

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of February, 2016*

**Note:** This is a compiled work by the Team The CSS Point. The DAWN.COM is the owner of the content available in the document. This document is compiled to support css aspirants and This document is **NOT FOR SALE.**

**Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)**



[www.thecsspoint.com](http://www.thecsspoint.com)





**You are trying to get the right Job?**  
You got your rocket in right direction

Visit [Jobiffy.net](http://Jobiffy.net) and search for thousands of  
Government and Private Jobs

**[JOIN NOW](#)**

Submit your CV/Resume and get selected

**[WWW.JOBIFFY.NET](http://WWW.JOBIFFY.NET)**

For more details please write us at  
[info@jobiffy.net](mailto:info@jobiffy.net) or  
Call us 0726-540316 | 0726-540016

**TO ADVERTISE ON THIS PAGE  
CALL: 03336042057**

# DOWNLOAD

**CSS Notes, Books, MCQs, Magazines**



**THE CSS POINT**  
Yes We Can Do It!

**WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM**

- **Download CSS Notes**
- **Download CSS Books**
- **Download CSS Magazines**
- **Download CSS MCQs**
- **Download CSS Past Papers**

*The CSS Point, Pakistan's The Best  
Online FREE Web source for All CSS  
Aspirants.*

Email: [info@thecsspoint.com](mailto:info@thecsspoint.com)

Table of Contents

Afghanistan: US concerns .....	6	Lethal waters.....	27
Monetary policy .....	7	A road map for Afghanistan .....	28
PIA turnaround.....	8	Jl’s textbook concerns.....	29
Syria shrine bombings.....	9	Train compensation .....	30
Killings in Balochistan.....	10	No consensus yet on Fata reforms .....	31
Petrol politics .....	11	‘Judging’ IP pipeline .....	32
Striking PIA.....	11	Top conspiracies.....	33
Safety of students .....	13	After the strike .....	34
New Nacta website .....	14	Saudi coalition.....	35
PIA crisis needs cooler minds.....	14	Farcical terror exercise.....	36
Indo-Pak visa regime.....	15	IS threat.....	37
Intizar Husain .....	16	Investing in people .....	38
Road to CPEC.....	17	Bajia’s departure.....	39
Obama’s reassurance.....	18	LNG: the second round .....	40
Media persons’ safety.....	19	Karachi security.....	41
ISI-NDS meeting .....	20	Pakistan’s lost universe.....	42
PIA crisis .....	21	Deep-rooted sectarianism .....	43
PSL launch .....	22	Military ‘justice’.....	44
Quetta targeted again.....	23	Valentine’s Day .....	45
Intervention in Syria.....	24	Madressah reforms.....	46
Child deaths in Thar .....	25	Right to information.....	47
Census complications.....	25	Hockey win.....	48
KP budget cuts .....	26	Interference in AJK.....	49
		Fixing power tariffs .....	50

Pakistan’s sportswomen .....	51	Party democracy .....	75
India-Pakistan talks .....	52	Syria ceasefire .....	76
Hindu marriage law.....	53	Pakistan Super League .....	77
Mayor for ICT .....	54	New terror-financing guidelines .....	78
Criticising NAB.....	55	Zardari: no lessons learnt.....	79
Price of drugs .....	57	Euro bond ghosts .....	80
Syria invasion talk .....	58	Retirement in cricket.....	81
Indian objections to F-16 sale .....	59	Nuclear restraint potential.....	82
Altaf’s ‘appeal’ .....	60	Tax amnesty failure .....	83
NFC award delay .....	61	Novel protest .....	84
Possible census delay?.....	62	Karachi transport scheme .....	85
JNU controversy .....	63	Obstinacy over Siachen .....	85
Vaccination refusals.....	64	Nabbing Asim Hussain.....	87
Lifting of Iran sanctions.....	65	Pak-Afghan cooperation .....	87
Stain on ‘honour’ .....	66	Protection for women.....	89
Liberal visa regime .....	66	Nanga Parbat ascent .....	90
Poor state of health .....	67		
Accountability laws .....	68		
Militants online .....	69		
Census: now or never .....	70		
Literary festivals.....	71		
Pathankot steps .....	72		
Uncertain times for NGOs.....	73		
Tattered probes .....	74		

## Afghanistan: US concerns

SENATE confirmation hearings for an incoming military commander nominated by the US president are rarely insightful.

The nominee is usually careful to not offend or contradict the administration he is about to serve under, while senators tend to be respectful of American generals.

But neither are confirmation hearings a waste of time. Many a time, they provide insight into an administration's inside thinking and the outside opinion of nominees whose credibility is at stake.

Last week, Lt-Gen John Nicholson, US President Barack Obama's nominee for commander of American operations in Afghanistan, appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee where, among other subjects, the general was asked about the Pakistani aspects to peace and stability in the Pak-Afghan region.

Effectively, Gen Nicholson suggested three things: one, the counter-insurgency campaigns in Fata have produced significant results; two, border cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan is vital; and, three, Pakistan needs to put further pressure on the Haqqani network in particular and the irreconcilable elements among the Afghan Taliban generally.

