried and tested septuagenarians and an advisor who has little (if any) stake in Pakistan. In between, there were instances which deserve credit and praise. I will start with CPEC, arguably the most important project in Pakistan's present circumstances. A lot hinges upon the outcome of this program in terms of Pakistan's future economic outcomes. The government has rightly turned its focus to the socio-economic, agricultural and scientific cooperation aspects in its Phase-II compared to the PML-N's unhealthy obsession with infrastructure in its first phase (one outcome of which was the various expensive power production plants). Especially important in this regard would be the long-term plan for agriculture, which desperately needs technological upgradation if Pakistan is to ward off serious food shortages in the future.

Additionally, the formation of a committee to renegotiate expensive power contracts is indeed a step in the right direction. Second, Khan's government is very rightly insisting upon transferring fiscal powers to the district/union council level rather than remaining with provincial capitals. If this can be achieved, it would be a real game-changer as far as productive fiscal out-

comes are concerned. The present working of provincial capitals in fiscal matters induces the same problems as were once associated with an all-powerful Islamabad. Third, this government seems to be making a determined effort to boost trade with neighbours and beyond. It is increased trade, rather than enmity, that will be Pakistan's saviour in the future and produce millions of job opportunities within the country. Pakistan's rapprochement with Afghanistan, Iran and Bangladesh is a good example of these initiatives. It is quite heartening to watch the beginnings of transit trade between Afghanistan and India through Wagah, heralding a new chapter in Pakistan's history. Fourth, the way the current government has exposed the wheat and sugar subsidy scams (despite some of its own members coming under scrutiny) is definitely praiseworthy. And fifth, there have been administrative measures that can go a long way in righting the wrongs with a rusty, inefficient public-sector working.

For example, the unethical practice of departments keeping an allotted budget in the savings accounts and then a few officers pocketing the money has been put to an end (though the money has not been recovered. Also note that this unethical practice was pointed out by a domestic source, not by big-time donors). Similarly, the changes in laws to weed out inefficient officers from service, if applied properly, will ensure a better level of public service and its delivery. Overall, the negatives do outweigh the positives as far as managing the economy is concerned. It's a long debate, with some leading facets pointed out in the lines above. Suffice to state that the PTI, and Pakistan, have still got a long way to go.



Pakistan, Afghan

ZUNAIRA INAM

A major milestone was reached on February 29, 2020, when the Taliban and the US completed an agreement that was a first step towards a larger intra-Afghan peace deal.

Some of the crucial requirements of this deal included a US pledge to slowly remove all troops (US or foreign) from Afghanistan, a Taliban commitment to stop terrorist groups from using Afghan territory and a strong support for intra-Afghan peace negotiations. Getting all parties to agree to a negotiated peace settlement is a mammoth task. Even if both the Taliban and the Afghan government are willing to come to the negotiating table, there are serious issues that need to be resolved, including power-sharing, role of Islam within the state, and women's rights.

Pakistan has been trying hard to dispel the false image of being a country associated with terrorism. Despite Pakistan being accused of "lies and deceit" in 2018, by President Trump, it has become a key player in the intra-Afghan peace talks. Pakistan was able to expedite and facilitate these talks because of its relationship with both the Taliban and the US. For Pakistan, there are multiple benefits for facilitating peace in Afghanistan. Turmoil doesn't suit the long-term interests of Pakistan and hence it has been consistently promoting the intra-Afghan peace process. Islamabad also does not want there to be a slipshod withdrawal of US presence in Afghanistan as there was post-Soviet war. It would also be detrimental for Pakistan were there to be a government in Kabul that is friendlier with India than with Pakistan. Pak-Afghan relations have seen a lot of ups and downs; hence it is essential for them to focus on their diplomacy and to facilitate this peace process.

