

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of August 2016

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Afghan Taliban visit to China

THE elimination of Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a US drone strike upended the Quadrilateral Coordination Group on Afghan reconciliation and effectively froze the nascent Afghan dialogue process. As a result Pak-Afghan relations plunged and the Pak-US relationship hit fresh turbulence, though efforts by at least Pakistan and the US since have somewhat stabilised the triangular relationship. As ever, Chinese diplomacy was careful and anonymous through most of the discord. But now, there are reports that the Chinese hosted an Afghan Taliban delegation from the group's political office in Qatar two weeks ago, and so the China-Taliban connection has once again come into the spotlight. What is China attempting, and who is it aligned with on the Afghan question?

In the immediate term, it is likely that the Chinese diplomacy has been triggered by a closer alignment with Pakistan on what needs to be done in Afghanistan for regional stability. That renewed Pak-China conversation may have been triggered by the growing ties between New Delhi and Washington and the understanding between the Chinese and Pakistani establishments that a growing convergence between India and the US regionally, including in Afghanistan, can have adverse consequences for the strategic interests of China and Pakistan. However, there are other impulses too, not least the understanding, as Chinese President Xi Jinping made clear to his Afghan counterpart, Ashraf Ghani, in a June meeting, that "Afghanistan's peaceful reconstruction and reconciliation process ... is the only way out for Afghanistan to achieve permanent peace". Towards that end, China has ratcheted up its cooperation with Kabul, while simultaneously keeping open channels of communication with the Afghan Taliban.

The long-term Chinese interest in Afghanistan has been two-fold: deny separatist Uighur militants space inside Afghanistan and protect Chinese investments in the country. That twin goal has been pursued since the Karzai era and appears to be the cornerstone of Chinese policy on Afghanistan. Given the long-term and more immediate Chinese interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan should leverage its relationship with China to get the Afghan dialogue process back on track. Where Afghan officials may not be willing to heed the advice of Pakistan, China's opinion may carry more weight. And if the Afghan Taliban are truly resistant to cajoling by Pakistan, the addition of China's diplomatic heft globally, especially its clout in the UN, could cause the Afghan Taliban to consider returning to the negotiating table. Ultimately, however, Pakistan should regard international diplomacy as a complementary effort to the core Pakistani policy of reducing the space for the Afghan Taliban inside the country and encouraging them to return to dialogue at the earliest. If that process can be managed within the QCG, it may

help diplomatic coordination. But Pakistani policy should be not be predicated on actions by other countries first. If political reconciliation in Afghanistan is necessary, Pakistan should take the lead confidently and with little hesitation.

Sindh CM's challenge

THE new chief minister of Sindh, Murad Ali Shah, has pointed in the right direction when discussing the biggest challenges he sees for himself. But it remains to be seen how much of a force for change he can actually prove to be. In his inaugural speech in the provincial assembly, he mentioned the dismal state of human development in Thar and the neglect of civic obligations in Karachi as his big tests. But addressing these will require going against some of the most ingrained failures of his party. Karachi cannot be fixed if it continues to be run by the provincial government, and Thar's condition will not get better if the ruling party does not take human development and improving the state of delivery across a range of services more seriously. In both areas, the PPP's performance has proved to be grossly inadequate; whether or not Mr Shah can reverse this in the one full year of rule he has before the elections inspires justified scepticism.

Over the years, Sindh has become the favourite whipping boy of provincial governments in Pakistan. It has been an important ground for battles for power at the centre, and has been the site of the most vigorous opposition to military rule in the 1980s. Its place in the political struggles of the country, coupled with its own social structure, has forced successive chief ministers to rule the province while constantly looking over their shoulder for threats from unexpected quarters. An example of this is the mini-revolt led by Zulfiqar Mirza against former president Asif Zardari some years ago. Patronage politics plays hardball in the province. Lost amidst the mighty political contests that the province has been historically caught up in is a sense of governance as the primary deliverable of political power. Mr Shah needs to ensure that the machinery of the provincial government is not subordinated to the requirements of patronage, whether in wheat procurement, sugar pricing or service delivery as he balances the needs of the province's political environment. This is a tall order for a new inductee, but Mr Shah has the benefit of his pedigree, high intelligence and energetic disposition to make a strong effort. Given the short time frame and stark challenges before him, he will need all the strength he can muster to actually walk the talk he laid out in his inaugural speech.

Monetary policy

THE State Bank has hewed to a cautious stance in keeping the key discount rate unchanged in its latest monetary policy announcement despite furnishing a very upbeat assessment of the state of the economy. Inflation is down to “a 47 year low of 2.9pc” while growth has “touched an 8 year high of 4.7pc”, according to the central bank. Foreign exchange reserves are sufficient to cover four months of imports, while the fiscal situation is stable as “revenue collection exceeded expectations”. The bank says growth could well experience a “spurt” in the forthcoming fiscal year due to elevated project spending, whether through the PSDP or CPEC, improved energy supply and a better law-and-order situation.

On the surface, the bank says, things are well; but lurking beneath it all are risks of a serious nature. A continuing slowdown in China and the Gulf, coupled with uncertainties relating to the EU and Brexit complications, could weigh down future growth. The biggest risk would be an unexpected rise in oil prices. Given the narrow base of growth revival, and the continuing dependence of the economy on official inflows from abroad, these are hazards to be taken seriously. The bank also veers towards over-optimism in painting its constant liquidity injections into the banking system as a positive force, especially by claiming that they have “helped in a better transmission of monetary policy”. In fact, these injections are evidence of a dysfunction more than anything else. If they have played a role in lifting private-sector credit offtake, it shows that the bank has met with little success in urging the financial sector to move out of its addiction to government lending. The revival in growth that the bank is pointing out is real, no doubt, but it is important to bear in mind that it is built on generous levels of government spending and State Bank-sponsored liquidity provision. These are far from the foundations of sustainable growth, and the central bank ought to be clearer in mentioning that.

Dynastic politics

THE ascent of Murad Ali Shah to the Sindh chief ministership, the deployment of Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari as chief PPP campaigner in the recent AJK election and the prominent role of Maryam Nawaz Sharif as director of the PML-N's media strategy all have one thing in common: none of the three would be where they currently are were it not for their last names, ie each is the product of a political dynasty.

While Chief Minister Shah has reasonable political and governance experience, his dynastic counterparts on the national stage have decidedly less so.

Indeed, the very fact that both Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Maryam Nawaz Sharif modified their names to reflect the famous dynasties they are part of is an indication of the meagre political experience they can credibly claim.

While political dynasties are an old and long accepted feature of Pakistani democracy, there is something quietly troubling about the rise of Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Maryam Nawaz Sharif.

Contrast the fast-track rise of the Bhutto and Sharif scions with that of their parents.

Much before Benazir Bhutto became prime minister, she led a remarkable and brave campaign against the dictator Ziaul Haq and earned her right to lead the country.

Before Nawaz Sharif took to the political stage at the federal level, he was the chief minister of Punjab and before that the provincial finance minister.

Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's political path has been brutally shaped by the assassination of his mother, but the rise of the PPP chairman has resembled less a modern-day political ascension and more the training of a king-in-waiting from ancient times.

Chairing party meetings and giving the occasional speech does not translate into adequate preparation for life on the political front lines.

The disastrous PPP campaign in AJK may have several reasons, but it also exposed the inexperience and odd politics of Mr Bhutto-Zardari. Similarly, until her recent turn as the architect of the government's media strategy, all Maryam Nawaz had by way of experience was a short stint as chairperson of the Prime Minister's Youth Programme, a scheme seemingly created by her father to give his daughter executive experience.

Disturbing as it may be that two potential future leaders of the country are being steered to the top without any meaningful political or governance experience, supporters of the PPP and PML-N will point to an obvious truth: Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Maryam Nawaz Sharif will likely never hold high public office unless the voter decides to elect them. In a narrow electoral sense that may be true, but can such blatant family-first politics truly deepen democracy in Pakistan?

At least Chief Minister Shah appears to understand the need to display competence and mastery of governance affairs and not harp on political lineage.

Perhaps Mr Bhutto-Zardari and Ms Sharif can help their own causes by appearing a little more humble in light of their vast inexperience.

NFC award

THE newly minted chief minister of Sindh has rightly pointed to the failure of the federal government to finalise the eighth NFC award as a major lapse.

Since the PML-N government came to power in 2013, it has failed to advance the NFC award and is continuing the process of determining provincial shares in federal tax revenues under ad-hoc annual extensions given under the seventh award of 2010 which expired end of the fiscal year last June. That award had dramatically increased the shares given to the provincial governments and, coupled with the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, had substantially altered the terms of the federation.

The present government's failure to advance the process, as required by the Constitution, and successfully negotiate a new award signifies its large-scale failure to preside over interprovincial issues, and the longer the affair drags on, the more it cements the PML-N's reputation as a party of the Punjab which commands little to no credibility outside its provincial stronghold.

Initially, the delays in finalising the award were attributed to Sindh which took an inordinate amount of time to nominate its member on the commission.

But it has been more than a year since then, and the whole issue appears to have dropped off the radar altogether. In the meantime, the government has been imposing more or less arbitrary and involuntary cash surplus requirements on the provinces to keep its own fiscal affairs in order.

The neglect of its constitutional duties in finalising a new NFC award, coupled with the practice of withholding shares from the divisible pool on the grounds of meeting its cash surplus requirements, show that the government is not interested in coordinating with the provinces and prefers to keep power and resources centralised.

If this is the case, then the PML-N has lost an opportunity that its period of rule afforded to shed the image of itself as a Punjab-based party, and demonstrate to the electorate that it is capable of presiding over the affairs of the whole country.

It would be better to simply make an upfront case for why Pakistan should remain a centralised state. Instead, the government is making excuses for the delay in the award; blaming provincial governments for not doing their homework prior to holding the meetings to advance the process is not a convincing reason since it is the provincial governments themselves that are demanding a new award in the first place.

Interfaith outreach

IN times of tumult such as these, it takes sagacity and courage to rise above the clamour and appeal to people's common humanity.

In Europe, where the past few weeks have witnessed horrific violence, much of it perpetrated in the name of Islam, it was heartening to see voices raised and gestures made over the weekend to bring people together, instead of tearing them apart.

For example, the statements made by Pope Francis upon his return from Poland reflect a desire for inclusivity rather than ostracism. The pontiff said it was unfair to equate Islam with terrorism, observing that "it's not right and it's not true".

He added that the militant Islamic State group was "not Islam". Elsewhere, in several churches across France and Italy, including the famed Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, Muslims attended Catholic Mass in solidarity.

This gesture came in the aftermath of the brutal slaying of an elderly French priest in a town near Rouen last week by two Muslim extremists.

Cynics would say these gestures mean little, especially considering the terrorist threat Europe currently faces. However, it can also be argued that such gestures and healing

words send a message to all types of extremists — Islamist militants as well as the European far right.

To the militant Islamists, the message is that Muslims can and do live with other faith groups in harmony, despite the militants' divisive rhetoric.

This message applies equally to the Islamophobes, who demonise the entire Muslim community for the crimes of a few, and who insist there is no place for Muslims in Europe.

It would be wrong to assume the extremist threat has subsided. But what events over the weekend have shown is a constructive way of dealing with crises.

Muslims in Europe and the wider West should continue to build bridges with governments and other faith communities, and help point out black sheep, while the state and society in Europe should also make greater efforts at outreach and not ostracise the entire Muslim community.

Children at risk

IT is never a pretty sight when the apparatus of law enforcement and justice fails to protect vulnerable members of society, but it is particularly disturbing when it fails in the case of children.

The kidnapping of children, with the intention to sell them into forced labour, has been an ongoing concern in Pakistan for many years now, with reported cases reaching the hundreds almost half a decade ago.

But in 2016 this figure has reached 767 in Punjab alone, with five months still to go in the year. The only reason we even have the figures at this point is because of the Supreme Court.

The rising number shows that the phenomenon of abducting children and selling them into forced labour has entrenched itself into a sizable racket while law enforcement officials have failed to mount any kind of vigorous effort to halt the crime. There can be no excuse for this failure.

Yet time and again, whether in the context of the recently unearthed cases of child abduction and sale into slavery, or last year's example of the Kasur child abuse ring,

Punjab's law minister Rana Sanaullah has sought to invoke details that serve to deflect blame away from the provincial government's law enforcement agencies, and has tried to place the facts in a context that muddies the government's response rather than clarifying it.

Last year he tried to argue those involved in the Kasur child abuse ring were members of a close-knit community and their disputes with each other over land and other issues were the key driving force behind the abuse.

This time, he is quoted saying that parents of the abducted children have the primary responsibility in not letting their children play in the streets and keeping them under close watch.

Additionally, Mr Sanaullah and members of the provincial police force are also quick to point out that the rackets are based in other provinces, and quite likely run by demobilised members of militant outfits.

It would be better if they were equally quick to concede that multiple crimes are committed when someone abducts a child and sells him or her onwards.

Apprehending such people, along with their facilitators and clients who 'purchase' these unfortunate children, is the number one priority for the government that the minister belongs to.

On Monday, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif ordered the setting up of a task force on missing children. Yet there is little introspection on the improvements required in his police forces to apprehend the perpetrators.

The relationship that the police has with local communities is key to this, as is technology to build a database of those charged with crimes against children. If the police had been taking its responsibility more seriously, we would not have seen the growth of this heinous racket to such enormous proportions.

Rangers' issue

FOR the time being, the matter concerning the Rangers' deployment in Sindh has been resolved.

On Monday, the PPP-led Sindh government gave the paramilitary force the green light to stay in the province for one year, while extending their special powers in Karachi for 90 days.

There had been some acrimony in this regard, with the Sindh government resisting the centre's and establishment's demands for granting the Rangers policing powers throughout Sindh.

With the Karachi-specific extension, the PPP has stuck to its guns, resisting province-wide powers for the force.

However, the manner in which federal Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar handled the situation was unbecoming. Before the extension was granted, the minister told a press conference that the Sindh government was employing "delaying tactics" and that "alternative legal options" would be explored to keep the Rangers in Karachi.

The minister's tone — speaking as if Sindh was a colonial possession of Islamabad rather than a federating unit — was inappropriate. More tact must be shown by senior government functionaries while publicly dealing with such sensitive issues.

Few will argue that Karachi and the rest of Sindh suffer from serious law and order problems. It is also true that the three-year-old Rangers-led operation in the metropolis has brought down levels of crime and violence, though many miles remain to be covered before Karachi can be called a safe city.

Yet the fact is that there is an elected government in Sindh, and it is unacceptable for the centre or the establishment to dictate terms.

If there are differences between the provincial administration and the federal government, they should be handled tactfully, keeping in mind the province's reservations, as law and order is primarily a provincial subject.

Moreover, the Rangers have been present in Karachi for nearly three decades; while the force's presence has resulted in periods of calm, overall the situation remains grim.

While the militarisation of policing duties may create temporary peace, in the long term this is not a viable option. For example, while today most of Balochistan is controlled by paramilitaries, peace and normality evade the province.

While the Rangers should continue their activities in aid of civil power, the goal for the Sindh government should be a complete revamp of the provincial police force.

Reforming the police so that it serves and protects the people of Sindh rather than any political masters should be amongst Murad Ali Shah's top priorities.

The Khizr Khan speech

PAKISTANI-born Khizr Khan's seven-minute speech at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) was amongst the most impactful and original last week.

With his wife, Ghazala, the American Muslim paid tribute to the patriotism and sacrifice of their 27-year-old son, army Captain Humayun Khan, who died in a car bombing in 2004 in Iraq whilst saving hundreds of other troops.

While inviting the Khans to the Convention was a clever Democratic response to Republican candidate Donald Trump's bellicose and divisive rhetoric against Muslims, it also reminded of the life of a decorated veteran devoted to public service; 'the best of America' as Hillary Clinton had said of Humayun Khan.

That said, it is unfortunate that a candidate for the highest office in America, Mr Trump, has repeatedly called for the banning of Muslims.

It was this blatant Islamophobia that was challenged by Mr Khan, thereby countering negative portrayals of Muslims.

Reportedly, Google searches for the phrase 'register to vote' spiked after his DNC speech. It would do Mr Trump good — even this late in the race — to remember that the majority of American Muslims are law-abiding, patriots, and most intend to vote in November: 824,000 are already registered under the 'One America' non-partisan campaign.

While Mr Khan's heartfelt speech gave a voice to American Muslims, it has also become a watershed in the Clinton campaign.

For her part, Hillary Clinton must ensure support for all races and religions that she has so aptly celebrated at her Convention through a more unifying and moderate agenda.

That second-generation Muslims born and raised as Americans want to define the public narrative of their faith in America must be recognised by mainstream politics.

Consider the impact on American Muslims when Mr Khan proudly held up the Constitution, prodding Mr Trump to acknowledge that men and women of all faiths and ethnicities had died defending America.

If America is to preserve its liberal values, and tackle immigration problems as well as increasing religious intolerance, both candidates must work harder at inclusivity — the kind symbolised by the dignified Khans.

Battling load shedding

THERE is little surprise that, in the twilight of its term in power, the government is moving into panic mode regarding its promise to end loadshedding before 2018.

It was easy to make those promises during an election campaign and even give unrealistic timelines. But everybody who understood the power sector knew that delivering on the promise was going to take a lot more than megawatts.

Since coming into power, the government has undertaken a series of steps to try and tackle the question of power shortages, including a large one-time settlement of the circular debt in its first days in power, and a number of projects to add more power generation capacity as well as upgrading some sections of the transmission system.

But, beyond these largely quantitative measures, it has run out of ideas. This, indeed, seems to be the take-away from the discussion in Islamabad on Tuesday, where Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif discussed issues of energy with senior federal ministers.

Addressing the question of chronic power shortages was never just a question of quantity alone.

Loadshedding exists because the entire power system is badly outdated and in dire need of deep, institutional reform. These reforms are needed across the board — from governance of power sector entities, to induction of new technologies like time of use

metres and net metering, to pricing reforms to move towards greater market-based pricing of electricity.

No discernible progress has been made in any of these areas. Instead we have heard a constant litany of projects to utilise cheaper fuels, like coal or LNG.

It is true that a growing dependence on imported furnace oil for power generation was an important factor in giving rise to the power crisis in the first place. But it wasn't the only factor. Improving efficiencies and recoveries, as well as accurate billing, and skewed incentive structures in the power sector all play a role.

Given how the government locked itself into a project-based approach, it now naturally finds itself chasing its own deadlines in a futile attempt to add more megawatts to an otherwise dysfunctional system.

Without deeper reforms, this is akin to pouring water into a leaky bucket in the hopes that, if the quantity of water being poured is increased, the bucket may yet fill up.

This is a failure of vision and imagination, and for this failure the PML-N can expect to be taken to task in the next general elections.

With the underlying problems left unaddressed, whatever incremental electricity is brought into the system will have the costs of the dysfunctions priced into it.

We have already seen this with the upfront coal tariff, and the demand for dollar-based settlement of all power purchases by Chinese sponsors, which has driven up tariffs.

The government is right to be worried about its legacy in the power sector.

Saudi labour crisis

THE news coming out of Saudi Arabia of thousands of foreign workers — Pakistanis included — not having been paid for months and reportedly running low on food is reason for concern.

As reported, over 8,500 Pakistanis employed with two Saudi firms have not received their salaries for a number of months, and are also facing issues securing end-of-service benefits.

Perhaps the most distressing accounts are those that describe workers having to beg or scrounge for food in the kingdom.

These issues are linked to the current state of the Saudi economy, which has been battered by the plunge in oil prices.

The kingdom — the Arab world's biggest economy — relies on oil for most of its state revenue; resultantly, when prices crashed from their high of over \$100 a barrel in the past few years, the Saudi economy was shell-shocked.

The construction sector — which employs a large number of foreigners — was hit particularly hard, with several projects halted. And whenever economic pressure builds up, the first to face the axe will be foreign workers, especially in the Saudi and overall Gulf context.

Considering Saudi Arabia hosts over 1.5 million Pakistani expatriates, the crisis needs to be dealt with on short- and long-term bases by the Pakistani government.

In the short term, the workers must have access to food, water, decent accommodation and medical care, while the government should take up the issue of securing their outstanding dues with Riyadh.

As news reports point out, the state is already looking into these matters, as Pakistani missions in Saudi Arabia are in touch with the affected workers.

Moreover, the government should also arrange to bring back any workers who may not be able to afford airfare. But the bigger challenge is that of the long-term future of Pakistani workers in the kingdom.

The prognosis for the Saudi economy is mixed, with many experts predicting a rough ride ahead, especially if oil prices remain low. If more Pakistanis are laid off, does the government have a contingency plan in place?

For example, remittances from Saudi Arabia were around \$6bn in FY16, as per State Bank figures.

Are we prepared to handle the fallout should these funds dry up significantly, and do we have the capacity to absorb Pakistani workers returning from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf should economic conditions deteriorate further?

