**State of lawlessness**

Kamila Hyat

Friday, Apr 05, 2024

As we can all see and read frequently in both mainstream and social media, a new wave of crime is sweeping across the nation. This is perhaps most visible in the so-called ‘kacha’ areas of Sindh, named because since colonial days they have been victims of underdevelopment and a lack of governability because of the dacoits who have taken control of these parts and adjacent ones in Punjab.

The issue however is not limited to these parts. It stretches also to Karachi where a wave of crime has affected low-income, middle-income and high-income groups. It would need a full study to determine the precise reasons for this. But it is not hard to understand where the problem lies.

There is every reason to believe that the high rate of unemployment and the continued rate of inflation are affecting people in many different ways. One of them is their vulnerability to criminals of various kinds who have come forward both in the form of those who scam people over the net or on their mobile phones, often claiming to be bank officials or suggesting that the recipient of the call has won a large award. These scams are widespread and are thought to have generated huge sums of money for those behind them; the same is true of the robberies and kidnappings that take place virtually across the country but most notably in larger cities like Karachi and Lahore.

This is the state of the nation as a whole. Karachi with its known rate of crimes and a city that holds more small weapons than most others around the world has been particularly vulnerable to the wave of crime. But this is visible also in other big cities including Islamabad which was once known as being comparatively safe and a good place in which you set up business or go for a drive. This is said to be no longer true with muggings occurring on city streets and on the more deserted hill tracks which run through the Margalla Hills and are used both by people who drive their vehicles up to scenic spots and by trekkers who go out for exercise or pleasure.

The point here is that something needs to be done. Of course, law and order need to be improved and the decision to step up the salaries for law-enforcement personnel posted in notoriously unpoliced areas is not a bad idea, but it is not enough. The root of the problem lies in the manner in which people are living and the desperation of so many of them, notably those who are young and without jobs.

Practically speaking, these young people have no real option but to turn to crime if they are to survive. There is no excuse for holding up people at gunpoint or kidnapping traders and businessmen. But we need to ask what the alternative is for a young man who has been left without a job or without any hope of attaining one over the coming days and weeks. The problem is a very real one and needs to be addressed. Such people feel their only option is to live unlawfully and at least keep food coming into their homes and their kitchens. So many have succeeded given a poor system of law enforcement that more are tempted to take the same path and do all that is possible to keep themselves afloat.

We therefore need to cope with poverty and the situation of people. There has been much written about how impossible this is, given the current state of the economy and the current state of the country as a whole. After all, we have a government, which most people know, handles very little real matters of significance and is there merely as a front. But at the same time, we also have 220 million people, including most who are young, who need to survive and need to manage, one way or the other. We should then question how this can be achieved and what is to be done.

In other states of South Asia, as well as in other parts of the world, heavy investment in just two areas of life, education and healthcare, has helped countries climb up the ladder of social development and towards safety for their families and themselves. We need to follow the same paths. Indeed, we need to look at all the paths that have been taken around the world to rescue people from similar situations. This may require some thinking and a degree of intellectual togetherness. It also requires dialogue and discussion among the parties that sit on the treasury benches or make up a part of the decision-making system in one way or the other. But there is now no alternative but to come up with a method despite the positive ones and despite the grave economic challenges we face.

In the first place, there needs to be a reduction in administrative spending, given that we are in no situation to do away with debt servicing. This is one of the chief expenditures on the budgetary pie, or even with defence, which takes up another huge chunk of the budget. But even if this is not possible for practical reasons, there are other ways to get around the situation. There is no reason why the federal government owns thousands of vehicles of various kinds, many of them luxury cars. After all, every minister needs at most one car to go about his or her business. The same should be true for other people in government service.

The number of perks and privileges other sections of our system enjoy are unprecedented in global terms. In Scandinavian countries, parliamentarians serve voluntarily, without any privileges and any salaries. We have reached a point where our government and those that represent it, need to think along similar lines. Even worse is the fact that these representatives often pay very little in taxes as do those who own vast amounts of land.

We need to tax property as an initial step and bring about the kind of reform and renovation that is required in the nation. There is still time to achieve this before it is too late. Soon there will be no more time left as more and more people move away from Pakistan and try to set up lives elsewhere in different places.

There has to be a major effort to change and education and healthcare should be the responsibility of the state and is in fact now a responsibility handed over to the provinces after the 18th Amendment. If all this is implemented, we could go a long way in saving ourselves from the dangers in which people live their daily lives, often stepping out of their houses in fear and risking a situation where they may never return to open their front doors and reunite with their families.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor. She can be reached at:

kamilahyat@hotmail.com