There have been claims that Pakistan would like a power-sharing agreement between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban because this would be in Islamabad's favour. However, there are some factual errors to this claim; namely that the Pak-Taliban relationship is not without its share of ups and downs and secondly, it does not want an Islamic state akin to the Afghanistan of the 90s sharing its borders. The fallout from that has caused a domino effect of terrorism that Pakistan has only very recently been able to control. The current direction of events is exactly what Pakistan needs. It is essential for Islamabad to remain a central player during the intra-Afghan peace talks. Over the last few decades, the Pak-Afghan relationship

has become tricky. There has been growing distrust, and accusations of cross-border terror facilitation. However, there seems to be a thaw in relations recently.

High Council for National Reconciliation Leader Abdullah Abdullah is also seen as a personality that can usher in a new era of Pak-Afghan relations. Afghanistan's newly appointed special envoy for Pakistan, Mohammed Umer Daudzai, has stated that he would like to "mend political relations" between the two countries. He emphasized that after Pakistan's large role in the Afghan peace process, his main focus is to facilitate lasting peace in Afghanistan and to deepen the strong ties that exist between the two countries.

However Herculean the task was to get the Taliban to come to the negotiating table with the US and the Afghan government, an even more impossible task lies ahead. Now the stakeholders have to successfully initiate, maintain and conclude the entire intra-Afghan peace process. There are a few questions that arise regarding this process: how difficult will it be to get the Taliban to accept a power-sharing arrangement with a government that they have consistently refused to recognize and even declared their intentions to overthrow? How does Pakistan factor in the talks, moving forward?

This is a great opportunity for Pakistan to strengthen the ties that may have weakened over the years. It needs to adopt a strategy of smart diplomacy. There is a great amount of distrust and bitterness that has soured the relationship between these two countries. Economic and social inroads need to be made into Afghanistan to improve the image of Pakistan in the eyes of the younger generations. The SDPI Board's chairperson Ambassador (r) Shafiqat Kakakhel, has stated "there is a huge opportunity for medical tourism between the two countries...we should not think in terms of economic depth rather than of strategic depth, where we have around a trade potential of \$5 billion." Pakistan's aim should not just be the establishment of peace; rather, it should also work towards sustained peace in Afghanistan and the region.

Keeping in view all these hurdles and roadblocks, there is always a danger of the entire process crumbling or getting stuck in a quagmire. The US is under a lot of domestic pressure to withdraw from Afghanistan and Russia, India, Iran and Pakistan are all locked in a competition for influence within Afghanistan. There are, as they say, too many cooks in this kitchen. The outcome of these negotiations could

Refugees Pakistan's unmatched services for humanity —Part II

SABA NOUREEN

Pakistani government, in collaboration with UNHCR, facilitated refugees with the basic needs including health, clean drinking water and housing maintenance, leaving no question of these funds being of any good for Pakistan as the burden on the economy of Pakistan is rising with time. However, this cooperation could not survive beyond a decade following the settlement of refugees in Pakistan, calling for increased support permanently. Worsening law and order situation have made foreign traders and investors hesitant. The already struggling economy fabric has shattered, stimulating unemployment and inflation. Fragile economic and grim security situation shaped a new trend amongst Pakistani youth, they started migrating to developed countries. Apart from the economy, of late presence of refugees has posed challenges to Pakistan's security due to emergence of refugee warrior communities, narcotics smugglers, and armaments and organized criminal networks mainly because of the open Pak-Afghan border, as found by a study published in the Refugees Magazine. Unchecked Afghan refugee exodus has changed the security scenario in Pakistan. Refugee camps were used as safe havens by terrorists in many cases. Thus, the scope of militancy and threat to security has turned vast in Pakistan for which the Government of Pakistan has deployed a large number of Army personnel on its western border. There is no doubt whatsoever about the commitment Pakistani military has shown to root out terrorism from Pakistan, especially from the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas which has now become a part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The many counter-terrorism operations by the Pakistan armed forces have freed the affected areas of the threat of terrorism. In 2008, most part of FATA was under the control of terrorists.