These two key questions need to be looked into without delay by our economic planners.

Women SC judges

It is encouraging to note parliamentary debate on gender imbalance in the Supreme Court even as the government drags its feet on the issue.

On Tuesday, the Senate Standing Committee on Law and Justice deferred a bill tabled by PPP Senator Babar Awan in May calling for a 33pc quota for women judges to be appointed to the SC through an amendment of the Supreme Court Act, 1997.

Earlier, a similar bill in the National Assembly mandating a 25pc quota was opposed.

Although to date, Pakistan is the only country in South Asia to never have appointed a woman as SC judge, there is no constitutional bar that prevents women judges from the higher courts.

That said, only seven of the country's 112 High Court judges are women. The Pakistan Bar Council, the highest regulatory body for lawyers, has never had a woman member.

Such glaring under-representation of women in the judiciary reflects a deeper gender imbalance. Even so, women in the legal profession have demonstrated mettle. Stellar SC contenders included Majida Rizvi (the first woman judge), Khalida Rasheed, Qaiser Iqbal, and Yasmin Abbasi.

Without sustainable efforts at reform (support from bar councils included) to include women in the higher courts, progress will be slow. Surely, if three out of four law students are women, there is no shortage of interested young lawyers.

Moreover, since judicial appointments to the SC come from among High Court judges and lawyers, there is the argument that quotas at the SC level might not be as effective if there are such few qualified judges. That may hold some weight but quotas must not be dismissed as part of the remedy.

After all, quotas for women parliamentarians have made a difference to their political contributions. Further, the lack of transparency in the all-male judicial appointments process must be remedied.

Criteria for nominations to the superior judiciary must be made public. If the process is unbiased and merit-based, then quotas would partially address gender disparity in the legal profession.

Rewarding vigilantism

OVER the past many years, there have been a number of cases of vigilantism where citizens have taken the law into their own hands. But instead of addressing this disturbing trend, the state — or at least some of its functionaries — appear to be encouraging it.

On Wednesday, an individual who had gunned down two suspects during a robbery attempt targeting him in Karachi a few days ago was given a cash reward and certificate of appreciation by Sindh's inspector general of police.

The IGP termed the action by the citizen — who had a licensed weapon — a “good omen”, adding that the individual had “demonstrated courage”.

Such accolades, coming from the province's top police official no less, set a dangerous precedent where vigilantism is concerned.

Already, a frustrated public is often not shy about dispensing brutal ‘justice’ to suspects itself. For example, at least two incidents of lynching were reported from Karachi last month — in the Orangi Town and New Karachi areas — where members of the public beat suspected robbers to death.

Indeed, levels of street crime in the metropolis are extremely high; still, this is no justification for the police to encourage vigilantism and abandon its core duties.

Instead of promoting mob justice, Sindh police officials need to work harder to bring down street crime levels.

CPLC figures from the first 10 days of Ramazan, corresponding to mid-June, suggest there was a sharp rise in cell phone and motorcycle snatching cases during this period.

Some citizens were also shot dead upon resistance. In fact street crime has become so endemic that many people don't even bother to report incidents. The new Sindh chief minister has said bringing down street crime is amongst his priorities.

This is a long-term exercise that requires revamping of the police. However, some steps can be taken immediately, such as increasing patrols and deploying undercover officers at spots where criminals and muggers are known to strike.

This would certainly be a far better option than handing certificates to vigilantes.

PM's pragmatic remarks

IF Pakistan is to have its concerns addressed and national interests advanced, it must be prepared to acknowledge that much of the outside world has concerns about Pakistan and believes that global security is affected by national security choices made by this country.

In partially acknowledging that reality, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has once again tried to infuse a degree of sensible pragmatism in the country's foreign and national security policies.

But the remarks Mr Sharif made to a gathering of Pakistani ambassadors in key world capitals raise an obvious question: do the prime minister and the government he leads know how to translate their sensible approach to foreign policy into an actual change of policy, even at the margins?

Peace with neighbours and recognising the reciprocal basis of good international relations are not just high-minded ideas, they ought to be practical realities for a country looking to modernise itself and take its rightful place in the international order.

Mr Sharif appears to understand what Pakistan needs on the external front: the question remains whether his government has the ability to reorient national policy.

To be sure, Pakistan has a number of legitimate concerns of its own and the regional security environment is a complex one.

The latest turmoil in Indian-held Kashmir and Pakistan's struggle to impose some semblance of order on the Pak-Afghan border are just two examples of where Pakistan has faced outside hostility even when it tries and pursues legitimate, diplomatic solutions.

Contrast, however, the preferred approach of civilian leaderships in Pakistan to that of the military establishment.

Where civilians seek cooperative solutions, the military establishment's approach to security and foreign policy tends to — perhaps unwittingly — infuse rancour into debates and hardens international positions.

That is partly because of the provocative language used when describing the outside world's approach to Pakistan — the infamous ISPR comments after a meeting between Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Gen Raheel Sharif are an unfortunate example — while blandly deflecting the outside world's criticisms and demands of Pakistan.

The now routine declaration that Pakistan does not tolerate any form of terrorism and militancy even as the leaderships of banned militant outfits with external agendas roam free around the country is an example of deflection that satisfies no one.

While the military establishment may be more candid in its private discussions with foreign leaders, the difference between what is said and what is permitted remains too large for diplomacy to overcome.

Meanwhile, the civilians' lackadaisical approach has the effect of them not being taken seriously internally or externally.

Sensible as Prime Minister Sharif's remarks may have been, what are the policy interventions that are being considered and what are the tools that the government has at its disposal to implement its ideas?

Talking points ought to be the distillation of core policy goals and the methods of achieving them, not the other way round.

Farewell to the IMF

THE country is all set to bid farewell to the IMF once the final tranche has been received by September, but it is worth bearing in mind that this is not the first of such farewells.

The past track record of the country with the Fund is proof of enduring structural weaknesses in the economy which have left it mired in a low tax base and weak exports.

Abiding fiscal and external deficits are the natural consequence, making repeated approaches to multilateral lenders an essential part of Pakistan's economic history. So how far has the program that is about to be completed gone in rectifying these structural problems?

The Prime Minister may well be sincere when he says he wants to see Pakistan out of the IMF for good.

Unfortunately though, given that many of the weaknesses that sent us to the Fund in the first place are still around, it appears the period of respite will not last more than a few years.

Nevertheless, the government can take credit for seeing the program through, thereby leaving it to the next government to make a fresh approach and have another crack at resolving the fiscal and external difficulties that chronically tie the economy down.

The biggest achievement of the current program is a rebuilding of reserves: these were perilously low when the government came to power in 2013. Its other achievement is keeping a lid on the fiscal deficit and bringing a halt to direct government borrowing from the State Bank.

Along the way, a few other issues have also been sorted, such as withdrawal of SROs, passage of the Anti Money Laundering Act, and some strengthening of State Bank autonomy.

These are not minor accomplishments, but one is hard pressed to see how they can form the basis for a revival of sustainable growth.

The government is now left to its own devices in ensuring a broadening of the base of growth, reforming the power sector, halting the continued rise of accumulated losses in key public sector enterprises, boosting agriculture and shoring up collapsing exports.

This is a tall order for any government, least of all one that is in the final full fiscal year of its rule. So yes, its farewell to the IMF, but for now only.

A rancorous Saarc meeting

A DAY after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif went to the Foreign Office and urged a policy of peace with neighbours and paying heed to international concerns about Pakistan, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan sparred with his Indian counterpart at the Saarc interior ministers' meeting in Islamabad on Thursday.

Hosting the meeting was always going to be a challenge, with bilateral Pak-India tensions at a peak and given the interior minister's penchant for dabbling in foreign affairs along hawkish lines.

In addition, Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh, himself a hawk and no shrinking violet, had already spurned suggestions of a bilateral meeting with his Pakistani counterpart and cast himself as a lone warrior in hostile terrain.

So, despite hopes for a reasonable outcome, the possibility of rancorous exchanges could not be ruled out. And that is precisely what came to pass as Mr Singh and Interior Minister Khan opted for petulance and pettiness against each other.

From a closely watched and deliberately botched handshake to both ministers skipping an official luncheon, the Indian and Pakistan interior ministers were the proverbial bulls in the Saarc china shop.

That the squabbling likely embarrassed the interior ministers from the other Saarc countries appeared not to worry the two.

For his part, reconciling Chaudhry Nisar's posturing at the Saarc meeting with the prime minister's advice to the Foreign Office must surely be very difficult.

What the prime minister said was sensible and welcome; what the interior minister did was counterproductive and helped turn already strained diplomacy into an unseemly altercation.

Was the interior minister briefed by the Foreign Office and why was he not assisted in the home ministers' meeting by a relatively senior foreign officer?

Surely, the government cannot expect to reorient foreign policy if a senior minister is contradicting the foreign ministry's efforts and undercutting the message of his prime minister.

Once again, and this time in a matter of just 24 hours, the government has failed at a policy reset that it had itself mooted.

Dismal as the Pakistani effort may have been, the message that Mr Singh brought to Islamabad and his self-satisfied tone in remarks to the Indian parliament after his return suggest that the Indian government is also in an unyielding mood.

Seemingly determined to compound the error of killing Burhan Wani and igniting mass protests in India-held Kashmir, the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is lashing out at Pakistan instead of recognising its own flawed policy in IHK.

Tensions between India and Pakistan are as old as the reality that dialogue between the two countries is essential for both. India cannot reasonably expect to engage the world minus Pakistan, but time and again that appears to be the preferred approach of Mr Modi's government.

The unpleasantness in Islamabad on Thursday has surely deepened the divide between the two neighbours.

Olympic failure

IT must rank as a national tragedy — a seven-member contingent representing Pakistan at the Rio Olympics, with the national hockey team not even qualifying.

Critics and fans could well pronounce this Pakistan sports' darkest hour, but for the rapidly plummeting standards that risk the country not featuring altogether at the 2020 Games in Tokyo.

To put it succinctly, the sorry state of Pakistan sports today is best depicted by the paltry contingent in Rio.

It is not as if the sports administrators in the country had barely a few months to prepare for the Olympic challenge. Neither were the players pitch-forked suddenly into their roles for the extravaganza.

Instead of putting together the best possible combinations, working out strategies and ironing out player deficiencies for Rio, the Pakistan Olympic Association for the most part of four years remained engaged in a legitimacy battle with a parallel body that had no more than nuisance value to show for it.

POA's apathy was equally reflected in the corridors of power as the government too did not show any sense of urgency in resolving the dispute or the will to remove the incompetent officials.

Weak infrastructure, lack of stars, doping problems, substandard coaches, an illogical domestic calendar, dwindling sponsorship money and the ever-shrinking national circuit have left Pakistan sports in poor shape.

It is little wonder that Pakistan has not won a medal at the Olympics since the 1992 Barcelona Games.

The national hockey team, once a major medal hope for the country at the Games with eight medals to show so far, including three gold, has reached its nadir by failing to qualify for Rio.

The cupboard is hopelessly bare in boxing, athletics, wrestling and other sports as well whereas their respective federations and officials continue to enjoy multiple terms in office.

The power struggle within Pakistan sports is highlighted by the fact that as many as 17 officials have accompanied the seven athletes to Rio. One can only bemoan the lack of direction and the will to improve in a system bereft of soul-searching and accountability.

Moreover, there is no one in sight to inspire confidence or adopt revolutionary measures to address the rot.

However, if the reaction among fans and in the media is anything to go by, the government and joy-riding officials will soon find it difficult to deflect the wave of antipathy from a public deeply disappointed with the Olympic flop.

War against greenery

HERE in Pakistan, there is no dearth of instances where short-term gain trumps long-term benefit, often while those who are meant to take a more forward-thinking view turn a blind eye.

This is what leads to problems such as, for example, the endless encroachments on public spaces in cities.

The latest iteration of this proclivity is reported from Karachi where on Wednesday night some 600 fully grown Neem trees planted along the Superhighway between the Toll Plaza and Wadi-i-Hussain graveyard were chopped down.

The trees were planted by the Sindh Forest Department a few years ago, according to a range forest officer, and had been thriving. But commercial concerns must always triumph: a temporary cattle market is being set up in the area, and the trees had to go so that it could more easily be visible from the main road to potential customers.

In other words, an asset that could have benefited the general public for decades was without a thought given up.

A moment's reflection upon Pakistan's realities might throw up the idea that this is hardly surprising. But the same can possibly be said about the follow-up, which is that when the police were approached by SFD officials for registering an FIR, they agreed only to receive a complaint.

It would perhaps be a small matter were it not for the fact that this pattern of waging a war against greenery is amongst the more insidious, yet little remarked upon issues in Pakistan.

Whether it is the city administration chopping down trees in Lahore for the Canal Road widening project, or the timber mafia doing the same and by degrees denuding the country's forests, the practice is widespread.

The way out of the situation is simple — at least on paper: raise awareness amongst the citizenry and law enforcers, enhance the capacities of the latter, and keep watch on the consequences of climate change. Straightforward remedies, but seemingly far-fetched in the context of Pakistan.

PML-N's overreaction

IT may be arrogance or it could be a sign of panic, but the PML-N's early response to Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri taking to the streets of the country is unnecessary overreaction. The filing of a reference for the disqualification of Imran Khan with Speaker of the National Assembly Ayaz Sadiq is a nakedly political ploy that has little to do with the law or parliamentary practice. While the post-Panama Papers revelations about the PTI chief's past financial practices and property ownership have raised legal questions, the proper forums for deciding those issues are the judiciary and the ECP. Moreover, the PML-N move against Mr Khan in the National Assembly could trigger allegations of conflict of interest against the speaker, given Mr Sadiq's recent partisan attitude towards the PTI in the Assembly and the bypoll he was forced to contest last year following the PTI's successful challenge of the 2013 general election result. Unfortunately then, the PML-N's apparent decision to fight politics with politics could cause unnecessary collateral damage to the apex democratic institution.

Far more sensible an approach involved the meetings that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif held with the leaders of allied political parties, the PkMAP, National Party and JUI-F. Perhaps it was to seek reassurances or to strategise, but the cumulative democratic lesson of the last eight years has been that when parliamentary forces consult each other and act in concert, it has the effect of defusing political crises and stabilising the democratic process. The fact is that the PML-N has a majority in the National Assembly, a dominant majority in the Punjab Assembly and is one half of a power-sharing agreement in Balochistan. Those are legitimately earned, democratic strengths, while there is little clarity about the scale of public support for the PTI and Tahirul Qadri and their agenda of street protests. Moreover, the ToR committee continues to exist and the

PML-N can still find a way to break the impasse there, allowing a judicial commission to be formed and the inquiry into the Panama Papers to begin.

Yet, the PML-N has acquired a well-deserved reputation for overreacting to challenges from the PTI and Tahirul Qadri, and the building political confrontation could trigger an ugly response from the PML-N if the party abandons common sense. The events of June 2014 in Lahore — in plain words, the massacre in Model Town — still cast a pall over the PML-N, and the party's long march to Islamabad for the restoration of then chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry was a confrontation that only outside mediation resolved. The PML-N is defending what it believes is its rightful political ground and the party is protecting its leader, but perhaps the party should remember that its foremost duty is as the elected government of the country.

Culling pye dogs

STRAY dogs have been at the receiving end of the civic authorities' zeal in Karachi since Thursday. At least 700 of them have so far been killed in two areas of District South alone using poison pellets in chicken meat, and the total number throughout the city's six districts could run into thousands. The carcasses — which made for some gruesome viewing — were collected by the municipal authority concerned and removed to a landfill. The scale of the problem posed by the stray dog population in Karachi can be gauged from the fact that last year Jinnah Hospital treated 6,500 dog bite cases, while the number thus far this year has reached 3,700.

There is a considerable amount of outrage from some quarters about the cruel manner of the cull, which resulted in an agonising death for the animals. That is as it should be, because suffering — whether undergone by man or beast — must be a matter of concern and more humane options explored. However, those for whom private cars are the primary mode of transport would find it difficult to appreciate the dangers that packs of stray dogs pose on a daily basis to pedestrians as well as children playing in the streets, a far from uncommon sight in the metropolis. That said, in the delicately balanced order of the natural world, it is worth looking at the issue from a more holistic point of view. Research has shown that pye dog populations in an area tend to replenish themselves as other dogs move in to fill the ecological space created by the culled animals. Also, a larger amount of available resources enhances survival rates for both puppies and fully grown dogs. But therein lies a clue: deprive stray dogs of the resources that nurture them. The lack of an organised garbage disposal system in the

city exacts a multifaceted environmental cost. Addressing that issue would have a far-reaching impact on reducing the pye dog population as well.

Power bottleneck

NO sooner had the government committed itself once more to its promise of eliminating load-shedding by the end of its term than we have a new report from the power sector regulator detailing the many bottlenecks that plague the country's transmission system. Most importantly, the regulator has pointed out that the existing transmission system cannot even carry current loads, let alone cater to the requirements of the future. In the past, high officials of the water and power ministry conceded that the transmission system was unable to handle loads beyond 15,000MW. Now Nepra tells us in its annual report that the transmission system can barely cope with present demand, and whatever upgradation work is being carried out will not address the real bottlenecks. Many power plants, we are told, are operating well below capacity because there is insufficient capacity to evacuate the power they generate. In addition, many grid stations and transformers are operating at 80pc of capacity, well beyond their safety limit. And in the midst of all this, the government is claiming that it will take power generation capacity to 31,000MW by the time its term ends.

The question naturally arises: if the system is barely able to cope with the evacuation, transmission and distribution of power under today's loads, how does the government intend to handle all the additional generation capacity it is contracting? Some transmission lines are indeed being laid, particularly those where Chinese projects are involved, with the most notable example being the work under way to connect Jamshoro grid station with Lahore via two lines. But the details given in Nepra's report go far beyond the main spine of the country's transmission system. In order to handle the kind of loads that the government is planning to put on the system by 2018, even if we assume they come online as planned, it will mean that the entire network should be undergoing massive upgradation. Instead, the report tells us of plants that have been inaugurated with much fanfare only to become idle because power lines to carry their output have yet to be laid. It tells us about grid stations overloaded and EHV lines near full capacity. As has been repeatedly emphasised by many already, without underlying reforms of the power sector institutions and technical upgradation of transmission and distribution, mere megawatts will not be enough to tackle the power shortages in any meaningful way.

Imran Khan's protest

FOUR months ago, the Panama Papers bombshell dropped and threatened political chaos in the country. In the intervening four months, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the first family survived the challenge through a combination of events: Mr Sharif's surgery abroad; the hot summer months coinciding with Ramazan followed by the Eid break; the pause at the ECP as four members retired; and the negotiating process over the terms of reference for a judicial commission reaching an impasse. Now, four months since the Panama Papers bombshell, PTI chief Imran Khan is trying to re-energise the controversy and has taken to the streets once again to demand accountability of the first family.

Whether advisable or not from a political or governance perspective, the right to protest and call for accountability belongs to Mr Khan and his party. But what is indisputable is that the onus is on the government to find a solution: the unified parliamentary opposition can only make demands of the government; it is the government alone that can notify the formation of a judicial commission and set out its terms of reference. While Mr Khan does turn to dangerous and destabilising rhetoric far too often, he has also made it clear that a judicial commission formed on terms acceptable to the unified opposition still remains an acceptable solution for the PTI. Surely, then, the impasse in the ToR committee can be resolved — if Mr Sharif can find it within himself to accept that the revelations in the Panama Papers regarding the first family should be probed on a priority basis.

Much as the PML-N would like to dismiss the Panama Papers as political propaganda and treat the PTI's protest campaign as an illegal attempt to overthrow the government, the fact remains that the scandal posed serious questions to the first family that have yet to be answered. Moreover, from a democratic standpoint, it is clear why a prime minister and his family should be held to a higher standard of credibility and transparency — the great power reposed in the prime minister necessarily comes with great responsibilities towards the public. But the PTI also has a responsibility to the democratic system that the party and its leaders appear to be unaware of. In particular, Mr Khan's enthusiasm for taking to the streets often seems to dwarf his interest in parliament. At the very least, Mr Khan should pledge — and work to ensure — that the upcoming protests remain peaceful on the PTI's part.

IDPs' return

AS the government falls behind in its responsibility to rehabilitate and secure internally displaced communities in Fata, many thousands face a future deprived of shelter, potable water, education and livelihood. This newspaper highlighted the story of one such family from the Alisherzai tribe returning to central Kurram after seven years, only to face virtual homelessness. While voluntary repatriations to Kurram Agency began in 2011, many poverty-stricken returnees have not been helped in the rebuilding of homes and securing of livelihoods as promised. Meanwhile, the civil administration is yet to distribute cash grants of Rs35,000 for 4,000 returned families — despite Rs42m set aside for Kurram Agency's rehabilitation. With large-scale Fata repatriations expected to end in November, questions are emerging regarding the mandate of the Fata Disaster Management Authority. Tasked with transporting IDPs to their hometowns, the FDMA appears powerless to collect assessment data and manage rehabilitation projects. Presently, conflict rehabilitation in Fata is controlled by the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Unit charged with the disbursement of Rs5.4bn. Where is this money going? The RRU is failing to show results in tribal agencies where the army is not actively intervening in rebuilding as evident in North and South Waziristan where rehabilitation projects are showcased as army achievements. Controlling most decisions on Fata, the army-led establishment has ostensibly agreed to joint ownership with civilians on rehabilitating IDPs. However, this 'partnership' has exposed the ineptitude of the civilian administration.

True, the large-scale displacement from conflict zones in Fata and the subsequent repatriation of over 200,000 implies that financial and human resource constraints remain enormous. But neglect and apathy by the civil administration, including the Fata Secretariat — understaffed, unable to plan and lead — is no excuse when faced with a humanitarian disaster — for instance, only 1,600 returning families out of 13,000 in Kurram have FDMA-provided temporary tents. Surely, this must propel KP's chief executive into action. With no drinking water nor education and health facilities, families regret their return. Rehabilitation is a combined civil and military task. To add, the government has failed to coordinate with donor agencies offering immediate assistance for shelter and food in millions of dollars as the cold weather sets in. Offers of humanitarian assistance should be welcomed when rapid action is required. If IDPs are to return to sustainable lives and peace, the government must know that it is reform with consensus among stakeholders that rebuilds lives.

Vehicle fitness

THE traffic chaos in many of Pakistan's cities has by now reached legendary proportions. Such is the tangle that at several busy intersections and thoroughfares across the country it is often possible to empathise with dispirited members of the traffic corps, watching on helplessly as road users violate rule after rule, in numbers so great that orchestrating order does seem an impossible task. For this reason, when the relevant law-enforcement department attempts to improve the situation, at the very least points can be granted for the effort made, even if it is a given that the lack of persistent follow-through will mean that anarchy will, inevitably, reassert itself. It is in this spirit that the Punjab government's recent roads-related initiative must be appreciated. The province is making a renewed push to crack down on vehicles that are not roadworthy and do not pass fitness standards. Huge numbers of such vehicles ply the streets across the country as even a cursory survey would reveal. Having inaugurated a 'vehicle inspection and certification system' in Kala Shah Kaku near Lahore about a fortnight ago, under which vehicles will pass fitness standard tests and those found below par will be stopped from being used, the plan is to set up 39 such stations in the province by the end of the year. Further, it is going to make fitness certificates a requirement for public transport vehicles getting permits for different routes, which will be achieved through an ordinance amending the Provincial Motor Vehicles Ordinance 1965.

This is a praiseworthy initiative, and one that other provinces would do well to emulate. The lack of roadworthiness of too many vehicles used as public transport — buses, wagons, three-wheelers, etc — is one of the reasons behind the high rates of the, often fatal, traffic accidents in the country. Beyond this, there is an urgent need to enforce existing traffic regulations. If Pakistan is ever going to present a picture of orderliness, it has to start with the roads.

US citizen's mystery

EVEN as the news was first breathlessly relayed across the country, the questions quickly mounted.

Days later, there are still no answers and Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan's statements have only deepened the mystery.

Matthew Craig Barrett, an American citizen expelled from Pakistan five years ago in nebulous circumstances, returned to the country over the weekend after being granted a visa by the Pakistani consulate in Houston, Texas.

Despite being on a so-called blacklist, he was cleared by immigration staff at the Islamabad airport to enter the country.

In and of themselves, the details are not sensational: Mr Barrett is a private citizen, has no known connection to the US state or intelligence apparatus, and was previously residing here with his Pakistani wife and two young children.

But it was the circumstances of his expulsion from Pakistan in 2011, allegedly for venturing near a restricted military facility, and the fact that he was branded an American spy in the tumultuous months after the Raymond Davis incident and the Osama bin Laden raid that make Mr Barrett's case both puzzling and of potentially national significance.

If it is a matter simply of visa fraud, the problem is a familiar one and has proved exceedingly difficult to stamp out.

Corrupt embassy officials abroad and collusion with immigration staff at Pakistani airports have allowed many a wealthy individual to circumvent the system over the years, though the digitisation and integration of records in recent times has made fraud much harder to perpetrate.

It appears inconceivable that Mr Barrett would attempt to re-enter Pakistan for spying purposes — the idea that an individual who is a Caucasian and a foreign national unaffiliated with the US embassy, essentially a private citizen, can spy inside Pakistan is ludicrous. But such are relations with the US once again and such is the climate of hostility towards foreigners in Pakistan generally that it has automatically been assumed in sections of the media and the political class that Mr Barrett has arrived to cause harm to this country.

The interior minister has tried to downplay the spy angle, but perhaps only because of the embarrassment it can cause the government.

No effort has been made to clarify the circumstances of Mr Barrett's expulsion five years ago and the usual tendency to blame junior officials for a mistake — in this case Mr Barrett's re-entry into Pakistan — has been indulged in. The interior minister can surely do better.

Carnage in Quetta

EVENTS in Quetta yesterday demonstrated that the country remains vulnerable to meticulously planned urban terrorism of particularly grotesque dimensions.

It began with the targeted killing in the morning of senior lawyer Bilal Anwar Kasi, gunned down while travelling in his car. That was the opening salvo for mayhem on a much wider scale.

A suicide bomber struck at the gates of the Civil Hospital's emergency department where a large number of people had gathered after his body was brought there.

At least 70 people died in the blast, and 100 were injured. Many of the dead included lawyers; several of them senior members of the fraternity who, it is said, were more vocal than most about human rights violations taking place in the province. Two cameramen from DawnNews and Aaj TV were also among the dead.

Violence in Balochistan is multifaceted and perpetrated by a variety of actors, including separatists, religious extremists and others, but the modus operandi in this case appears to indicate the involvement of religious extremists. And there has indeed been a claim of responsibility, albeit unsubstantiated, by at least one such outfit.

After a lull of several months, there have been indications that extremist groups are once again active in the city, with lawyers being the target in most incidents.

In June, the principal of the University of Balochistan's law college was assassinated. On Aug 1, two Hazara men were shot dead. The next day, a lawyer was murdered in broad daylight by gunmen on a motorcycle. In response, pillion riding and the display of

weapons in Quetta were banned. However, such cosmetic measures do little to thwart those bent on carnage.

Clearly, there has been an intelligence failure of grave proportions — even more so given the overt security footprint in a garrison town like Quetta.

While the immediate target may well have been the legal community, with the murder of Bilal Anwar Kasi acting as ‘bait’, there is little to illuminate the motive behind the atrocity.

Ongoing legal proceedings against individuals accused of terrorism could have been the trigger, but such large-scale attacks are typical of the blowback that militants had launched after the state began to go after them.

Moreover, lawyers, doctors and teachers are seen as part of the ‘intelligentsia’, and when they are targeted — especially through such wholesale slaughter — it casts a pall of gloom over society, especially in a province that has seen a heartbreaking decimation of its educated class through violence.

Such attacks also belie the claim by security forces and law-enforcement agencies that they have brought terrorism under control through ‘intelligence-based operations’.

Years of myopic and ultimately self-destructive policies have created a witches’ brew of militant groups and proxies in Balochistan acting at the behest of various quarters, not all of whom are foreign.

Do the authorities even have a road map that sees the people of this beleaguered province as more than cogs in a security state?

Miners' protest

A PROTEST mounted recently by the salt mine workers in KP's Karak district has once again brought into focus an ugly reality: at the very margins of our society and our country's labour force, miners toil under merciless conditions, beyond the reach of any state protection.

Regular news reports appearing in the media announce the deaths of numerous miners in deep coal shafts. But rarely does anybody reflect on what this actually means.

Only those who have been inside a mine in the country — whether coal, salt or mineral — understand that mining is one of the most hazardous occupations. An accident can cause several workers to be buried alive deep underground — in some cases, they linger on for hours, even days, before suffocation, dehydration and starvation slowly claim their lives.

The workers in Karak had been demanding death and casualty grants for those killed or injured during work, ie they were protesting the absence of any safety measures, accusing leaseholders of exploiting the workers, and pointing out the poor working conditions under which they toil.

All of this is an understatement. Fact of the matter is, miners work under mediaeval conditions in Pakistan, and safety is usually the furthest thing from the minds of leaseholders.

It is common practice, for example, in many coal mines to use open-flame contraptions for lighting, when internationally it is strictly prohibited to have any kind of open flame or even a filament bulb inside a coal mine due to risk from methane bubbles that could spark an explosion.

Mines often collapse on top of the workers, resulting in grievous injuries to them or death. There is a desperate need to extend some protection to the workers in the mining sector given that the latter is dominated by small-time contractors who are beyond the reach of government's regulations.

Workers in this sector are exposed to some of the most serious hazards to life, limb and health, and they deserve attention like all other human beings.

After Quetta

MONDAY'S devastation in Quetta has drawn various claims of responsibility, but only this is certain so far: the long fight against militancy is a much bigger, borderless war than it has thus far been fought as.

The allegations that the Quetta carnage may be linked to CPEC and hostile foreign interference in Balochistan were predictable enough, but cannot and should not be ruled out. That makes it all the more important for the perpetrators to be identified and caught and for the criminal justice system to be allowed to take its course.

Nothing less than a clear and wholly transparent prosecution and judicial conviction of the architects of the Quetta attacks will establish the truth.

Yet, whether the attackers were linked to outside forces or the internal fight against militancy, the straightforward reality is that the attacks could not have taken place in isolation.

Peace and stability can never be brought to Quetta, Balochistan, Pakistan or indeed the region generally if militancy is fought in isolation and selectively by states while the militants themselves move freely across borders and boundaries.

Consider the possibility of an internal dimension to the Quetta attacks: as the military leadership itself has alleged, the anti-militancy successes in Fata and KP may be causing militant groups to look to operate elsewhere in the country.

But security policy in Balochistan has been dominated by the military for over a decade now, indicating that an ad hoc, piecemeal approach to combating militancy will not succeed. Or, if there is foreign involvement, Balochistan is made vulnerable primarily because of the long border it shares with Afghanistan.

On the other side of this boundary, however, lie areas virtually controlled by the Afghan Taliban. The insurrection against the lawful government in Afghanistan, then, is adding to the instability of the region and must be regarded as part of the problem.

That terrorism cannot be fought and won while being isolated from one's neighbours, whether inside the country or outside, must be the basic starting point for Pakistan's national security policy.

The zero-tolerance approach is often rejected as unfeasible or impractical, but unless it forms the philosophical underpinnings of overall security policy, the country cannot realistically look forward to a peaceful, stable or prosperous future.

Whether internally or externally directed, terrorism inside Pakistan will only be defeated by cooperation among institutions and between states.

Finally, the need for clarity and coherence in overall policy should not obscure local failings. Quetta, a relatively small provincial capital, ought to be better protected than it has been.

After each attack, whether a targeted killing or an indiscriminate bombing, the same vows are made by different officials, but accountability never seems to be a priority. Surely, Balochistan and its capital, Quetta, deserve both answers and also visible accountability.

Media perils

THE death of two cameramen in the Quetta suicide blast on Monday underscores the perils of conflict reporting that Pakistan's media routinely face.

Mehmood Khan of DawnNews and Aaj TV's Shahzad Ahmed were among the over 70 people killed in the secondary attack that took place at the Civil Hospital where lawyers and media had gathered following the shooting of senior advocate Bilal Kasi earlier in the morning.

This incident again draws attention to the vulnerability of a media compelled most of the time to tell the story at any cost — 72 media personnel in the country have lost their lives in the line of duty since 2002.

Surely, no story is worth the life of a reporter or cameraman. In fact, covering an attack with the patience and restraint necessary in a risky situation will not detract from the newsworthiness of the story.

Both media houses and their employees ought to realise this and the importance of adhering to safety guidelines in the coverage of terrorism-related incidents.

Coercing reporters to obtain exclusive information and footage in the aftermath of a blast is simply wrong, even for upping the ratings.

Unfortunately, journalism is often driven by commercial interests, and most reporters and cameramen risk their safety to earn a livelihood.

Newsrooms conducting live interviews of injured media workers — some lauded for their intrepidity on air — takes away from the message that safety comes before one's duty to provide information.

Therefore, news editors must only encourage information and footage obtained safely. On their part, many media workers don't want to be told how to do their job and indulge in spats with security officials when refused access after an attack — in their quest to shoot footage of victims, some have even hindered medical efforts.

It's about time editors collectively endorsed and implemented revised and updated SOPs, especially in view of the rising incidence of secondary attacks that have proved more lethal.

Staffers must receive training and security briefings; they must display their press badges and wear flak jackets and helmets, besides familiarising themselves with exit strategies.

Meanwhile, instantly uploaded social media footage also encourages news outlets to push the accepted limits to get the story out quickly. This worsens matters.

The information war reminds one of George Orwell's words: "In times of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act." Telling the truth is essential but it should be told with sensitivity and without recklessness.

Stranded workers

PAKISTANI workers based in Saudi Arabia send home billions of dollars in remittances every year. But now, in their time of need, it appears that the state's response to their problems has been inadequate.

The stories emerging from the kingdom are harrowing, as accounts published in this newspaper on Tuesday illustrate.

Affected workers who spoke to this paper say they have not been paid for many months, while others complain that there have been days when they have gone without food and water.

The workers' troubles are, of course, linked to the slowdown in the Saudi economy; thousands of workers — including Pakistanis, Indians and Filipinos — mainly in the construction sector have been affected, as their employers have failed to pay their salaries.

The identity documents of some have expired and not been renewed, while in other cases the employers have taken away the workers' documents.

In Saudi Arabia, an expat being found without proper residency documents can mean dire consequences for him.

What is particularly disturbing is the fact that when some affected workers approached Pakistani missions in the kingdom for help, they were callously asked why they had come to work in Saudi Arabia in the first place. These accounts counter official claims that Pakistan is looking after its affected workers in the kingdom.

India, whose workers are in a similar situation, sent a junior minister to Saudi Arabia to look into the issue. If the crisis persists and Pakistani workers remain unpaid and stranded in the kingdom, Islamabad should dispatch a senior official to discuss the matter with Riyadh.

The government must use its good offices with the Saudi government to ensure that the dues of these hardworking men are cleared by their employers.

Moreover, Pakistani missions in the kingdom must deal with the affected citizens with empathy and respect. The PML-N-led government is known to be close to Riyadh; it is time it used its influence to alleviate the suffering of Pakistani workers in the kingdom.

Intelligence lapse

WAS it an intelligence failure? Mehmood Khan Achakzai believes it is and has demanded that heads roll.

Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan believes it is not and has argued that it is a national duty to support the country's armed forces and intelligence apparatus.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif took to the floor of parliament and insisted that not only are the country's political and military on the same page, but that the intelligence agencies are working tirelessly to defeat our enemies.

For its part, the military leadership has ordered a redoubling of effort by the security and intelligence apparatus it heads in the wake of the Quetta carnage.

What is undeniable is that the country has once again been convulsed by terrorism that remains undefeated. Furthermore, the vows by high officials to defeat terrorism have not addressed the basic question at an operational level: what happened in Quetta this week and why did it succeed?

It is a cornerstone of intelligence and counterterrorism that the enemy has to succeed only once for the state to appear to have failed.

An IRA claim of responsibility after a failed assassination attempt against then UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher perhaps most famously encapsulates the state's conundrum: "Today we were unlucky, but remember we only have to be lucky once — you will have to be lucky always."

Yet, there are two aspects worth considering of the reaction to the Quetta bombing, and, indeed, generally to virtually every major attack.

Contrast first the reaction of Chaudhry Nisar to the Quetta bombing with his reaction to personnel allegedly involved in granting entry to a 'blacklisted' American citizen, Matthew Barrett.

Without waiting for a thorough investigation and acting swiftly, the interior minister ordered legal action against several individuals and bluntly claimed that crimes had been committed.

Yet, when it comes to the intelligence apparatus, especially that led by the military, Chaudhry Nisar appears to automatically believe that no wrong could have been committed, no lapse ever allowed. Why?

The focus is the city where the attack took place and the area within that city where the bomber struck.

After more than a decade of near-total control of security policy and a dominant hand in the security arrangements of the province, why is Balochistan's intelligence apparatus unable to detect a plan as sophisticated as the one that unfolded in Quetta on Monday?

At the very least, some coordination was required to first kill a senior lawyer and then strike the hospital where his colleagues had gathered to receive his body.

Coordination means vulnerability to interception as does the fact that the first killing should have heightened security immediately in the vicinity of the hospital. Surely, it is not unpatriotic to ask if everything possible is being done before deaths occur, and not after.

Apathy towards rape

NO matter what the law may be on paper, attitudes to women and their place in society determine the outcome of crimes against them. And Pakistan has a long way to go, even in a cosmopolitan and relatively modern city such as Karachi.

A report by War Against Rape, which was released on Tuesday, indicates the prevalence of endemic institutional apathy towards rape victims in the metropolis which renders their quest for redressal an uphill battle.

The findings reveal a shocking disparity between the number of total medico-legal examinations of sexual assault victims — a vast majority of whom are women and girls — carried out in Karachi and the FIRs filed with the police, which are a prerequisite for legal proceedings.

Between January 2015 and July 2016, despite 516 medico-legal examinations, FIRs were filed in only 122 of those cases, less than 24pc of the total.

Moreover, 70pc of the cases investigated by WAR during this period did not make it to court, mainly because the families chose not to pursue the matter legally or because of 'external pressure' on them.

For context, consider this: only about 10pc of sexual assault cases are even reported. The situation, instead of improving, appears to have worsened over the years: in 2005, FIRs were filed in 160 out of 357, or 44pc, medico-legal examinations in Karachi.

Rape is not an easy crime to prosecute successfully, even in many Western countries.

The reasons can range from the circumstances of the case to the victim's own determination to stand her ground in proceedings where invasion of privacy is a given. However, in countries like Pakistan, those alleging sexual assault have to run a gauntlet of public humiliation that is of another order altogether.

Weak, corrupt institutions and the culture of shame and silence surrounding sexual matters make even reporting rape — the very first hurdle — a daunting challenge.

Unsympathetic police, intrusive questioning of the victim and deliberate delays in filing FIRs compound the victims' distress.

Moreover, only seven women medico-legal officers, against a sanctioned strength of 27, are appointed in Karachi, which makes for long delays in completion of medical formalities.

Years-long court proceedings, which sometimes feature insensitive judges, and even voyeuristic bystanders, understandably deter victims and their families from pursuing cases to their conclusion.

Moral judgment and bias in dealing with survivors of rape is inexcusable, and the institutions concerned must take note of the report's findings.

Expanded Sindh cabinet

SINDH'S new Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah has talked of change in the province. But if the size of his cabinet is anything to go by, the people of Sindh may see more of the same where governance is concerned.

On Sunday, the provincial cabinet was expanded and currently stands at 37 members. Included in this list of worthies are ministers, special assistants and advisers.

To put things in perspective, the number of members sitting in the Sindh Assembly is 165. It is no consolation that the cabinet of Mr Shah's predecessor was even larger and included a number of coordinators, political secretaries and political assistants.

Frankly, there is nothing new or indicative of change in stuffing the cabinet with as many individuals as possible. And the key question that should be asked of this supersized grouping is: will they deliver?

As a lawmaker speaking to this paper admitted, 'political compulsions' had a role to play in the jumbo cabinet.

This is clear as the relatives of PPP stalwarts, 'influentials' such as tribal chieftains, and other such luminaries have been included in the line-up. No doubt many of these individuals excel in their fields. But does Sindh need such a top-heavy government to solve its myriad problems?

Have these cabinet members been taken on to improve governance in the province, or due to political reasons?

Rather than having such a large number of captains steering Sindh's ship, should Murad Ali Shah not have formed a leaner cabinet, consisting of capable lawmakers and professionals who could address the province's dire issues?

However, now that the cabinet has been expanded, we hope the list of its members does not increase exponentially. More importantly, we hope that the new set-up delivers and does not make the mistakes the earlier cabinet made.

The PPP has been slammed by its critics for failing on the governance front in the province. This is Mr Shah's chance to prove his critics, and that of his party, wrong.

Draconian cyber law

THE National Assembly has passed the controversial Prevention of Electronic Crimes Bill (PECB) 2015, which means only the president's signature keeps it from becoming law.

The government's unwavering commitment to bulldozing the bill through has borne fruit in spite of criticism by human rights activists, journalists, IT experts and digital rights groups.

The deal was, however, really sealed in the Senate in July, where a PPP-led house could have blocked the bill or introduced meaningful amendments. Instead, despite having consulted civil society groups and other stakeholders, it was able to allay only a few concerns, with most of the 50 amendments made being cosmetic in nature.