Pakistan military started various operations in 2008 which include Operation Zarb-e-Azb launched in 2014. The determined use of force, commitment and sacrifices by the Pakistan military against terrorism, eventually successfully cleared these areas.

In fact, in 2014 the attack at the Army Public School in Peshawar further solidified the national determination to hunt and eliminate these terrorists. This is how Pakistan has played its part in the war against terror as a frontline state despite burdening its economy, human resource, and above all dealing with the consequential threat to the situation of law and order in Pakistan.

In 2017, 123 attacks out of 130 were planned and executed by the ominous minds sitting inside Afghanistan. The porous Pak-Afghan border made it easy for individuals and the drugs being cultivated in the bordering areas in Afghanistan to be trafficked in this. This has created many challenges for Pakistan among which drug addiction is of grave concern, especially for the youth. The influx of illegal weaponry into Pakistan is also a phenomenon connected with the influx of Afghan refugees. UNHCR has suggested that Pakistan should absorb the registered refugees instead of repatriation of Afghan refugees. But the government of Pakistan is committed to peaceful and dignified repatriation rather than forceful despite all the dire cultural, socio-economic, and political ills. Most of the Afghan refugees are not willing to go back to the war dilapidated Afghanistan and have become a permanent member of the

Pakistani landscape. The main effort of the Pakistani government remains to make these refugees responsible and capable people so that they serve their country well upon their return. Evidentially, Pakistan has tried its level best to host the Afghan refugees. It has provided them the same resources that it has to its people, even if the cost is beyond its bearing. The circumstances will remain the same as long as war continues in Afghanistan. Hence, a prosperous, stable and peaceful Afghanistan is vital for prosperous, peaceful and stable Pakistan, too. The current status of the refugees who had migrated since the Russian invasion in 1979, 30% are staying in the refugee camps while the rest have shifted to the urban areas of Pakistan and have taken their surviving responsibilities on their own. Repatriation that started in 2001 aimed at all refugees going back to Afghanistan. One of the main challenges Pakistan had to deal with was the dilemma of unregistered and registered refugees. During 2007-2008 when Pakistan realized the need to register the refugees, people were reluctant to get themselves registered due to their fear of being sent back. The failure in being able to do this has been due to the state's lacking resources, and also the hesitance of international aid and mostly the European community, after a period of crises, to remain with their donor programs. Pakistani government was working with the collaboration of UNHCR, however (unluckily), this cooperation could not live beyond a decade following the arrangements of refugees in Pakistan, which required permanent support. Overall, the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions has tried to present the issues of Afghan refugees stationed in Pakistan to the international community, lately the world has not considered Afghan refugees a problem at all. The major effort of the Ministry has been advocating and raising its voice for the betterment and rehabilitation of Afghan refugees. The Government of Afghanistan under President Ashraf Ghani must be acknowledged for making efforts to create conducive environments for the return of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan from Pakistan. As compared to the previous regimes, the current government has taken up the issue as a serious concern.

The current government has made some arrangements to absorb and re-accommodate Afghan refugees back to their homeland. However, there are still some loopholes in the current system in Afghanistan which are limiting the refugees from going back to their land. There could be a way to assist their return, by establishing special zones for their living and also by creating a special quota for them in employment, be it in any domain. Financial and residential security make returning an attractive option for refugees.

UNHCR has also shown a commitment to offering them an individual package of USD 200 for the refugees who were going back to Afghanistan. According to an estimation around 2.4 million refugees are still staying in Pakistan, and Pakistan is looking forward to international support for their repatriation in a better way but the international community is showing hesitance and reluctance. Pakistan has openheartedly hosted the Afghan refugees to the best of its ability, both financial and material. However, insufficient financial support and means from the international community have made it difficult for Pakistan to provide humanitarian assistance and repatriation to the Afghan refugees.

—The writer is freelance contributor