Perhaps the only amendment providing some consolation was the right to appeal, granted in the much-condemned Section 34, which gives the state sweeping powers to block or remove online content.

In its final form, the bill is both regressive and written not to protect citizens but to empower the state.

Specifically, the PECB can be seen as a tool of war; one of the "cornerstones of the government's plan to fight the spread of terrorists' and militants' activity online", an earlier interior ministry report stated in connection with the National Action Plan against terrorism.

In this context, MQM MNA Raza Ali Abidi was quite right in his statement in the Assembly yesterday: "The government was under pressure to pass this bill using any force necessary." While it is an open secret, it is a pity he did not share, for the record, where the pressure came from.

Parliament then has ceded control of the internet in the name of national security. The bill has many grey areas and poorly worded definitions of terms such as "malicious intent" or "dishonest intention". The harsh punishments listed do not fit with most of the crimes in the bill.

The room for interpretation of several clauses is so vast that a harmless activity could land an individual behind bars with hefty fines. Other areas of concern, such as the draft conflicting with other laws, have been ignored.

The granted room for censorship is likely to have a chilling effect on the one medium where diversity of thought was possible with minimum interference. PPP's Naveed Qamar summed it up best when he said, "The bill will be misused by authorities and government departments.

None of us will be spared if this law is used in an undemocratic way." Given Pakistan's patchy record in governing the internet thus far, there are legitimate fears that the government and security agencies will misuse the ambit of this law to their advantage.

There is no doubt that there is a need for laws to regulate cyber activity in a world where online behaviour is increasingly becoming part of the public domain. But this botched attempt is set to cause more problems than it will solve.

Afghan refugees

WHILE one can understand the concerns that drove Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan to declare that the children of displaced Afghans in Pakistan would not be issued Pakistani national identity cards, this restriction should not be allowed to infringe on the refugee rights of the community.

The state here remains morally obligated to providing refugees access to education, health and economic opportunities during their stay. Indeed, it can take a step further by granting Pakistani nationality to the children of mothers who are Pakistani citizens. It is illogical and unjust to deny them this right.

The refrain so far has been that over the decades — since the 1970s — the presence of Afghan refugees in the country has thrown up mammoth economic and security challenges.

This concern cannot be discounted, and solutions to the problems their stay may have generated must be discussed. But, at the same time, xenophobic tendencies cannot be allowed to dominate. Sadly, many Afghan refugees in Pakistan, registered or otherwise, have experienced society's hostility and have been at the receiving end of the state's ire for alleged links to militancy.

A whole community has been tarred by the suspicions of the establishment.

That said, the fact that the government extended the validity of the Proof of Registration card for 1.5m legally registered Afghan refugees until the end of this year shows the state is cognisant of its commitment to protecting refugee rights.

The six-month period allows time to sort out national policies for voluntary refugee repatriation. With 3,500 PoR cardholders having returned this year compared to over 58,000 in 2015, the extension underscores the need for both governments to work on plans for a structured repatriation drive and a sustainable reintegration programme for Afghans once they return.

This is especially necessary because the offspring of many Afghans who fled their country during the late 1970s and early 1980s, have grown up in Pakistan.

They have received an education here, have married here and their children have been born here. Their status also deserves sensitive discussion.

Meanwhile, Pakistan must ensure that the PoR cards work like CNICs by opening doors to educational and economic opportunities. Such incentives will surely encourage the documentation of an estimated one million unregistered refugees.

Investing in youth empowerment and education will also enhance stability and reduce suspicions that the refugees have links with militants.

Karachi's garbage crisis

AMONGST the many tragedies that have afflicted Karachi over the decades — such as crime, terrorism and urban blight — the city's solid waste problem is assuming crisis proportions.

In neighbourhoods across the city — from the enclaves of the elite to the sprawling urban slums — there are mounds of garbage piling up everywhere, with the provincial government and municipal authorities at sea about how to solve the problem.

The new Sindh chief minister has made statements about how he wants Karachi cleaned up; but beyond well-intentioned words, the city's residents want to know whether the rulers have any real plan to combat the garbage menace.

As urban planners point out, there is no reliable data about the amount of solid waste the metropolis generates on a daily basis, though estimates suggest it runs into thousands of tonnes.

Much of the waste ends up in dumps, alleyways and open spaces where it remains for weeks if not longer, while some of it is burnt in bonfires that unleash a vile miasma that chokes the entire locality.

Surely, Karachi deserves better. Though this situation has persisted for decades, it has become worse over the past few years; state-sponsored cleanliness drives have produced no lasting results.

Experts say the problem is that the state does not treat waste management in a holistic manner.

For example, while statements about lifting garbage will be made, it is unclear how it will be ultimately disposed of. Waste disposal and treatment is a linked exercise, from garbage generation to disposal, and must be addressed in a systematic way.

Moreover, the state should realise that garbage collection will not only result in a cleaner city, it can also result in revenue through energy generation, creating compost from organic waste, recycling material etc.

A proper plan overseen by elected local governments — accompanied by a campaign sensitising citizens about proper waste-disposal methods — should be the government's top priority; if need be, the model of other cities, such as Lahore, can be studied.

Security for judges and lawyers

THE modus operandi of the terrorist is flexible. When so-called hard targets become difficult to attack, soft ones are selected. When one area becomes more stable and therefore harder for terrorists to operate in, other, more vulnerable areas are targeted.

The challenge for the state is to not only keep up with the changing ways of the terrorist, but to stay one step ahead of him. When it comes to protecting the judiciary and the wider legal fraternity, however, the state has fallen behind.

Yet another attack on Thursday against the legal community in Quetta, this time a failed assassination attempt on FSC judge Malik Zahoor Ahmed Shahwani, has raised concerns that lawyers and judges may have become a sustained new target.

The devastation in Quetta earlier in the week, the killing of a lawyer in the same city the week before and the month-long abduction of the son of the Sindh High Court chief justice in June suggest an emerging pattern to both threaten the state and terrorise society.

If that is indeed the case — if militants are taking their war to the country's judicial and legal communities — the benefit to terrorists is relatively clear.

Damaging state institutions, making their members fear for their lives and making it easier for terrorists to operate is a key goal for them. While the state has turned to military courts as a partial response to the militant threat, the criminal justice system remains on the front line in the anti-militancy fight.

The cases of the vast majority of alleged terrorists processed through the judicial system are handled by the civilian-run judiciary. Be it bail, trials or the appeals process, judges and lawyers are deeply involved in the process of bringing them to justice.

By threatening the legal community, then, militants are essentially trying to frighten off an institution whose job it is to bring them to justice. That the individual targets may not all be directly connected to the fight against militancy does not matter. What matters is that fear is being sowed.

But it is far from clear what the state can do to protect the legal fraternity. While security for high-profile targets can be stepped up and the intelligence and law-enforcement apparatus can work with legal communities across the country to improve security, the apparent randomness of the attacks makes it difficult to fight back. But fight back the state must.

The terrorist's goal is to make the state seem weak. As new threats evolve, the state must adjust its response. Specific ethnicities and religious communities have been targeted before.

The fight against militancy was always going to be a long, difficult one. Neither the state nor society should lose hope though — that being a fundamental aim of the terrorist.

Hanif's example

IT is not difficult to find parallels between Hanif Mohammad's traits and those of his hometown (Karachi) and country.

The intense struggle for survival in later years brought in much energy and activity, yet it was the 'Little Master' who set the tone and proved that consistency of effort, self-belief and courage were the basic requirements to put up a spirited fight. His was a low-key effort, a foundation painstakingly created for the cricketers who came after him to build upon.

He believed in not giving up his wicket until the very last, writing his own epitaph in opposition to those who were in a hurry to celebrate his genius in a rushed obituary.

Hanif was there long before the Pakistanis took their sporting heroes for granted. He was there right at the start, setting standards since used to measure Pakistani prowess in various areas.

Internationally, too, he left an impact that was felt for generations; the skill at his command was weaved into many a tale from an era in which to be called a legend was a genuinely proud badge of honour. He epitomised perseverance and resistance. He personified a dignified defiance.

He was no A.H. Kardar or Imran Khan who led flamboyantly. His was a reassuring, unruffled, constant presence that brought calm and permanence to the national side in its formative years.

Before the team, there were individuals. Each one was in competition with the other, wanting to excel, wanting to promote his individual brand of the game for the nascent country. There were inevitably clashes over taste and style and also quite often on the basis of regions.

As a pioneer of Pakistani cricket and as a batsman of pure class, it has frequently been said that Hanif Mohammad was not given his due and that he was a victim of politics — an assertion backed by his 'sudden retirement' from Test cricket just a few runs short of becoming the first Pakistani to score 4,000 Test runs.

The man himself preferred to not indulge in the past unnecessarily and he was rewarded with the biggest prize for being around as a friend from the very beginning: from being an original icon of Pakistan cricket at a time before cricket was hyped by

television and instant versions of the game, he retained his aura as an extraordinary human being blessed with a rare determination and will to carry on the task.

Private guards

AS lawlessness has grown by leaps and bounds in Pakistan, the demand for private security has accordingly shot up.

Today, nearly all buildings — public or private — have security guards stationed inside and outside to keep an eye on undesirable elements. But as the chief justice of Pakistan observed during a hearing on Thursday, there is also a need to keep an eye on private security guards.

Justice Anwar Zaheer Jamali instructed the Sindh inspector general of police to scrutinise private guards as it was possible that some could be passing on sensitive information to foreign intelligence agencies or militants.

The chief justice added that many security guards are hired without verification while some are reportedly involved in crime.

Indeed, LEAs across Pakistan should take heed of what Justice Jamali is saying, as there is a definite need for better regulation of the private security industry.

Private security is big business; one figure suggests there are around 85,000 security guards in Sindh alone. It has also been observed that in Karachi, there are more active private guards than police officers. Yet despite their numbers, most private guards are ill-trained to meet the challenges of their job.

In fact, it would not be wrong to say that most are little more than armed, liveried watchmen. And while some brave individuals have given their lives in the line of duty, it is troubling that others have aided crime and terrorism.

The provincial governments need to ensure guards are well-trained, well equipped and well paid so that they can perform ably.

Secondly, LEAs must ensure all guards hired by private companies go through a thorough verification of credentials. Any companies that flout these standards must face punitive action.

But ultimately, while greater regulation and oversight of the private security industry by the state is required, the fact is that protecting the life and property of citizens is the core responsibility of the police; the state cannot abdicate this crucial responsibility.

Thoughts on August 14

WITH one year more to go before Pakistan completes 70 years of its existence, it is time we focused on a merciless self-examination to find out why and where we stand today in this hour of social anarchism and political duality. Could all this have been different if only we had avoided one mistake? Or is the abysmal state today the result of not one but a series of fundamental mistakes we made repeatedly — as if propelled by an uncanny force beyond our control — to all but destroy the values that the father of the nation stood for? Astonishing as it sounds, the loss of half the country and the humiliating surrender at Dhaka failed to shock us into making a clean break with the past and start afresh with a new resolve. Instead, where there should have been poise and restraint, history records recklessness, mob violence, repeated violations of the sanctity of the Constitution, and a flagrant abuse of state funds for personal and partisan gains. All this was topped by two military interventions (after 1971). Even when the civilian leadership returned to power after elections tainted by polling fraud, the spectre of ‘controlled democracy’ — an idea first mooted by Iskander Mirza in the pre-martial law days — haunted the polity. It still does.

The repercussions of military rule are there for us to see: the nation’s political growth has been stunted, its social fabric torn apart, and Pakistan’s image abroad tarnished. Acts of terror, like the one in Quetta last Monday and the carnage at the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014, are the visible form of the malignancy that has the country in its grip; the deeper and clandestine form of it is to be seen in religious extremism that has stymied liberal forces. More mortifying is society’s indifference to acts of mass murder, besides the perversion — often with the help of the establishment — of such noble Islamic concepts as philanthropy and jihad. The mishandling of the US-led anti-Soviet ‘jihad’ created a breed of militants who since then have been on their own, often beyond the control of their patrons, and are now at war with Pakistan — a state that nurtured them and made them victors in Afghanistan.

But even though we stumble and fumble and seem unable to find our way in the pre-dawn opacity, we should be sagacious enough not to show haste and, instead, detect the streaks of light piercing the all-enveloping gloom. The year 2013 saw the completion

of a full five-year term by an elected government and a constitutional transfer of power. This march — howsoever arduous — towards democratic evolution must be maintained, and no follies and foibles by the elected should be considered reason enough for the non-elected to re-enact a play censured by history. This should not mean carte blanche for the civilian leadership to demean itself in the people's eyes by glorying in the perks and privileges of power. Also deserving of denunciation is the evil use of law to persecute the opposition — a nostrum both civilian and military governments had recourse to. Quite often, the opposition invited and later regretted military rule, because it must know the generals have their own agenda.

The goal for all, and not merely the reviled politicians, should be to uphold Jinnah's teachings, especially those he spelled out repeatedly during the less than 13 months he had after independence. The gist of those pronouncements make clear Jinnah wanted a Pakistan which would be a welfare state; which would not be a theocracy; where lawmaking would be the sole prerogative of the people's elected representatives; and where all citizens, irrespective of religion and gender, would be equal before the majesty of the law. This idyll cannot be reached in a lifetime, but certainly we have a fair chance of giving the future generations a better Pakistan, if we begin the journey with sincerity — even 69 years late.

Army chief's criticism

THE well-meaning critique — or perhaps full-throated criticism — is a familiar one. In the past, too, army chief Gen Raheel Sharif has expressed his frustration and disappointment at the pace of implementation of the National Action Plan. After a particularly grotesque and appalling terrorist strike, the public pressure on the military and political leaderships to pinpoint failures and do something new can be intense. Moreover, the flurry of high-level meetings inevitably produces assessments that diverge and plans of action that do not always quite dovetail. Yet, it remains an uncomfortable sight when an army chief publicly criticises an elected government, as Gen Sharif has done once again this week. What is particularly troubling is that the criticism came after a top-level military-only huddle at GHQ — could not the military leadership's concerns have been conveyed during the intensive civil-military meetings in the days prior? While the reality of the civil-military relationship is known to all and sundry, the brazen undermining of the constitutional chain of command is surely counterproductive for whatever counterterrorism goals the military is trying to achieve.

Apparent as it is that the state's implementation of NAP has been patchy at best and that the fight against militancy needs more sustained support from the federal and provincial governments, there are also some questions about the selective nature of the military's interventions. As reported in this newspaper, the military's concerns largely centre on projects and tools that the military has itself determined essential to fight terrorism: the extension of the Protection of Pakistan Act, the Rangers' powers in Sindh and Punjab, new Frontier Corps wings in KP and Balochistan, etc. While concern has also been expressed about the lack of civilian capacity building in law enforcement and madressah reforms, it has previously been the case that when the political government acts to grant the military its core demands, the overall public criticism of the government's performance by the military also recedes. That selective approach helps perpetuate a dynamic whereby rather than cooperative solutions, the military and the civilian government see themselves as separately responsible for the areas they consider of most importance to themselves. But NAP cannot succeed on an ad hoc, piecemeal basis. Nor can it fundamentally work if different institutions are working according to their own priorities.

Yet, unwelcome and unwise as the military's public criticisms of the government are, the government must recognise that its counterterrorism efforts are desultory at best. Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan exemplifies the muddled approach of the government with his contradictory statements: he has both praised civil and military institutions for their efforts in the fight against militancy and also claimed that there needs to be far more focus on NAP. Perhaps the interior minister is being pulled in opposite directions — between a self-perceived need to automatically heap praise on the military and fight for the funds and full-fledged activation of NAP that he has long championed. But therein also lies the problem of a government that cannot be honest with itself about its own performance and that still seems caught in two minds about the centrality of NAP. Perhaps Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif can provide the necessary leadership — if the military can demonstrate that it is willing to work with him in private and be supportive of his government in public. Like the APS Peshawar attack, the Quetta bombing this week is an inflection point. The enemy is not only tenacious, but amorphous — it will only ever be defeated if the full might of the state and society, acting with clarity of purpose, are martialled against it. The country needs to come together and its institutions to work together.

Modi's aggressive language

When India and Pakistan misbehave with and provoke each other, the damage can quickly escalate.

Seemingly alone among the various power centres in the two countries is the PML-N government, which has consistently held out the possibility of bilateral dialogue as the only reasonable solution to the two countries' manifold concerns.

Last week, following the devastating Quetta bombing, the security establishment and some members of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif immediately and bluntly pointed the finger of blame at India and alleged that attempts were being made to derail CPEC.

The Foreign Office was more circumspect and later in the week reiterated what by then had become an incongruous talking point by inviting India for a dialogue on the Kashmir dispute. Perhaps in making that offer, the foreign affairs adviser, Sartaj Aziz, sought to strike a different tone and ratchet down the alarming rise in tensions between India and Pakistan.

It was not to be. In an extraordinary and premeditated verbal attack against Pakistan, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had this to say at an all-party meet in parliament in New Delhi on Friday: "The time has come when Pakistan shall have to answer to the world for the atrocities committed by it against people in Balochistan" and Azad Kashmir.

Let that sink in for a moment. A serving Indian prime minister has attacked Pakistan over Pakistan's control of a sovereign part of its territory, the very territory that Pakistan alleges India is interfering in.

At the very least, Mr Modi's comments amount to a breach of diplomatic norms. At worst, his remarks can — and likely will — be interpreted by hawks inside Pakistan as a threat.

Perhaps Mr Modi should have considered the dismal path he has ventured down. When Balochistan is raised by India, Pakistan can counter with the instability and state-inflicted violence in northeast India. It is a path of senseless accusations and recriminations. India and Pakistan surely deserve better.

Mr Modi has also suggested that Pakistan is inflicting gross violence in AJK. But the contrast between events in AJK and IHK could not be more stark: where one region

recently held a competitive and open election, the other is being systematically oppressed.

While Islamabad does have a great deal of influence in AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan, the very idea that there is mass political rejection of the prevailing system is preposterous. Through legal instruments and keeping in mind the overall Kashmir dispute, neither AJK nor Gilgit-Baltistan have been officially absorbed by Pakistan.

Mr Modi is not merely obfuscating, but in denial of the very basis of the original Pak-India dispute.

Dismal healthcare

WHEN a government spends only 0.9pc of its GDP on health, it is clearly not concerned about the well-being of its citizens — at least those who cannot afford to pay for it themselves. One consequence of this callous indifference is corruption in the public health sector, which further eats into already scarce resources. The Supreme Court on Friday made some pertinent observations regarding public healthcare in Pakistan, describing the situation as pathetic and shambolic. The apex court was hearing a case about alleged graft and misappropriation of medicines in the supply of oxygen and nitrogen gas to a government hospital in Islamabad. The two-judge bench raised questions as to why medical equipment in government hospitals was so often out of order, and why results from reputed private-sector laboratories differed from those in the public sector. It directed the advocates general of all four provinces to provide by Aug 18 details and operational condition of the equipment in district headquarter hospitals.

One of the most visible ways in which the inequalities in Pakistan manifest themselves is in the appalling quality of healthcare that the general public has access to, which the state evidently believes is all that they deserve. While the privileged frequent private hospitals offering high-quality care, often at exorbitant rates, the less financially advantaged have to queue for hours at public-sector hospitals along with throngs of similarly unfortunate souls in the hope they may get the opportunity to consult a doctor. It is far worse for those without functioning, properly equipped public healthcare in their area. One has only to see the number of out-of-city patients and their families living on footpaths outside major urban hospitals to gauge the enormity of the problems faced by a vast majority of people. Moreover, aside from a few instances — that too because of efforts by compassionate, service-minded doctors and philanthropic individuals — the quality of care at government hospitals is so shoddy and substandard that many people

avoid it entirely. According to a study, only 29pc of the population uses public-sector health facilities, opting instead for private healthcare. For the underprivileged, that means out-of-pocket expenses that cut into vital expenditure on food and education. That further compromises their physical, social and economic well-being, setting up a vicious cycle that is difficult to break. We cannot call ourselves a civilised nation until all our compatriots have a fair chance at life.

Mob violence

THE disappearance or abduction of children is amongst the gravest of issues. The attention that is being paid to the issue by the Punjab government and the justice system, which is in turn spurring on the police, is, therefore, to be appreciated, even if all quarters can be faulted for remaining silent spectators for so long. However, the increased focus has also resulted in a wave of panic across many cities, particularly in Punjab. As a result, an ugly and deeply dangerous hysteria has been unleashed where mobs, suspecting citizens of ill intent, have vent their fury in the most violent of ways. In Lahore alone, at least 25 people — both men and women — have been badly beaten over the past month. The victims have included the parents of the child concerned. In Multan on Wednesday, an angry crowd resisted the police's efforts to take custody of four people being thrashed — it turned out that the victims were, in fact, searching for a child missing from their own family. A day earlier, also in Multan, a man and woman, who the police say are mentally challenged, were beaten nearly to the point of death, while in Faisalabad a mob tried to set ablaze an alleged kidnapper. Overwhelmingly, the victims have been innocent of kidnapping. Even more worrying, perhaps, is that some of these assaults have already been established as instances of personal scores or other disputes being settled by inciting a crowd to violence on the pretext of 'kidnapping'.

Pakistan is no stranger to mob vigilantism of the most brutal order. Even so, the trend currently in evidence would indicate that a societal pressure valve has burst. While the law-enforcement system needs to urgently improve its performance and address the confidence deficit that has developed between it and the public, saner quarters of society too must play their part and urge restraint. If allowed to take root, such a trend would add a grievous threat to citizens' personal safety, which is already jeopardised.

Imran Khan's disturbing tactics

Controversy thy name is Imran Khan — or so it would appear to be all too often. Steaming into Islamabad for yet another anti-government rally, the PTI supremo on Sunday night ventured into the fraught world of civil-military relations.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is afraid of the army, a thundering Mr Khan claimed.

Moreover, it is because the government is afraid it cannot control army chief Gen Raheel Sharif that the government has tried to give him an extension and even a promotion, Mr Khan alleged.

Never mind that there has been absolutely no indication from either the government or the army chief that a scheduled change of army command will not take place in late November.

Never mind that Gen Sharif himself categorically stated in January that he would retire on time and that neither he nor the military high command has suggested anything contradictory since. All that appears to matter are the rumours and insinuations that Mr Khan apparently sees swirling around him and that he decides must be true.

Surely, this is not the way of a responsible politician. Perhaps the PTI chief, in his endless bid to oust or destabilise the PML-N government, understands the value of cynical politics: if Mr Khan breathes fresh life into old rumour, sections of the media and the political class can join in the clamour and seemingly turn the patently false into a likely possibility.

And if that rumour can give the government jitters or draw the military deeper into the political realm, then the possibility of an overreaction by either side could rebound to the PTI's advantage. But what is remotely democratic about such tactics or, indeed, how is any of it good for institutional stability?

Mr Khan has a democratic right to protest and oppose the elected government of the country.

He also has the right to share with the public his opinion on matters of national importance — but there is a line between sensible, even strident, critique and wanton disruption.

To be sure, the civil-military imbalance is real and Prime Minister Sharif and the army chief have clearly had policy differences over the past two and a half years. Yet, both have found a way to coexist and, as Gen Sharif's term comes to an end, there is little doubt that the military is not seeking to interrupt democratic continuity.

The unfortunate and unnecessary military criticism of the political government in the wake of the Quetta bombing may have served as yet another reminder of how carefully civil-military ties need to be managed, but it has occurred against the backdrop of a scheduled, impending and orderly change of command in the army.

Mr Khan clearly believes that Nawaz Sharif is unfit to lead this country. But there remains a fundamental question to be asked of Mr Khan: is he truly ready for the responsibility of leading it?

Cricket success

PAKISTAN'S emphatic series-levelling victory against England at The Oval came after a sterling performance. Besides the impressive show put up by the players in the do-or-die fourth Test, the team quite refreshingly displayed a resolve to make a comeback to draw the four-match contest.

Pakistan, for most of its 65-year cricket history, has featured among the world's front-ranking Test sides.

However, strong comebacks like the one witnessed at The Oval, have seldom been associated with them, especially on away tours and despite the tag of unpredictability which they have acquired over the years.

After having made a perfect start by winning the first Test at Lord's, Misbah-ul-Haq's men were comprehensively beaten at the Old Trafford by a rejuvenated England team and then lost the hard-fought third Test at Edgbaston by wilting on the final day.

Accused of playing thoughtless, unprofessional cricket by critics, they rose from the ashes to beat the hosts in the fourth Test and salvaged a more than respectable 2-2 result.

Quite significantly, 'comeback' has been a buzzword for Pakistan in the series. There were quite a few players that carried the team and never allowed their ambitions to fade.

It was pleasing to see middle-order batsman Azhar Ali overcoming his poor early form to make a century at Edgbaston, a nearly forgotten Sohail Khan re-emerging as the bowling spearhead and young opener Sami Aslam proving his potential with some exquisite batting after a dismal series in Bangladesh in 2015.

But best of all was the return to form of veteran Younis Khan who dazzled the world with an epic, match-winning 218 at The Oval.

Skipper Misbah should be given the credit for Pakistan's recent successes in Tests. He has been a most influential figure and certainly one of the finest of modern captains.

A determined character who has led the batting from the front in times of crises, Misbah's success stems from picking the right combinations, building confidence in the players and getting them to stick together.

With tough tours of New Zealand and Australia to follow before the year is out, coupled with a short series against the West Indies, the challenges ahead are quite daunting for Pakistan.

But with their formidable display in England, Misbah and his team have hopefully shrugged off the 'UAE winners' stigma for good and are set to conquer many more frontiers from this point on.

Celebratory firing

WHEN will we learn that moments of joy can be celebrated in less lethal ways? On Independence Day, about a dozen people were admitted to hospitals across Karachi, some with serious injuries caused by the hail of bullets fired by trigger-happy individuals into the air in various neighbourhoods of the city.

Despite the hazards of this practice, there has been little attempt to crack down on those mindlessly carrying on with this exercise in celebration.

It is high time people were made to understand that bullets thus fired will inevitably come down, and those caught indulging in such a show of joy must be penalised for endangering the lives of others.

Curbing the practice is a challenge. Guns are commonly owned and many people see it as a matter of ego to ignore advice about other people's safety.

An awareness campaign is badly needed to sensitise people to the hazards posed by the practice. The frivolous discharge of firearms is a serious menace to society and the practice can only end if it is delegitimised to the point where people are willing to report those who indulge in it.

Unfortunately, with firearms as ubiquitous as they are in our society, one does not expect the police to be able to do much to discourage such firing. Help is needed from the community to take collective ownership of the effort to discourage the practice, and apprehend those who engage in it.

It is completely unacceptable that firing joy shots into the air should be allowed as a way of celebrating anything, whether it is Independence Day, a wedding, or any other occasion, especially in densely populated cities.

The practice needs to be countered through a large and coordinated effort. The state can lead the way and the media can also help in spreading awareness about its dangers. Too many injuries, in some cases fatal, have been caused by the practice and it is high time to pull all resources together to end it.

Implementation of NAP

AN intensive series of civil-military meetings later, a mutually acceptable solution appears to have been reached. The National Action Plan will be jump-started by a new implementation committee that is to be headed by the national security adviser. Perhaps, then, more than a year and a half after NAP was drawn up, the much-needed, multipronged fight against terrorism, militancy and extremism will be taken up with vigour. That the newly expressed resolve is a joint effort of the civilians and the military is also to be applauded — institutions working together is the only realistic path towards victory for the country in the long fight against militancy. However, necessary as civil-military coordination is, the new mechanism to be put in place raises a number of questions.

First, why is it that movement and progress only appear to occur in the wake of a devastating bombing? NAP itself was drawn up after the wrenching attack and merciless killings at the Army Public School, Peshawar. The Easter bombing in Lahore earlier this year yielded a similar rush by the state to be seen to be doing something new to fight terrorism. Now, the Quetta carnage of last week has become the catalyst for the latest push against terrorism and militancy. Must the state always be reactive in its tactics and strategy? Second, why does civil-military coordination invariably look like encroachment by the military on civilian turf? The NSA is only nominally a civilian position today — the office is held by a retired general, Nasser Janjua. He displaced a civilian, Sartaj Aziz, who remains the foreign adviser to the prime minister. Furthermore, does the NSA really have the bureaucratic and organisational support that, for example, the interior ministry has? Moreover, given the composition of the NAP implementation committee, will it actually function as intended or simply become a forum for instructions to be given by the military to the civilians?

Third, will Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif move to address the problems festering among his senior ministerial team? The defence minister appears to have been virtually shut out from national security discussions of late and in any case appears preoccupied with his principal portfolio, the power sector. The interior minister and the finance minister appear to only grudgingly get along, while the foreign adviser seems to be pursuing policies that do not quite chime with the current situation that the country is facing internally and externally. Can any government realistically fight terrorism, militancy and extremism if its own house is not in order? That the principals on the political and military sides of the state have recognised the need for more urgency and deeper commitment in the fight against militancy is welcome. But that very characterisation may be part of the problem: if there remain sides and inter- and intra-institutional differences and divisions, can unity of purpose really be achieved?

Kashmir dialogue

DESPITE the toxic atmosphere currently poisoning Pak-India relations, it is welcome that Islamabad has reached out to New Delhi to discuss the Kashmir problem. On Monday, the foreign secretary gave the Indian high commissioner in Islamabad a letter intended for his counterpart in New Delhi, inviting him to discuss the issue. Instead of indulging in a blame game, this is the mature way to handle the situation. For over a month now, India-held Kashmir has witnessed severe unrest. Around 70 people have been killed in the violence, which was sparked by the killing of militant commander Burhan Wani by Indian security forces. A large number of youngsters have suffered eye

injuries — with some being blinded — due to the pellet guns used by security men. And while the Indian establishment claims Pakistan is fuelling unrest in IJK, it is quite clear that the uprising is indigenous in nature, fuelled by New Delhi's repressive methods in the held territory. Moreover, Narendra Modi's remarks, repeated during his Red Fort speech on Aug 15, unnecessarily dragging Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir into the debate, have not helped matters on the bilateral front, or in addressing the unrest in IJK. Hence, in the midst of all this, Pakistan's call for dialogue makes eminent sense — in fact, this can be an opportunity to revive the Pak-India dialogue process.

India should realise its strategy in the held territory has not borne fruit; militarising Kashmir has only increased the locals' resentment against New Delhi, which has tried to paint the uprising as a mere law-and-order issue. The current unrest has roots in the history of the region, and political stalemate. Internally, the Indian government, through its ruling allies in Srinagar, the PDP, must reach out to the disaffected populace and work to calm the situation instead of unleashing the security forces. As Kashmir's recent history has shown, brutal state repression will only further alienate the Kashmiris, and cause disenchanted youth to pick up the gun. India cannot deny that, despite the passage of several decades since the dispute emerged, Kashmir remains the flashpoint in the subcontinent and the prime reason for the absence of normal ties with Pakistan. That is why the Indian foreign secretary should respond positively to Pakistan's invitation; both sides need to frankly and sincerely discuss Kashmir — and all other issues. Grandstanding and indulging in cross-border verbal duels will only make matters worse.

Solar tariffs

THE good news is that there is ample investor interest in Pakistan's solar power sector, whether off grid or on. The bad news is that we are contracting some of the most expensive solar electricity in the world. The first upfront solar tariff announced by Nepra offered up to Rs17 per unit for utility scale solar power plants. That was revised down to Rs11 by December 2015, though reportedly some private producers have managed to obtain higher tariffs anyway. Now we have a communication from the water and power ministry urging Nepra to find ways to bring these tariffs down rather than up. Considering that solar tariffs are receiving bids as low as the equivalent of Rs4 around the world, in some cases even lower, what Pakistan is offering is clearly far beyond global norms and needs to be reduced urgently.

But there is one problem. The first, and largest solar power plant set up in the country as a partnership between the government of Punjab and a Chinese venture, has already locked in the exorbitantly high Rs16 tariff. All subsequent investments coming into the Quaid-i-Azam Solar Park in Bahawalpur have taken this higher tariff, and all other investors are being lectured about the need to reduce the tariff. This has created a perception that the government favoured a particular party, and then changed the terms for all the rest. Nobody will disagree with the water and power ministry about the need to bring down solar tariffs in the country, but how should we rid ourselves of this niggling thought that, somehow, we have all been had? Perhaps a way can be found to reduce the tariff for the original parties too that came in under the first upfront regime. That would certainly add credibility to the ministry's concerns about the high cost of solar power in the country, at a time when solar prices are plummeting around the world. Let's play hard, but let's also play fair.

Powers of detention

IN 2013 and 2014, towards the end of the last parliament and then under the present one, legislative changes were made to the country's anti-terrorism laws, including the promulgation of the notorious Protection of Pakistan Act (PoPA) in mid-2014. The aims were varied and controversial: expanding the definition of a terrorist act; giving the state new powers to act against terrorists and financiers of terrorism; setting up new special courts; etc. Yet, nothing came close to the controversy stirred up by the granting of 90-day detention powers to the security forces: a move that was, via PoPA and amendments to the Anti Terrorism Act, 1997, allegedly meant to give legal cover to the detention of so-called missing persons and also to help with investigations linked to the Karachi operation and other counterterrorism measures. Indeed, so controversial were the new detention powers that they came with a hard cap — a sunset clause that would automatically be triggered after two years.

That two-year period is now over and, among the various NAP-related discussions in the post-Quetta bombing scenario, the revival of the special 90-day detention powers is thought to be a key demand of the military-led security establishment. The political leadership is thought to be wary of granting an extension. The PPP and MQM, which have both felt the sharp end of detention powers under the amended Section 11EEEE of the ATA 1997, have reason to oppose an extension, while the PML-N, which has the numerical strength in parliament to have an extension passed in a joint sitting, has maintained an ambivalent position so far. To be sure, with the lapse of PoPA, a range of counterterrorism measures have been affected and some of them can be reasonably debated once again and reintroduced. But does the country really need extraordinary

detention powers, especially those that have been used against political forces? The problem with such ad hoc powers and piecemeal approaches is that they are open to abuse and, almost invariably in a rickety legal system, abuse does occur.

Just as importantly, recourse to add-ons and stopgap arrangements tends to suppress demand for long-lasting, structural reforms. To what extent, for example, has the creation of military courts under the 21st Amendment deflected attention away from the chronic deficiencies of the regular criminal justice system? First the ATA, then PoPA and finally the 21st Amendment — each of those legislative interventions simply created new judicial layers with no discernible systemic improvement. If anything, the new courts have created additional burdens for the higher judiciary because complex matters of due process have to be addressed when those convicted by special courts exercise their right to appeal. Ninety-day detentions may seem like a useful power to some in the security establishment, but from a systemic perspective such detentions only draw the country deeper into unnecessary legal and constitutional complications.

Benami properties

THE latest legislation to penalise all benami property holdings is a positive step in a much-needed direction, but questions remain. The legislation, which has been passed with the right amendments by a standing committee, aims to impose stiff penalties if the financier and the owner of a property are not the same person, and this has not been declared. The practice is widespread in order to conceal ill-gotten gains or tax-evaded wealth, and one of the reasons why the property market has been spiralling upwards so uncontrollably of late is because 'black money' of this sort has grown rapidly in our economy. Bringing this state of affairs under control is crucial to stabilising the property market as well as to curbing the growth of black money by denying the latter a safe haven. An earlier effort by the government to do just this — the exercise to revalue the official rates at which property transactions will be declared — has made some headway. Curbing benami transactions is the next step.

But questions remain about how effective the exercise will be, despite the new legislation. The MQM MNA present during the debate in the standing committee asked the most pertinent question of all. Does the Federal Board of Revenue really have the capacity and resolve to go after the big fish who engage in this practice? More importantly, does the government really have the will to follow through with this measure? It is a somewhat cynical take on the effort, but given the inability of the government to bring the retailers and wholesalers to register themselves with the tax

authorities following the banking transaction tax of last year, we are all entitled to our doubts now. Passing the legislation is the easy part. Making sure it results in a proper declaration of assets in future tax returns is the real game; unfortunately, thus far whenever the government has tried to take on the massive interests that operate in the black economy, it has failed. What reason do we have to assume that things will be any different now? An even more cynical take on the exercise is that it is little more than a tool with which to shake a few more pennies out of the pockets of property speculators. Once the legislation is steered through parliament, it will be the job of the government to prove the cynics wrong.

Kidnapping panic

MISSING children is amongst the most worrying of issues any society or community can face. One lost child is one too many. Not only must law enforcement leave no stone unturned in tracing cases of runaways, it must come down with its full might on cases where a child, sometimes even an infant, has been kidnapped. Sadly, while the problem has been there for years, it is only recently that it has drawn the sort of attention it deserves. However, this has also resulted in full-blown panic gripping communities in many of the country's cities regarding the risk of children being kidnapped, whether for ransom or some other repugnant reason. In this age of digital communication, it is easy for rumours and misinformation to spread like wildfire, and this is precisely what has been happening of late. Where social media feeds and the internet are filled with warnings and scaremongering, news tickers and headlines too are adding to the frenzy. The outcome has been mass hysteria in some sections of society, and violence in others — in recent days, over two dozen people have been beaten up by mobs in Punjab alone over suspicions of kidnapping.

Pakistanis need to take a calming breath, and the primary role in this has to be played by the media and the state. The media has in many cases irresponsibly put stories through without verifying the facts and, crucially, without drawing a distinction between missing (which includes runaways, statistically the largest group) and abducted children. Instead, it urgently needs to delve into the details and lay bare the core issues, including 'mundane' ones such as domestic violence that can drive adolescents out of their homes. The state, meanwhile, needs to make a measured disclosure about the scale of the issue, its myriad aspects, and the means it proposes to employ to address it. The state must ensure that no child goes missing, and anyone who does is speedily recovered. But the current hysteria is unnecessary.

Reviving Pak-India talks

IS it a ray of hope or just an illusion? Amidst the acrimony and bombast that has been the Pakistan-India relationship recently has come an exchange of letters discussing the possibility of talks between the two countries. It is a measure of how strained ties are that even though both sides have mooted a very different agenda for potential discussions — thereby all but discarding the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue before it could even begin — the very fact they are talking about the possibility of talks can be seen as a small step in the right direction. While the views from Islamabad/Rawalpindi and New Delhi are clouded by mutual suspicion, it does appear that the dual offer of talks is rooted in a familiar dialectic of domestic politics and international diplomacy.

For the Pakistani government, the offer to India of talks centred on the Kashmir dispute sends a signal domestically that it is willing to challenge Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and will not forget the people of Kashmir under Indian control. Internationally, the offer of talks sends a signal to anxious world powers that Pakistan believes in dialogue — much the same as the Indian government is likely hoping to achieve for itself through its counter offer of talks. Meanwhile, within India, the Indian government's suggestion for bilateral talks centred on so-called cross-border terrorism will appeal to hawks and those wanting a tough line taken against Pakistan. Yet, from self-serving motives can emerge the smallest of diplomatic breakthroughs and, as the events of the past couple of weeks have so grimly demonstrated, better that India and Pakistan talk about talks than hurl accusations at each other.

Whether the two states are willing to acknowledge it or not, there is an unchanging reality of the Pakistan-India relationship: the Kashmir dispute is fundamental to what Pakistan wants of India, while the terrorism issue is central to what India needs to discuss with Pakistan. If either side tries to exclude the other's central concern from bilateral talks, it will not get anywhere near its core policy objectives. Perhaps the Indian government should also consider the pointlessness of its verbal attacks against Pakistan regarding Balochistan since the Quetta bombing of last week. Such an approach will either be seen as a threat, or yet another attempt by India to deny the very existence of the Kashmir dispute. In either case, it will strengthen the hand of anti-India hawks inside Pakistan. What possible rational policy objective can Prime Minister Modi and his government hope to achieve from this? When India and Pakistan are thundering at each other, those advocating peace in both countries may seem hopelessly out of touch with reality and marginalised. But dialogue and peace are the only rational options for two states in which live nearly a fifth of all humanity.

Declining FDI

FOR two years now, foreign investment inflows into the country have been on a steep downward path, falling from a peak of \$4.44bn in 2014 to less than \$1bn in the last fiscal year. Coupled with similar declines in exports, this paints a worrying picture of the state of the external sector. The State Bank has repeatedly pointed out that tackling this trend is crucial to bringing stability to the reserves since future debt service obligations are high and the reserves may look good at the moment, but their shine will diminish once those outflows begin. Last year saw a precipitous decline in foreign investment which fell below the one-billion-dollar level for the first time in four years, led primarily by portfolio and public investment. For this reason, all eyes were on the July numbers, the first for the new fiscal year, for signs of a possible recovery. As it turns out, the new numbers, just released by the State Bank, bring mixed news.

Foreign investment has continued its downward slide in spite of a fresh beginning with the new budget, dropping by more than 14pc in comparison to July last year, even as portfolio and public investment recovered albeit in meagre quantities. Even though total foreign investment in the month jumped compared to last year, the bulk of the improvement came from portfolio investment, which is hot money and not here to stay. The declines in direct investment are the key, and the fact that investment from China has shown the steepest declines may explain the roll call of statements from the highest government offices calling for work on CPEC projects to be expedited and the path for the Chinese to be smoothed. More worryingly, the longer-term numbers show a steady eclipse of the older, more traditional, countries from where foreign investment came into Pakistan, and a growing presence of Chinese investors as the largest by quantum. There is an old piece of economic wisdom which says foreigners will not invest in a country if its own nationals are shying away from acquiring stakes there. The government should heed the advice being given by the State Bank and do more to improve the overall investment climate in the country, rather than focus so heavily on the Chinese alone, in order to reverse this trend in a more credible way.

Unsung heroes

LAW-enforcement officers in Pakistan work in an intensely hostile environment, facing lethal levels of violence on a regular basis. And amongst the most dangerous jobs within the law-enforcement framework is that of the bomb disposal personnel. Across the country, these brave individuals put their lives on the line to defuse IEDs and other explosives planted by militants. Amongst this rare breed of public servants was Phunal Khan Bangulzai, who fell in the line of duty on Wednesday. The officer was killed while defusing a landmine in Balochistan's Sogatpur district after he had just defused another device. Constable Bangulzai's sacrifice — along with that of other officers who served bomb disposal squads countrywide — must not be forgotten and those who have survived them must not be abandoned by the state.

Despite the immense risks BDS personnel face, these units are treated with a shocking nonchalance. For example, most units are underfunded and under-equipped, while the salaries of most officers are pitifully low. Yet they march on, despite the odds and lack of gratitude. For example, KP's bomb disposal unit alone has defused thousands of IEDs over the past few years, which translates to thousands of lives saved, even though they have lost men, such as Hukam Khan, in the process. There have been some improvements, eg the introduction of sniffer dogs and robots, mostly with foreign help, but there remains room for improvement. For example, in Sindh expensive bomb disposal equipment is reportedly sitting idle due to lack of repairs. The provincial governments must ensure BDS units are functioning in all districts, and that their personnel have the equipment and training to protect themselves. Salaries should be respectable and in cases of death, compensation packages to the heirs of the fallen officers should be sufficient and disbursed without delay. But most of all, there must be recognition at the national level of the services of men such as Phunal Khan, Hukam Khan and many others at the forefront of the fight against militancy.

Panama circus

BAFFLING as the strategy on the Panama Papers adopted by the PTI and PPP may be, there does appear to be a method to the madness. Both parties have tried to engage the PML-N on negotiations over the terms of reference for a judicial commission while simultaneously attempting to put pressure on the government for decisively resolving the simmering crisis over the finances of the first family. To be sure, the PTI and the PPP both appear to have separate motives in keeping the Panama Papers issue alive. For the PPP, the central issue appears to be national relevance: a

continuing slide towards electoral oblivion in Punjab means the party will be reduced to a Sindh rump if it does not find a way to counter and erode the PML-N's dominance in Punjab. For the PTI, the only issue that appears to agitate the party is the ouster of the PML-N in any possible way in order for PTI supremo Imran Khan to become a prime ministerial candidate.

Despite the political motives of the opposition, there remains a basic contradiction that the PML-N government has not addressed: the Panama Papers raised genuine questions about the financial affairs of the first family that no amount of obfuscation thus far has been able to hide. The questions do not simply pertain to apartments in London or the accumulation of tens of millions of British pounds, but are about the very nexus between politics and big business in Pakistan. How, truly, has the prime minister of Pakistan, coming from a reasonably wealthy family, turned into the patriarch of one of the wealthiest political dynasties in this country's history? Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif may be able to explain his personal history, but the legal, financial and electoral questions remain unanswered.

Ultimately, the democratic project demands a progressive improvement in the capacity of the elected representatives of this country. Imran Khan and his PTI may appear to be disruptive influences, ready to undermine whatever democratic stability this country has managed to achieve in the past eight years, but why can this country's elected representatives not submit themselves to reasonable standards of accountability? Imran Khan may be wrong in his anti-democratic agitation, but is the PML-N right in its defiance against democratic norms? Nothing the PTI, PPP or any political opposition party in parliament has done since the Panama Papers revelations has undermined the democratic project in the country. But have the democratically elected parties in the country really made any attempt to resolve the crisis? Or, with elections on the horizon, have they just been indulging in a game of political one-upmanship? A genuine attempt at introducing transparency and financial probity would go a long way in demonstrating that politics goes beyond the electoral race and is aimed at democratic reform of the system.

Seized with CPEC

NOBODY should doubt the importance of CPEC projects for Pakistan, but the level of attention being given to them by the highest ranks of government these days is starting to resemble an obsession. Since July, there has been one meeting after another on CPEC projects, each leading to a statement about the importance of their timely completion. The latest example is that of the cabinet meeting held on Thursday; this focused largely on a review of the pace of progress of the projects and building a stronger monitoring mechanism to oversee the work. This is fair enough — after all, nobody wants to argue in favour of delays. But if the same level of attention could be given to a vast reform agenda that is lying more or less dormant, perhaps many other problems could also be addressed.

The government's relationship with industry has taken a back seat as the focus has swung comprehensively towards CPEC. This is an unhealthy trend, especially at a time when exports and foreign direct investment are sharply trending downwards. Moreover, a detailed study of the debt service obligations being accumulated under CPEC projects, and the wider impact on the foreign exchange reserves of coal and LNG imports is still not complete while the projects themselves are being fast tracked. This is no way to run things. Doubtless CPEC has tremendous potential to benefit the country, but it is not the saviour that it is being packaged as. Roads and power plants will help ease logistics and perhaps boost production — provided the pricing of the electricity is competitive — but they alone cannot fix the chronic erosion of our economy's competitiveness or improve the investment climate for foreign private investors to acquire or grow their stakes. Even domestic investors are finding it difficult to get any attention from the government, while high-level meetings on CPEC continue under the perception that the ruling party's performance in the next general elections depends on nothing else. Meanwhile, losses mount in the public-sector enterprises and the privatisation agenda has been comprehensively derailed. Granted that the bouquet of projects under CPEC is large and varied, but it is wrong of the prime minister to claim that the completion of these is the topmost priority. That honour belongs to a wider, more durable set of reforms that can kick-start the wheels of the economy beyond just a few sectors.

Guantanamo prisoners

ONE of the uglier outcomes of the open-ended ‘war on terror’ has been democracies sacrificing some of their cherished values at the altar of expediency. Among these ideals is respect for the law and due process. And perhaps the most powerful symbols of how these values have been brushed aside, particularly in the American context, are the prison camps of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. In the case of the former, Barack Obama has been unable to close down the notorious detention centre in Cuba despite promises to do so going back many years. However, the US president has tried to bring down the number of inmates detained in Guantanamo. Earlier this week, 15 inmates were transferred to the UAE, to be resettled in the sheikhdom. This brings down Guantanamo’s prisoner population to 61; there was a time when the facility housed around 800 inmates. While these efforts appear to be well-intentioned, they are not enough, as the US administration’s ultimate goal should be closure of the facility.

To be fair, Mr Obama’s efforts have been stymied by Congress, particularly by the Republicans. Some members of the GoP have said that the prisoners should not be released as they are “hardened terrorists”. While this may be partially true — some of the inmates have indulged in militancy after release — if the US has evidence, it should be presented in court and the individuals should be punished if found guilty. Maintaining two sets of laws — one for suspected militants, another for everyone else — goes against the norms of justice. Besides, there are far too many dark spots that taint Guantanamo’s reputation and make its existence indefensible. Some inmates have been held without charge for 14 years, while minors have also been kept at the facility. And reports of torture are not unheard of. Keeping these realities in mind, Washington must either try the remaining inmates, or send them to their countries of origin, or states willing to accept them.

Regional power grid

THE recent agreement with Turkmenistan and Russia to become partners in the plan to import electricity via a long transmission line from Central Asia to Pakistan is vindication of the vision that lies behind the project. Known as the CASA 1000 project, it originally involved the import of hydroelectric power via a transmission line from Tajikistan to Pakistan in the summer months. But then, Russia and Turkmenistan expressed an interest in becoming partners as well, and since these countries have substantial surpluses of thermal power, it became feasible to keep the line energised during the winter months too. Now officials in the power sector from around Central Asia are

preparing for a meeting of a group known as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation that Pakistan is hosting in October and during which the participation of other countries in CASA can be discussed.

The vision is a grand one. A large regional power grid can connect multiple countries across Central and South Asia, with a market-based mechanism to feed power into the grid and draw from it depending on need. Massive grids of this sort were envisioned many decades ago but only now are they starting to come to our part of the world. CASA has broken the ground, and with growing interest from countries such as Russia and Turkmenistan, it is clear that the transmission line has opened a door to the vast energy surpluses of Central Asia. In time, it can grow to include numerous countries, and perhaps eventually even Iran and India with Pakistan and Afghanistan reaping substantial benefits as participants as well as from transit fees.

But there is one big problem that stands in the way of realising this vision: geopolitics. Security remains the biggest question mark hanging over the project since a substantial part of the transmission line will have to travel through Afghanistan. India and Pakistan are in the midst of an escalating spat as the crackdown in Kashmir grows more brutal by the day. And dealings with Iran continue to face substantial obstacles in spite of the withdrawal of sanctions. Pakistan can play a role in controlling some of the geopolitical issues that hang over the vision of a regional power grid, but ultimately the fate of that vision will be decided by the amorphous forces of history larger than any single government. The project should move ahead step by step therefore. Making CASA operational is a reasonable proposition. The government should do everything in its power to make headway in the CASA project during the forthcoming CAREC gathering. The security questions hanging over the project should not be underestimated, but neither should the potential benefits. Rarely have cooperation and confrontation yielded so stark a trade-off. Given the possibilities that a regional power grid opens up, its pursuit should not be allowed to fall out of focus.

Congo fever

WITH Eidul Azha three weeks away, the influx of sacrificial animals, especially towards the urban centres, has begun. In Karachi alone, thousands of beasts have already arrived, while many more are on their way as the festival draws closer. It is imperative that authorities remain on their toes as with the presence of such large numbers of livestock close to the population centres, the risk of diseases such as Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever is reasonably high. So far three people have died in Karachi over the last three weeks due to CCHF; the latest victim was a trader from Bahawalpur. In fact, CCHF has been a matter of concern for some time, especially in the past two years. Ten victims have succumbed to it. As per the global health body WHO, cattle, sheep and goats can serve as hosts for the virus. The latter is transmitted when individuals come into contact with the blood and tissues of infected animals; human-to-human transmission is also possible. The fatality rate can be as high as 40pc.

With so many cases over the past few weeks, the provincial and municipal authorities must remain alert. All sacrificial animals entering markets should be screened. As WHO recommends, chemicals should be sprayed to kill the ticks that carry the virus, while beasts found to be infected must be quarantined. Also, those who deal with livestock should wear protective clothing and use repellent on their skin and clothes. In fact, the authorities should carry out a public information campaign via the media until Eid to communicate preventive measures to livestock traders and those who work at cattle markets. There have also been calls for the enhancement of biosafety measures at hospitals while some experts say that to control the spread of CCHF, the focus of preventive efforts should be on the villages where livestock originates. There should also be inter-provincial coordination, as livestock traders often cross provincial borders on the way to market. And as a number of cases have originated in the Bahawalpur area, Punjab government officials need to pay special attention to this region. The administration in Sindh has announced several steps to combat CCHF; we hope the momentum is kept up until Eid so that further deaths are prevented. Moreover, livestock markets should be limited to designated areas; municipal authorities must remove illegal cattle pens that spring up inside cities and towns in the run-up to Eidul Azha.

Prank calls to Nacta

IF at times it appears that the state is not demonstrating enough seriousness in the fight against terrorism and militancy, there is also ample evidence that, notwithstanding this country's battle-scarred landscape, the citizenry itself has the same mindset. Consider the 1717 helpline set up by the National Counter Terrorism Authority shortly after the December 2014 attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar. The government had appealed to citizens to remain vigilant and report any suspicious person or activity for which purpose this helpline was established. But a month later, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan complained that around 500 to 600 complaints made on the number had turned out to be hoax calls, and that only 15 to 20 genuine ones had been received. Since then, matters have only worsened. In Islamabad on Thursday, at a Nacta meeting, data provided showed that out of 8,305 calls received by the helpline in just the first 20 days of July, only 41 had turned out to be legitimate and actionable. This is no less than shocking.

Such a vast number of hoax calls is a serious abuse of the terrorism authority's time and resources. The only action taken against the pranksters has been the identification of 75 of the most frequent callers, who had made more than 50 calls each, and whose SIMs were shut down after taking the matter up with the telecommunication authorities. This hardly goes far enough. So many people crying wolf would not only be demoralising in the extreme for the personnel whose job it is to counter the gravest of offences, it also increases the chances of genuine calls going unanswered. While citizens must rein in their worst impulses and be penalised where necessary, law-enforcement authorities must maintain the resolve to treat each call as communicating a potentially real and active threat, regardless of what the statistics say about the nature of the majority of calls. The guard must not be let down.

Operation in Tirah

MORE than a year since Operation Khyber-II was concluded, Operation Khyber-III has begun. Relatively small in scale but focused on harsh terrain in the Tirah region, the operation once completed should help deny militants movement between the Khyber and Kurram agencies. Moreover, it will take the military directly to the border with Afghanistan. Small-scale in this case makes for significant gains. The Tirah region's recent association with militant groups is well known: from the TTP to sundry foreign militants and from the Mangal Bagh-led Lashkar-i-Islam to the TTP splinter Jamaatul

Ahrar, some of the toughest and most tenacious militant groups have operated in the region. Operation Khyber-III then is not just a logical follow-up to Khyber-II; its impact should be felt in Peshawar too, which remains vulnerable to militancy in Khyber because of its proximity to the tribal areas. Border management should also get a boost as having troops physically near the frontier can restrict the militants' cross-border movement.

Necessary as military operations may have become in Fata, they are no long-term panacea. The various phases of the Khyber operation have followed a relatively clear and coherent plan, but at no point have they been supplemented by necessary civilian measures. And while resettlement of the two Waziristan agencies and Khyber has been a priority, next door Kurram has been seen returning IDPs underserved and unassisted. The interconnectedness of the militancy problem in Fata and beyond — militants displaced from one area have moved to other unsecured, less-governed spaces — has still not been addressed in a systematic way. The military has proved that it has both the skill and the will to clear and hold terrain in counter-insurgency operations and it has done so thanks to the bravery of its soldiers. But a return to relative normality for the people of insurgency-hit areas is proving elusive.

The problem is not hard to identify, but the solution is not easy. Whether by design or by force of circumstance, the military has displaced a weak civilian-run administration and taken over much of the rebuilding effort. But physically rebuilding an area may not be enough for long-term rehabilitation. Civil and social structures need to be rebuilt too. Well-meaning as the military's efforts may be, then, they cannot be a replacement for a civilian surge. But the civil-military imbalance makes it hard for the two to work together at the level needed if Fata is to become a stable, post-conflict region. Old problems continue to bedevil new challenges.

Pakistan's youth

A NEW study by the Population Council documents how the challenges of equitable education, healthcare, and employment opportunities are routinely dismissed by the government in the implementation of its youth development policies. The report, titled *Youth in Pakistan: Priorities, Realities and Policy Responses*, raises questions of whether Pakistan realises the significance of harnessing demographic dividends that lead to higher productivity and economic growth. While it is well known that investing in young people translates into economic growth, poverty reduction and greater gender equity, the failure of successive governments here to recognise the potential of early youth investment has resulted in a situation where there has been very little improvement in social indicators. The increase in the number of school-going children

over the last five decades may have reached a plateau now, and it is predicted that the figure will be around 92m in 2030. And yet, the education infrastructure remains inadequate for even the current school-going population, especially in the rural areas. More schools will be needed, and additional teachers trained and hired. Improvement has been incremental at best, even though current figures show that sustained advocacy and donor funding have led to higher enrolment figures than before: 86pc of all boys and 75pc of all girls aged between 10 and 14 years go to school, according to the report.

With the overall picture being abysmal, it is not surprising that the small gains of the younger age group have not positively impacted youth between 20 and 24 years. Having no access to education, many turn to manual labour to support themselves while girls marry young, often with negative consequences for their reproductive health and life opportunities. Lack of investment in female education has impacted women's participation in the workforce. And even if job opportunities are available to women, patriarchal attitudes keep them back. However, the fact that changing demographics predict an increase in the working-age population — from 85m in 2010 to 300m in 2050 — makes this the right time for formulating effective labour force policies as more youngsters enter adulthood. Any youth development policy task force must look into creating linkages between several sectors — health, education, child protection, employment, population — when drawing a framework and coordinating efforts between provincial partners. Government failure to harness the youth bulge in the next 10 to 20 years will have tragic consequences in the shape of economic stagnation, more recruits for militancy and political conflict.

Yemen's plight

ON the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, a cruel, brutal war has been grinding on since last March. In this conflict, the impoverished state of Yemen — already reeling from civil war and poverty — has been pounded by its powerful and very wealthy northern neighbour, Saudi Arabia. The Saudis launched the war on behalf of their ally, Yemeni President Hadi, whose forces have squared off against rebels comprised of the Houthi militia and factions loyal to former president Saleh. Yet amongst the several tragedies associated with the Yemeni conflict, the biggest has been the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians. Last week a school and an MSF-linked hospital were bombed by the Saudi-led coalition, killing a number of people. This is reportedly the fourth MSF facility that has been hit, while the coalition has been censured by various quarters for

its trigger-happy tactics. As per the UN, 3,700 civilians have been killed since the war began; the world body says the coalition is responsible for most of these deaths.

At this point, the possibilities of a peaceful solution appear remote. Peace talks between the rebels and the government have stalled and the Saudis are in a quandary about how to exit with their pride and image intact, without having defeated the Houthis. Both the coalition and the rebels have dug in for a long war, which means only trouble for Yemen's hapless people. In an ideal world, the Saudis and their international allies — including the Americans, whose involvement in the conflict in a supporting role has been described as crucial — would be told to hold their fire by the UN. But in a world governed by the Machiavellian codes of geopolitics and self-interest, this appears unlikely to happen. However, if states such as the US and UK, which swear by democratic values, were to suspend their support for the Saudi war, perhaps Riyadh might be forced to pull back and stop the aggression. In the meantime, the people of Yemen continue to pay with their lives.

Registering madressahs

MORE than two years after its formulation, the National Action Plan took its first and most credible step towards registering and regulating religious seminaries in Sindh when the Madressah Registration Bill 2016 received cabinet approval. It now moves to the Assembly where its passage is almost assured since the provincial legislature is dominated by political parties that have virtually no roots in the religious establishment. Registering the seminaries was an essential part of the National Action Plan, and the task met its stiffest resistance in Punjab, where the authorities were the last to submit a detailed count of the number of seminaries operating in the province, as well as geo-mapping the locations of all the establishments.

Working under the ambit of the Apex Committee, Sindh completed these tasks faster than anybody else. Where other provinces argued that regulating seminaries — their finances, syllabi and other activities — was largely a federal matter, Sindh is demonstrating how a provincial mandate can be brought to bear on the matter. In Punjab, the opposition to any heightened surveillance of seminaries was led by the Wafaqul Madaris al Arabia, a federal body. But in Sindh this body has a much smaller presence. Instead, the opposition is coming from political parties, the JUI-F more specifically, whose leadership is threatening the state with street protests in the event the bill is passed into law.

The political challenge should be taken seriously since the JUI-F has considerable street power, even if it cannot translate that into representation in the legislature. But just like the opposition from the Wafaq in the case of Punjab, the substance of the opposition is without foundation. Only a few seminaries can be said to be involved in extremist activities but a strong and continuous effort is required to keep a check on these few. During the geo-mapping exercise in Sindh, out of a total of 9,590 seminaries, 167 were found to be built illegally, at least 48 were identified by intelligence agencies for their links to extremists, and more than 3,000 were not registered with any government department, according to police figures given at the time. Given the fact that at least a few of them have been found to have links with extremist groups, and many have funds from overseas flowing into their coffers, it is necessary to bring their activities within view of the state. Monitoring of syllabi and teachers' credentials can be left to the federal government, but provincial governments clearly have a role in this matter. Contrary to its image as a floundering enterprise, the Sindh government is leading the way in this effort, perhaps because the political stars are best aligned for the job in the province. Nevertheless, safe passage of the bill will establish that centre-province issues need not be the obstacle they have been presented to be in the past.

Zardari's absence

WHERE is Asif Zardari and why is he not in Pakistan? At once a great mystery and an open secret, the whereabouts of the PPP co-chairman and the reasons for his absence from the country are not matters the party leadership likes to dwell on publicly. Indeed, the leadership Mr Zardari has left behind to run the Sindh government and represent the party nationally would like to pretend it does not matter where the de facto PPP boss is. The party argues that it is fully empowered and not reliant on Mr Zardari for routine decision-making. But not only is that claim false, it is an on-going disservice to the democratic project. A simple metric, if publicly revealed, would establish the truth: how many ministers and MPAs in Sindh have travelled abroad to meet Mr Zardari since he left Pakistan; how often have they travelled for that purpose; and how many days have they collectively spent outside the country and wherever Mr Zardari has set up court? It is preposterous to pretend that a government anywhere can function effectively or even reasonably if ministers and principals are constantly shuttling to foreign lands to seek direction.

Galling too is the apparent reason for Mr Zardari's prolonged absence from the country: the PPP supremo seems afraid that he will be ensnared by the Rangers-run operation in Sindh that shows no sign of abating and that continues to target politicians. Few will

have forgotten Mr Zardari's boasts as president and during the last parliament of how he preferred years in jail to ever abandoning his country. That seems to be no longer the case and, extraordinarily, it is no longer the case when there is no clear or immediate danger that Mr Zardari faces. After all, be it close advisers or other public figures alleged to be close to the former president, none of the Rangers' legal manoeuvres have so far yielded serious convictions. In any case, a frontal attack against Mr Zardari by the military-led security establishment would likely trigger a national political crisis. Can Mr Zardari, with the best legal representation, strong political support from a national party and a record of supporting democratic continuity, really be so insecure about his freedom were he to return to Pakistan? And if that is the case, can it really be said that the PPP is a true custodian of the democratic project? Mr Zardari, come back to your country.

Burkini brouhaha

FORGET suicide jackets, or 19-tonne trucks driven by homicidal maniacs — as happened in Nice on July 14. The latest 'weapon of terror' triggering a paroxysm of fear and loathing across parts of Europe is the burkini. A neologistic marriage of the words 'burqa' and 'bikini', the burkini — a version of swimwear that covers everything except for the face, hands and feet — has been banned in several French seaside towns. It has been described by Thierry Migoule, an official from Cannes which was the first city to ban the garment, as "clothing that conveys an allegiance to the terrorist movements that are waging war against us". The furore began earlier this month when skirmishes broke out on the Corsican resort of Sisco between groups of locals and Muslims, after tourists who snapped pictures of women bathing in burkinis were attacked by North African-origin men. The incident seemed to have prompted a mass departure from good sense in parts of Europe.

To some extent, France's paranoia is understandable. Home to the largest Muslim community in Europe, the country has been the target of several terrorist attacks since 2015, most of them carried out by perpetrators linked with the militant Islamic State group. However, French leaders have allowed fear, as well as political considerations in their country's increasingly right-wing climate, to drive a blinkered response that will further stigmatise and alienate Muslims. In short, it is a surefire route to strengthening the clash-of-civilisations theory so beloved of religious extremists' apocalyptic vision of the world. That aside, the absurdity of the stance is obvious to anyone not blinded by bigotry. Among the reasons cited in support of the ban is that the burkini is emblematic of women's enslavement, and that the logic behind it is to "hide women's bodies in order

to better control them". How is telling women how much of their bodies they can cover any less controlling than deciding for them how much of their bodies they can reveal?

MQM at the crossroads

The inevitable moment has finally arrived yet there is a feeling of foreboding. Altaf Hussain's state of mind was no secret, especially to party insiders, but when Farooq Sattar said openly what his colleagues had been saying in private for years, he brought the party to a crossroads that carries as much promise as danger.

Even by the erratic standards of Mr Hussain, the rambling tirade he delivered on Monday night set a new low in Pakistani politics. Besides, it was clear beyond doubt that the man who ruled Karachi via remote control for almost a quarter of a century was now totally disconnected from the realities his party is facing, a bit like those in history who went down shouting orders at armies that did not exist.

Beyond the speech and the mob action it unleashed, the events that have been set into motion as a result of the incendiary language and personal insults can do far more lasting damage if the right assessment is not made of the moment and its true import.

Given the changes that a clean break with London in the running of the MQM operation will bring, it would be a grave mistake to respond reflexively and emotionally. The situation demands a measured and discerning response, and egos must be kept out of the calculus.

No matter what the provocation, it should not be forgotten that the MQM is the fifth largest political party in the country, gaining almost 2.5 million votes in the 2013 general election and coasting through subsequent by-elections too.

Today's local bodies elections will show what the voters think of this episode, and we will see how far the party's base will be swayed by the tsunami of abuse it has been subjected to in the media since Monday night, and the consequent split effected by its Karachi leadership at their historic announcement on Tuesday.

This is the key to framing the response. Our history contains a number of other examples of moments when a political party has been vilified to the point of becoming radioactive in the public discourse without any regard for its roots amongst the masses, and in each case the elimination of the political leadership of the party yielded consequences that were worse than whatever choices the party was hoisting in the

political space. The MQM can be larger than Altaf Hussain and even if he does not realise this, the rest of us should.

The Rangers have done an admirable job in neutralising the law and order challenge that the MQM has posed in the past, and proof of this is in the diminutive attempt at arson and destruction that the party tried to mount following the powerful incitement from its London-based leadership.

But having done this, it is also important to bear in mind that the Rangers' mission must make way for the political process to resume and enable the voters to decide their own future. That moment is now, given the historic split in the party leadership and the looming shadow of an election.

This is the time to step back and let a delicate transition unfold. The Karachi leadership that disowned its London links must be given a chance to pull the party behind themselves and gain the trust of their voters.

The moment carries its dangers. All eyes are now turning to Altaf Hussain, seemingly alone and isolated in London. But will the cadres take their cue from him or the new leadership that is struggling to be born in the new circumstances? With whom will the voters go?

Mr Hussain may be down but he's not out yet, and if he decides to fight back, the future of peace in Karachi could hang in the balance. He cannot regain his position but he can certainly punch out a number of lights on his way down, creating the risk of a renewed cycle of violence amidst rising factionalism.

It has taken a lot to bring the party to this crossroads; it should now be allowed to match its words with its deeds before anything else.

Media as a target

DAMNED if they do and damned if they don't. That was the situation the media once again found itself in on Monday when events in Karachi illustrated the kind of pressures it is subjected to in this country. Instigated by MQM chief Altaf Hussain's speech in which he called for violence against various TV channels, the party's activists attacked a building housing two television channels, damaging property and injuring security guards. The rioters set fire to vehicles and hurled stones at the police and TV cameramen present at the scene. One person — the MQM claims he was a party activist — died while several, including staffers at the news organisations, were injured. The ire expressed by the MQM supremo against the media was on account of his speeches not being covered. In September 2015, the Lahore High Court directed Pemra to ban reportage of Mr Hussain's speeches and images, and until that order is successfully challenged, the electronic media has very little choice but to comply. Ironically however, that compulsion is the inverse — sans the violence — of what journalists have been subjected to at the hands of the MQM for years when it threatened them with dire consequences if they did not give 'favourable' coverage to the party. For implicit in the ban is a lack of understanding, across the board, of the media's critical role in a democracy.

Unfortunately, shooting the messenger, the latest manifestation of which we saw on Monday, has long been a tradition in this country. That is almost invariably the case in states that have experienced long periods of military rule and where democratic traditions — media freedom being a central pillar of these — have but a tenuous hold. Where Pakistan is concerned, autocrats such as Gen Ziaul Haq, with his notoriously brutal treatment of journalists he considered recalcitrant, are not the only offenders. Parties that otherwise claim adherence to constitutional norms have also targeted media outlets they perceive as antagonistic to their aspirations, or remiss in their reporting of them. To cite but one of the more recent instances, in September 2014, Geo's Islamabad offices repeatedly came under attack from supporters of the PTI during the party's dharna in the capital. Even regulatory authorities such as Pemra have at times, specifically with reference to banned organisations, conflated the media's responsibility of conveying information with 'glorification' of such entities and banned coverage entirely. Then there are the power centres that are aligned with the establishment. These are more opaque and unaccountable, a corollary of a quasi-democratic system and they also try to use the media to their advantage. The consequences of resistance can be deadly. And all this is not even counting the many militant groups for whom media personnel are fair game. Partly as a result of these many countervailing forces, the media's oversight role has been compromised, a situation that ultimately works to the disadvantage of political parties that have a stake

in the democratic system. For as the MQM has perhaps realised, objective coverage is far more preferable to none at all.

MQM after mayoral polls

THE most important voices in the entire MQM episode have just weighed in and their verdict is clear. As expected, the MQM has swept the elections to the positions of mayor, deputy mayor and chairman of the six district municipal corporation councils in Karachi. In Hyderabad, too, the result has been a sweep. The fact that the events of the last few days did nothing to impact the manner in which the MQM councillors voted is important to note here. Any disruption at this level would be an indicator of how the transition towards a post-Altaf Hussain leadership of the party is working out. Another indicator is that in his victory speech, Waseem Akhtar, the future mayor of Karachi who will run the city via video link from prison, made no reference to Mr Hussain except in passing. He did not shower gratitude and accolades upon him as has been customary for MQM candidates.

It is important to let this transition work itself out. Matters are being dragged in the wrong direction by overreaction to Mr Hussain's incendiary speech. The Rangers have no business sealing the offices of a political party or picking up its elected representatives without legally notified cause, no matter what the provocation. There are laws that govern such actions — but those laws have not been followed in this case. For its part, the MQM should do more to demonstrate clearly that it is departing from its old ways of doing things. The militant wing of the party, which ruled the city through fear, has to be put at a distance unambiguously, and a purely political path forward must be visibly adopted. Mr Hussain's announcement that the Rabita Committee will be empowered to run and preside over party affairs while he takes a 'break' may or may not be sincere, but at least for now it has saved the MQM from splintering.

A demilitarised MQM whose affairs are run entirely from Karachi is in the interest of the city, as are functioning and empowered municipal corporations. The Sindh government has a chance to advance both goals by devolving more powers to the office of the mayor and to the municipal authorities, as well as giving the new mayor access to meet people while he remains in prison. This is the right moment to work towards both objectives simultaneously. The leadership of the MQM needs political space to consolidate their position because the outbreak of factional violence within the party would be extremely damaging to Karachi as well as to the country's overall politics. There will be a temptation to see this as a moment to strike in an effort to eliminate the

party altogether, but this should be strongly resisted. Visceral sentiment and emotions have no place in making decisions that involve the destiny of millions of people.

Narco trafficking

As expected, UNODC's recently released World Drug Report 2016 shows that Afghanistan continues to play a prominent role in the narcotics trade. Although the yield was down by 48pc in 2015 from the year before, at 183,000 hectares (over 452,000 acres) Afghanistan still accounted for almost two-thirds of the global area under illegal poppy cultivation. The decrease, meanwhile, was not on account of any strategies to reduce cultivation but because of poor yields in the country's southern provinces. According to the report, the number of opiate users around the world is holding steady at 17 million people, a number unlikely to be affected by the fall in production because of surpluses from previous years. As a neighbouring country, Pakistan is a vital cog in the global opiate trade. For while the 'Balkan route' which goes through Iran and Turkey to supply Western and Central Europe is the principal conduit, the report describes the 'southern route', which traverses Pakistan or Iran by sea to the Gulf region, East Africa, etc as having "grown in importance". As per UNODC estimates, 43pc of Afghan opiates are trafficked through Pakistan.

The history of this region shows that poppy, whose cultivation began in war-torn Afghanistan in the 1990s in the absence of a stable government, is far more than just a cash crop. Both the Afghan Taliban and the Nato leadership have used this low-maintenance, high-return crop as a political tool for various ends. The Taliban banned it in 2000, despite three years of bumper crops, in the hope of winning some international goodwill. While the ban angered the locals, the West chose to look the other way, a short-sighted decision that only worked to strengthen the hand of the hardliners among the Taliban. Poppy cultivation resumed with gusto after the Taliban's fall, but the US opted to turn a blind eye again, this time to the huge profits the warlords and officials in the Karzai government were raking in through opium trafficking because their cooperation was vital to hunting down Osama bin Laden. As the Taliban resurgence — now fuelled by its own proceeds from poppy cultivation — gathers strength across Afghanistan, the warlords are needed more than ever, which means opiate trafficking continues as before. Pakistan has stepped up its efforts to control this trade, making seizures worth \$2.5bn in 2015, but the only way to close the spigot is to use creative methods to bring down cultivation.

Cricket glory

THE recent crowning of the Pakistan cricket team as the world's number one Test side is preceded by an inspiring tale of talent, self-belief, hard work and performing against all odds. The odds have surely been heavy. For many critics, the 2010 spot-fixing scam in England, coming close on the heels of the 2009 terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore, spelt the demise of Pakistan cricket. The process of rebuilding was a monumental task. With the team disgraced and defeated, neither the stalwarts nor the budding candidates for captaincy were ready to take up the stiff challenge of restoring the players' confidence and fix the tainted image of cricket in Pakistan. In stepped Misbah-ul-Haq, aged 36, with only a few Tests and ODIs under his belt. But he proved to be an inspired choice for a team in crisis. Calm and measured in speech and action, Misbah since taking over the reins has not only anchored the batting, he has also set his team a mental and moral example, grooming them into a cohesive, battle-hardened outfit. The result is there for everyone to see.

In accomplishing the Herculean task of taking Pakistan to the number one spot, Misbah has been ably supported by Younis Khan, Azhar Ali, Asad Shafiq, Mohammad Hafeez, Sarfraz Ahmed, Wahab Riaz, Saeed Ajmal and Yasir Shah who have turned in world-beating performances time and again. To their credit, the Pakistan Test side have beaten nearly all the top teams around the world, India's absurd obstinacy of not competing with their Asian rivals notwithstanding. In levelling a fiercely competitive four-Test series against England recently that catapulted them to the top, the team have silenced those who said they were champions solely in the 'friendly' environs of the UAE, the adopted home of Pakistan cricket since 2009. What is most pleasing for fans is that the country has become a leading contender in the game once again, armed with a fresh purpose to excel.

Implementation of Fata reforms

THE much-needed, much-delayed Fata reforms process appears to be finally moving ahead. It appears that the renewed national focus on the National Action Plan, of which Fata reforms are a part, and the imminent return of Fata IDPs, following the conclusion of major military operations in the region, have acted to spur the state into action. While the reforms process has been unacceptably slow, the political government has at least done a commendable job of consulting, and intending to consult, a wide spectrum of stakeholders. By the time the Fata reforms are finalised, the hope is that a truly representative and democratic set of recommendations will have been agreed upon.

Yet, as the years since the 18th Amendment was passed have demonstrated, a set of profound legislative changes will only be effective if there is a well-thought-out implementation process. On that score, the impending Fata reforms have at least three areas that need attention.

First, the proposed implementation committee provisionally to be led by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governor has adequate federal representation, but lacks a provincial component. Given that the reforms appear to centre on the integration of Fata with KP, the lack of provincial representation is a potentially dangerous oversight. As the future chief executive of a unified province, the KP chief minister is best placed to guide the gigantic administrative task ahead. Without senior provincial representation, the experience of the 18th Amendment may be repeated, when provinces were unprepared for the wholesale transfer of powers, to the detriment of both the tribal areas and KP. Second, the Fata secretariat and the governor's office need to be urgently strengthened. At present, neither have the administrative capacity to handle the manifold major tasks ahead — the Fata secretariat because it has been sidelined for years in the running of the region and is hardly the destination of choice for competent administrators, and the governor's office because the incumbent has not proved to be a model of dynamism and initiative.

Third, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself needs to be more involved. Fata reforms have been discussed for years, but were formally enshrined in NAP in December 2014. Since then, by its own admission, the government has failed to make any major progress on multiple points of NAP, including certainly Fata reforms. If that is to change, if fresh energy is to be injected into — and then sustained over a period of years — the reforms and implementation process, the chief executive of the country will surely have to lead. Whatever the support and push from other institutions — be it the military or the democratically elected leadership of Fata — what is to be attempted in the tribal agencies is historic and dwarfs in political and administrative complexity anything undertaken by the state since Partition. Those tasks can only realistically be led by the chief executive of the country.

Falling remittances

ANY which way one looks at it, the steep fall in remittances received in the month of July is worrying. The inflows this year dropped by 20pc compared to July last year. Some attribute this drop to a post-Eid dip, but no such dip was seen in previous years, and considering the numbers are comparing the July data from last year and this year, any such fall would be accounted for in both. In some measure, the drop can be the function of the currency volatility since Brexit. The pound has fallen by a historic 31pc in the month of July, and in the data the steepest drop in remittances is also from the UK, down by 38pc. But the declines are broad-based, happening in countries ranging from the US to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other GCC nations. They are also part of a longer trend that predates Brexit volatilities.

It is too soon to say that the declines are here to stay, but it is not too soon to start contemplating the possibility of this. All three sources of foreign exchange inflows for Pakistan are showing similar trends, with FDI and exports also falling consistently. The State Bank and the IMF have, in their own way, warned about the vulnerabilities in Pakistan's external sector. Earlier July data for FDI also showed a steep drop, possibly indicating an acceleration of the trend. With remittance data adding to the gloom, an urgent reminder has been issued that the "record high foreign exchange reserves" that are the pride of the finance minister may not be all that they are made out to be. It is a grave mistake to put all our stock on Chinese investment and inflows from the IMF, World Bank and other IFIs as the counterbalance to declines in other areas. The strength of the external sector is built primarily on exports, FDI and remittances. Once all three of these indicators show sustained declines — and going by recent data an accelerating decline — there are grounds for serious concern about the underlying health of the economy. The government's growth story is now at stake. Managing an economy is about more than just the GDP growth rate and foreign exchange reserves. If the government has no ideas on how to arrest or reverse this trend, it is laying a very poor foundation upon which to build its legacy.

Marine pollution

ALTHOUGH small, the fisheries sector is part of the country's economy. More importantly, it is the main source of livelihood for the people of scores of villages dotting Pakistan's coastline. These realities, to say nothing of the pressing need of the planet's conservation, have sadly done little to prod citizens or state authorities into action that could save our part of the Indian Ocean. On Wednesday in Karachi, a national workshop on the topic of sustainable fisheries had been organised by the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum in collaboration with a UN agency. On the occasion, Federal Minister for Ports and Shipping Mir Hasil Khan Bizenjo lamented the practice of overfishing. In passing, he also mentioned another issue which many feel is of even more pressing importance: marine pollution. As acknowledged some time ago by the Marine Pollution Control department, some 350 million gallons of raw sewage or untreated industrial waste from Karachi enter the harbour every single day. In addition, thousands of tonnes of solid waste are dumped into or end up in the harbour on a daily basis. This appalling picture is only likely to worsen given that not all the pollutants going into the sea from this country's coastline are tabulated.

Under the weight of the waste that is generated, the infrastructure in many of Pakistan's cities is almost on the verge of collapse. Unfortunately, the seas are in a similar situation, again through damaging human activity and interference in the ways of nature. Efforts have been made to clean up the waters, but this is a long and expensive process that will take time to bear fruit. The first thing to be done is to stop the flow of sewage and garbage from Karachi — this is by far the single large source of pollution. The city's old and inadequate sewage systems need a serious overhaul, and waste management has to become a priority. The recently inducted chief minister has promised a cleaner Karachi; can he be induced to turn his attention to the sea as well?

MQM: the road ahead

IN every nation's history, there are defining moments, moments that augur a shifting of the tides. The last few days in Karachi have provided several such moments, and on Thursday they coalesced in a stark image, the likes of which an entire generation of Pakistanis, specifically those living in Karachi, could never have imagined they would witness. In different parts of the city, as well as in Hyderabad, posters of MQM supremo Altaf Hussain were taken down from where they had gazed upon the citizenry for decades. Even Azizabad — the Karachi locality synonymous with the party and where its formidable central headquarters Nine-Zero is located — saw posters, banners etc

with the MQM founder's visage being removed. Several unit and sector offices were sealed, though without legal orders. In the past, these controlled their respective localities with an iron fist — and more — and were the vital nodes through which Mr Hussain's orders from London were carried out. Some were bulldozed on the grounds that they were built on encroached land.

And yet, in a city that has long been held hostage to Mr Hussain's whims, where a phone call from him was enough to send Karachi spiralling into an orgy of violence at the hands of the MQM's much-feared militant wing, there was a stunning lack of reaction from supporters. Then again, Karachi has changed in many ways, demographically and politically, in the years since the military-led operation against the MQM in 1992; its people are wiser, and many of them are weary of the party's unabashedly authoritarian proclivities. Among the MQM's leadership, instead of defiance, there is trepidation and fear, evidence of a party denuded to its core. The arrests and detentions of hundreds of MQM activists since the Rangers' raid on Nine-Zero in March last year — sometimes through brutal, extralegal tactics — had already shattered the party's air of invincibility. Then came Mr Hussain's incendiary speech on Monday, which upped the ante significantly, and left the MQM's leadership in Pakistan little choice but to disassociate itself from his remarks.

Although at this time, Dr Farooq Sattar and the other party leaders standing with him are under immense pressure on various fronts, a situation in which perhaps the only thing that matters is surviving the crisis, it is also an opportunity to look ahead. Those who have assumed the mantle of leading the MQM must acknowledge that the party has had a militancy problem and chart a course clear of that unsavoury reality. There is yet a core constituency that looks to the party to represent its interests, and which has continued to vote for it in considerable numbers. For its part, the state must now stop placing roadblocks in the way of the MQM's functioning. What has happened over the last few days is a sea change. The question to ask, however, is this: is it a game changer?

Turkish incursion

FOR the past five years, Syria has become a laboratory of sorts where different regional and extra-regional players have experimented with their own solutions for the war-torn country. These have included regime change, propping up Bashar al-Assad's besieged government, as well as unleashing a bevy of proxy warriors — moderate and not so moderate — upon the hapless country. The results of these experiments have, expectedly, been grim, with nearly 300,000 dead, extremist groups such as the militant Islamic State group emboldened, and millions of Syrians uprooted. The latest foreign experiment in Syria has been the brief incursion this week by Turkish forces across the border; the Turks reportedly helped Syrian opposition fighters free a border town held by IS. While the routing of IS may be welcome, the Turkish incursion raises important questions about the propriety of a foreign country taking action in Syria — which, we must remember, remains a sovereign state — without the consent of Damascus. But it is also true that respect for Syrian sovereignty was long ago discarded. A long list of foreign powers — including the US, Russia, Iran and the Gulf Arabs — have either had a limited military presence in Syria (some with the government's approval, others in order to topple it), or have supported proxies on the ground. It must be asked whether these and any further foreign interventions will help stabilise Syria and counter extremist groups, or simply lead to more chaos.

Yet questionable as Turkey's recent military action may be, some reports indicate that Ankara has softened its 'Assad must go' rhetoric and has become more sympathetic to Iranian and Russian concerns about their Arab ally. In the bleak Syrian scenario, this may be a rare ray of hope. Along with IS, Turkey is deeply suspicious of Kurdish nationalist militants in Syria, who have gained control of territory and are supported by the US. If major external powers active in Syria — namely Turkey, Russia, the US and Iran — can arrive at a consensus, it may just be possible to end the bloodbath. For this to happen, all material and political support to the rebels, particularly of the extremist variety, must cease, while Russia and Iran must pressure Mr Assad to hammer out a peace agreement with the genuine opposition. The fact is the regime change strategy has failed in Syria; the sooner its proponents publicly accept this, the better it will be for the Syrian people and their battered country.

Senator's view of the poor

COULD he have been joking? Maybe, there was an element of irony or cynicism in his comments about the hegemony of privilege. But the more we analyse media reports of a Senate meeting on Thursday, the clearer it becomes that the august member of the upper house Sardar Yaqoob Khan Nasar was not in a jovial mood. Nor can his remarks be seen as an attempt at bringing out the disparity between the poverty-stricken and the privileged strata. His was an earnest evaluation as he saw it from his perch that, fortunately for him, exists at a considerable distance from the homes of the poor. Only complete ignorance on his part can explain the nonchalance that his words conveyed.

Sardar Nasar appears to think that if everyone were to become rich there would be no one to labour and till the land — this is far from an original assertion but always a timely one. According to the reports, he was ready to stand his ground as some of his colleagues in the house tried to make him take a more balanced and politically correct view of the issue. Maybe he will be brought around to accepting their advice and eventually concede that he had been indiscreet. That would be desirable for the system but even if that does not happen, some merit can be found in the senator's comments. By speaking his mind he did provide a more realistic measure of the problem that those who have been struggling for various kinds of equalities continue to face. Such reality checks are perhaps necessary from time to time. They are better than having 10 revered personalities debating just how cruel the world is to the underprivileged, while being convinced deep down that their speeches are not likely to change the status quo and create an impression about a benevolent world where none exists. One can thank the senator for reminding us of a mindset that will continue to hold society back.

Water emergency

FOR many years now, alarm bells had been ringing that water scarcity in the country was reaching a point where catastrophic consequences were imminent. It appears that the moment we were being warned about has more or less arrived. A new study by the Food and Agriculture Organisation looks at the impact that growing water scarcity in Sindh, as a result of the two-year drought from 2013 to 2015, has had on the province; it has given out truly disturbing numbers to substantiate its observations. More than 1.1 million people “fell below emergency-level thresholds” for survival as a result of this scarcity, and almost 75pc of people living in rain-fed areas “lacked the resources to cover basic survival and livelihood protection needs”. Not only that, the report finds “large reductions in yields and abandonment of cultivation altogether in the most

drought-affected zones”, as well as widespread destruction of livestock — in some cases over 50pc of the herd died as a direct consequence of the drought.

These are staggering numbers. It seems we are no longer headed for an ecological calamity, but have entered one. If the levels of water stress continue to increase, matters will worsen and the consequences could be even more disastrous. Droughts are a part of nature, and in our part of the world, they have a cyclical quality to them. But in this case, the variation in rainfall that lay behind the drought appears to be linked to changing climatic patterns. Even though the study does not specifically flesh out the climate-change link, the report’s authors do acknowledge that there is one — a realisation that once again underscores the alarm that the impact of climate change on Pakistan does not lie in the distant future but is happening right now, and goes far beyond monsoon flooding.

The study itself was done on the request of the Provincial Disaster Management Authority of Sindh, which indicates that the authorities are aware of the impact of the drought and searching for ways to mitigate its effects. Now that the findings are before us, they must be taken up by the new chief minister, who should not only request an immediate briefing, but also demand an action plan going forward. The fact that such a study has been done at the behest of a department of a provincial government shows there is some political responsiveness to the important ecological ravages of climate change. The higher authorities now need to step up their efforts on an urgent basis and put together a coordinated response to mitigate the impact of the drought, as well as develop systems to build greater resilience. None of this is academic or wishing for the impossible. Given the will in the right quarters, we can surely mitigate the impact of climate change on livelihoods and ecology.

India’s hysteria

IT may only be a magazine cover, but it is emblematic of a new, nasty and unfortunate trend in India: vilifying Pakistan, attacking its leaders and even questioning this country’s very existence. Clearly, the Indian magazine India Today was aiming for a controversial statement in putting Gen Raheel Sharif on its cover with a faux imprint of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s hand across the general’s face. But some of that provocativeness was undone by the accompanying cover story, which concludes: “By raising Balochistan, Modi has succeeded in blunting Pakistan’s offensive on Kashmir and also addressed the public demand for a strong answer. But it has limited tactical utility ... Modi has shown that he is capable of thinking out of the box. But he has to be

careful not to be boxed in by his actions.” A modicum of sense, then, even in the midst of nonsense. Yet, the coarsening and hardening of anti-Pakistan rhetoric in India is an unmistakable trend. It seems India once again has a Pakistan problem of its own making and its own imagination. From government ministers alluding to Pakistan as hell to artists coming under pressure, and even facing legal trouble, for speaking sensibly about this country, India is seemingly gripped by an anti-Pakistan rage.

Contrast that with what has become the mainstream sentiment about India in Pakistan. While the violence in India-held Kashmir and the Modi government’s belligerence has elicited over-the-top reactions from some sections here, gone are the days when India was the unshakeable centre of political discourse in Pakistan. All major political parties want peace with India — even with a right-wing BJP government if it is willing to act sensibly and rationally — while few major segments of the population can be mobilised politically purely on anti-India rhetoric. The military too has evolved into recognising that the domestic security threat is bigger and more urgent a challenge than competition with India. To be sure, if India instigates, sections of state and society here are more than willing to respond. And there remains undeniably a terrorism problem that plagues the Pakistan-India relationship. Yet, what is on display in India and the seeming eagerness with which hateful anti-Pakistan rhetoric is both being spread by the mainstream media there and lapped up by large sections of the public is unprecedented for periods not involving hot, military conflict. Far too many in India are seemingly uncomfortable with the very idea of Pakistan.

Chaman closure

THE Pak-Afghan border crossing at Chaman, Balochistan, has been closed by Pakistani authorities since Afghan protesters burnt this country’s flag and reportedly vandalised the Friendship Gate at the crossing on Aug 18. Two separate demonstrations were held on the day in the vicinity, one on the Pakistani side to protest against Indian Prime Minister Modi’s inflammatory remarks targeting Pakistan, the other across the border, where a gathering to celebrate Afghanistan’s independence took on a decidedly anti-Pakistan tone. As is the case when hyper-nationalistic sentiments are whipped up, the Afghan demonstrators reportedly ended up attacking the border gate and burning the Pakistan flag. In reaction to this, the local authorities have kept the crossing shut; vehicles and people have been unable to cross the border for the last 11 days, with Islamabad insisting that Kabul apologise for the provocation.

While the flag-burning stunt is indeed deplorable, the fact is that common people on both sides of the border are suffering due to the closure. It is estimated that between 10,000 and 15,000 traders cross over daily, while trucks laden with perishable produce are waiting in queues, with their cargo bound to spoil in the summer heat. Moreover, vehicles carrying supplies for Nato forces in Afghanistan have also been held up. While Islamabad is well within its rights to protest the desecration of the national flag, it should take steps immediately to reopen the crossing and let common people cross the border. The incident should not be lumped together with the larger Pak-Afghan relationship, which, at this point in time, is anything but cordial. Earlier on, the Torkham crossing was also closed for a brief period. In fact, if Pakistan showed magnanimity over the issue and reopened the Chaman crossing, it would send a positive signal to Kabul. Those elements — such as militants — that are standing in the way of better Pak-Afghan relations should be the ones prevented from crossing the border, not ordinary citizens of both countries.

Misplaced patriotism

Across much of South Asia, there is a growing strain of state-sponsored nationalism that is worrying and potentially dangerous in its consequences.

From India to Bangladesh, and from Pakistan to Sri Lanka, political dissent of various hues is being branded as anti-state and clamped down on viciously.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed has marched her country to a deadly place in her quest to vanquish her political enemies, while in Sri Lanka, the civil war may be over but great prejudice and discrimination are rampant against ethnic Tamils.

Meanwhile, Kashmiri dissenters have once again caused India to bare its teeth while the political opposition in the restive northeast of that country has for decades now been labelled as militants, anti-nationalist and veritable traitors.

The unmistakable rise of a narrow, state-sanctioned version of patriotism is evident in far too many places in South Asia against far too many oppressed groups.

Yet, it is Pakistan that must remain of the most immediate and serious concern.

Misplaced patriotism — encouraged, sponsored and directed by sections of the state — is dominating the political discourse at present. Be it Baloch separatists or even

nationalist politicians like Mahmood Khan Achakzai, there is wholesale condemnation of swathes of the political spectrum taking place.

Even a thoroughly regrettable speech by Altaf Hussain has been turned into an opportunity to shoehorn all political opinion into a narrow, sanctioned version of nationalism.

No right-thinking Pakistani would oppose the essence of 'Pakistan zindabad', but a patriotism test — demanding of everyone to express allegiance to the Pakistani state before countenancing their political views — is a development that militates against good sense and political rights.

Perhaps a brief tour of history may help here. Once upon a time, the Khan of Kalat was arrested for sedition — a charge that echoes uncomfortably decades later in the plight of Baloch activists today.

East Pakistan was lost in the civil war, a conflict situation exploited by India — arguably, the roots of separation were laid by the state-led West Pakistani campaign to label Bengalis and their principal representative party, the Awami League, as anti-state.

Soon after, in a truncated Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto banned the National Awami Party of Wali Khan. Today, its successor, the ANP, is a mainstream political party and its cadres have been decimated by the banned TTP.

The story continues with ugly allegations against G.M. Syed of Sindh and Sardar Ataullah Mengal, and arrives in the present day with the demonisation of Mr Achakzai, whose father faced similar accusations before his death in a bombing.

There is one Pakistan, but there is no one idea of what that Pakistan should be. The state has neither the right nor the authority to dictate to the people what Pakistan ought to be to them.

The political realm is best served by a robust debate among competing ideas and philosophies. Coercion and artificial homogeneity are the real threats.

A decade after Bugti

IT has been 10 years since the death of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti on Aug 26, 2006, at the hands of the army in the Bhamboor mountains of Kohlu, Balochistan. The ripples touched off by that watershed event — which turned a prominent tribal leader seen as pro-establishment for much of his life into a nationalist icon — continue to roil the province even today, with inevitable repercussions for the federation as a whole. On the day of the anniversary, Baloch-dominated areas in Balochistan witnessed a complete strike on the call of the Jamhoori Watan Party which was founded by Bugti. Even Quetta, a Pakhtun-majority garrison town with a mixed population of different ethnicities, came to a standstill.

Whether the people's response was of their own volition or out of fear of retaliation by insurgents, the success of the strike was, by default, an acknowledgement of the enormous significance of what took place a decade ago. Bugti's killing served to further inflame the insurgency that had been triggered a year earlier by the rape of a doctor allegedly by an army officer in Sui. That insurgency continues to this day — the longest of five such movements since Partition. Furthermore, for the first time ever, the conflict encompasses virtually all the Baloch-majority areas in the province, including those in the south. The establishment's response, brutal and short-sighted, has been self-defeating, serving to fuel more anger and alienation — thus providing ample opportunity for covert foreign meddling and more chaos. Enforced disappearances have provided a rallying point for critics at home and abroad, while enlisting extremist groups as proxies to counter the separatists has had deadly consequences in a region with porous borders and an already existing militancy problem. The insurgents too have resorted to increasingly violent tactics as the situation has spiralled out of control. Meanwhile, efforts by the previous, Dr Malik-led provincial government to engage separatist leaders in dialogue went nowhere. That was scarcely surprising, given the lack of political will by the centre to address genuine grievances of the Baloch that stem from historical neglect and naked exploitation of their resources by the state. However, Brahmdagh Bugti does his people no favours by eliciting India's help in this powder keg. The only — and one cannot emphasise this enough — the only way to deal with this confoundedly complex situation is through an astute political response, backed by real power to effect change in the long term.

Saving folk music

THE cost extracted by violence from all segments of society in Peshawar has been tremendous and unbearably painful. But if there is one area of work that has come under sustained attack, it is that of culture and the performing arts. Artists, musicians and actors here have had their places of work destroyed and their ranks decimated; not only have they come under direct assault, they have also been subjected to threats and intimidation that have driven several of them away from the city. Those still soldiering on traverse a tough terrain. The combination of working in professions that are historically not well paid, with little to no support from the state, and being in the cross hairs of extremists has left many in a pitiful state — with the expected fallout on the traditions they represent. The news, therefore, that senior Pashto folk singers have set up the Music Welfare Society is very welcome. According to Zahir Shah, noted harmonium player and the chief of the MWS, the purpose of the organisation is to preserve musical traditions, train artists and singers, as well as set up a welfare fund that can help colleagues financially, whether aid is required for medical treatment or some other purpose. The MWS expects that some 600 artists, including instrumentalists and singers, will join together under its umbrella — a sizeable number given Peshawar's demographics — and also plans on organising events that promote Pashto folk music.

Such cooperation and the decision to take collective action is praiseworthy, and it can only be hoped that it does indeed result in tangible improvements in the lot of at least some of the province's musicians. However, it is worth asking, what on its part is the state or provincial administration doing to similarly keep KP's culture alive? The Peshawar Arts Council is one of the oldest art institutions in the country, set up for the express purpose of facilitating cultural activities. Surely, it should be taking the lead in matters such as this.

Death by encounter

A CHILLINGLY familiar story emerged from Punjab's Counter Terrorism Department on Sunday. According to its spokesman, a CTD team transporting four terrorism suspects in a van to a locality in Lahore as part of an investigation into a terrorist attack was ambushed by several gunmen. A ferocious firefight ensued. By the time it was over, the four men who were in custody lay dead and the attackers had escaped under cover. The police, miraculously, were left without a scratch. The men who were killed had been arrested on suspicion of having perpetrated the attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore in 2009, as well as involvement in the bombing of the city's Moon Market the

year before which left over 70 people dead. From Karachi, also on Sunday, there was news of a custodial death. An MQM activist Mehmood Khan, arrested on Aug 11 by Malir police, died in Civil Hospital under suspicious circumstances. The SSP Malir police claimed Mehmood was suffering from complications brought on by diabetes.

Judging from past experience, no effort will be made to determine the veracity of the police's version in either of these instances. Unbridled power such as that enjoyed by law-enforcement personnel in this country invariably leads to abuse, with personal vendettas sometimes carried out in the guise of enforcing law and order. Only in such an environment can certain policemen continue to thrive despite being known as 'encounter specialists', which begs the question: how much savagery would they have had to commit to acquire that sobriquet? Reports of alleged terrorists getting killed in so-called encounters are so frequent that they seem almost banal, unworthy of comment. Police encounters and custodial torture were always tactics present in the law-enforcement playbook but they acquired renewed currency in the aftermath of the Rangers-led operation in Karachi, and a crackdown against religious extremists in Punjab. According to the HRCP, 2,115 people were killed in 'police encounters' throughout the country in 2015.

The state appears to have decided in many instances that it is not worth the time and effort to build a prosecutable case, although it has sufficient legal tools at its disposal to do so even in the absence of a functioning witness protection programme. In a brutalised society, witness to some ghastly bloodletting in the past few decades, concerns about due process and accountability may seem ill-judged and pedantic. These, however, will determine the future of this country. Police encounters and custodial deaths are evidence of an increasingly authoritarian state opting to create an illusion of order rather than undertaking the long, hard slog of addressing the causes of violence. The organs of the state tasked with upholding the law cannot be above the law themselves. Mirroring the actions of the worst in our society will only perpetuate the cycle of violence.

Missions or junkets?

GIVEN the critical situation in India-held Kashmir, with the death toll rising by the day, the world, especially the oppressed people of the valley, would have expected from Islamabad a response better than sending parliamentary delegations to world capitals to do a job for which few of them appear well equipped. They may not have fake degrees, and some of those named indeed do deserve to be there, but PTI's Shah Mehmood Qureshi had a point when he said only those parliamentarians should have been chosen who could raise the Kashmir issue abroad in an effective manner. The former foreign minister must have been piqued by his omission from the list, but he was not wrong when he said the list of nominees showed the government's lack of seriousness on the Kashmir cause. That an overwhelming majority of the delegates belong to the ruling PML-N-led coalition is itself a sad commentary on the prime minister's choice, as is the inclusion of seven lawmakers from southern Punjab, and one PPP MNA and one PML-Q senator to flaunt political 'fair play'. What is outlandish is the choice of such friendly capitals as Beijing and Ankara in the itinerary. Do the governments in these countries really need goading and entreaties by what the prime minister calls 'special envoys' to side with Pakistan on this issue?

Nowhere, however, is the frivolity of the entire enterprise starker than the visit by these delegates to capitals of the other four of the P-5. Decades back, the UN Security Council, that then included KMT China and the Soviet Union with its frequent use of veto, had passed resolutions calling for a plebiscite in Kashmir to decide the fate of the disputed territory. Since then, as the Cold War ended, a sea change has occurred in world politics, with Pakistan losing the priceless clout it once had with Western powers which had had the equitable UN resolutions passed. Today, with the US-led West pressuring Pakistan to 'do more' against terrorists, and all Western multinationals vying with each other to cash in on India's economic boom, it is highly unlikely that the 20-odd, and in some cases uninspiring, parliamentarians will be so persuasive as to convince these world powers to allow a seismic shift in their Kashmir policy. Let us accept it: these 'missions' are merely costly junkets draining an exchequer sustained by Pakistan's heavily taxed people.

Congo fever concerns

WHILE the number of victims in the country who have succumbed to Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever may be small, it would be ill advised for the authorities to take no precautions against the disease. At least 16 people countrywide have died of CCHF — spread by infected ticks that attach themselves to cattle, sheep and goats — in the recent past. It is obvious that with Eidul Azha just two weeks away, and thousands of sacrificial animals heading to or already in the cities and towns, the authorities must remain vigilant to prevent the spread of CCHF. However, as per a report published in this paper on Monday, officials in Karachi seem to be taking it quite easy in this regard. While municipal officials this paper spoke to claimed that all animals arriving at the livestock market on the outskirts of the metropolis were being inspected, traders had another story to tell. For example, one individual claimed that his beasts had not been inspected all the way from Rajanpur, Punjab, till their arrival in Karachi. Others corroborated this claim. It is indeed a difficult task, logistically, to inspect all animals; in Karachi alone, 130,000 or so beasts have arrived so far. Yet there is no other option but vigilance to keep the livestock healthy and people safe.

As experts have recommended, animals should be sprayed with insecticide at least 12 to 15 days before slaughter. Considering this is the time period left before Eid, provincial authorities should waste no time and start spraying all major livestock markets countrywide. Moreover, there should be tighter inspection of movement of livestock across provincial lines. Beasts originating from districts where CCHF cases have been reported — such as southern Punjab and parts of Balochistan — should be checked particularly thoroughly, while there should be a strict ban on makeshift markets. And in future, it would be prudent if provincial authorities ran awareness campaigns about how to keep animals healthy as well as maintaining hygiene standards in the towns and villages where most of our livestock is bred.