Taken together, Gen Nicholson's comments amount to the cautious cajoling that other military and White House officials

have indulged in in recent months. While acknowledging the Pakistani fight against militancy, there has been a subtle but significant push for the state here to do more.

In the words of Gen Nicholson: "Pakistan must take persistent action against the Taliban, particularly the Haqqani network. Pakistan's pressure on the Taliban combined with its support to the reconciliation process are mutually reinforcing, and when combined, will help reduce the violence in Afghanistan."

If the 'persistent action' and 'pressure' are meant to be military steps, then Pakistan must resist. The lack of a coherent US strategy in Afghanistan should not be allowed to bring a new war to Pakistan. While the Taliban should be nudged towards the negotiating table and cross-border militancy needs to be clamped down on, none of that remotely approaches steps that would amount to declaring war here against new groups.

What Gen Nicholson's testimony glossed over was a reality acknowledged elsewhere by his boss, US Defence Secretary Ash Carter.

The fighting season in Afghanistan that is approaching may be the fiercest yet and the US troops are nowhere close to exiting Afghanistan.

For all the problems of cross-border militancy, what is undeniable is that the Afghan security forces themselves are far from adequate and the National Unity Government has been unable to deliver on governance issues.

It is the internal security and governance challenges in Afghanistan that ought to be paid equally urgent attention.

Otherwise, a fighting season that is as tough as or worse than last year's is likely to leave the Afghan state and the Americans too looking for scapegoats.

That may cause a deterioration in the Pak-Afghan-US relationship just when the focus would need to be on salvaging an intra-Afghan peace process. Better sense ought to prevail at the outset.

*Published in Dawn, February 1st, 2016*

## Monetary policy

IF there were any hopes that a newly constituted independent monetary policy committee would inject some new life and independence of thought into the analyses being put out by the State Bank, they stand dashed following the release of its first monetary policy statement on Saturday.

The statement is not only a mealy-mouthed endorsement of all government claims, it appears to be actively misleading in places.

The authors speak of "an improvement in the fiscal accounts" in the first quarter, while at the same time pointing towards "additional tax measures announced in October 2015" as another reason to be optimistic. Are the authors aware of the reasons that made the "additional tax measures" of October necessary?

These included a Rs40bn shortfall in the revenue-collection target, prompting the IMF to attach prior conditions to be fulfilled before the release of the next tranche. For its part, the Fund pointed to a "shortfall in federal tax revenues" in the same period.

One wonders whether the new committee is adding its numbers up differently, or simply taking dictation from the government.

The statement gives us a rather understated, and in some places a very misleading, picture of the economy. The decline in exports is papered over quietly while growth in private-sector credit offtake is blithely attributed to factors such as "improved financial conditions of major corporates" and "better business environment" and "impact of monetary easing".

How much of this credit offtake is attributable to large CPEC-related projects, and how much to some organic revival of real activity? The decline in exports is "dependent on external demand and cotton prices in the international market", meaning little needs to be done at a policy level to address the problem.

This take on declining exports also contradicts what the State Bank had said about the subject in its annual report.

One expected the newly formed committee to exercise a bit of its independence and cast a light on some of the difficulties in the foreign exchange market, or the volatilities sweeping across the speculative trades such as the stock market.

It was also expected that the independent economists who have been appointed on the committee would make their presence felt, but clearly that hasn't happened.

February 2016

It is clear that the committee needs to do a far better job than this in its future statements, or else it will risk losing its credibility.

*Published in Dawn, February 1st, 2016*

## PIA turnaround

THIS is not the turnaround we were expecting. The government has announced it will abandon its search for a “strategic investor” to take minority stake and management control of PIA in response to a strike by the company’s unions.

This represents a rapid reversal of its commitment given to the IMF back in August.

Not many people actually believed that the government would be able to deliver on its commitment, especially when it said it would get the job done by December 2015.

*Also read: [PIA privatisation postponed for six months](#)*

But neither did anyone expect it to cave in so fast, after only a few days into a strike that didn’t disrupt flight schedules, only reservations.

Adding to the surprise was the fact that just a day earlier, one minister had given a tough public statement that the government might exercise the option of declaring flight operations an “essential service”, making it illegal for the strike

to continue. Then suddenly, the government announced an abandonment of its plans to invite a strategic investor.

This is ad hocism at its best. Did the government really go into the whole search for a strategic investor without knowing that the workers’ unions would react to the strike?

Did they really have no game plan to deal with the eventuality? It seems so, and sadly enough, the real reasons why the more important structural reforms in areas such as public-enterprise restructuring remain stuck in limbo three years after the general elections have become clear.

One can endlessly debate the best reform path forward for PIA. But there can be no two opinions on the rapid volte-face, a turnaround of an entirely different kind, that the government has just pulled off.

This is no way to advance reforms or even put up an appearance of tackling the underlying structural problems that plague the economy. The signal that is sent out by this decision is that the government is too weak, too fearful and far too short-sighted to undertake the difficult task of putting the economy on a sustainable footing.

*Published in Dawn, February 1st, 2016*



## Syria shrine bombings

THE bombings near the revered Syeda Zainab shrine outside Damascus on Sunday, in which at least 70 people have reportedly been killed, are a disturbing provocation clearly designed to sabotage the nascent peace talks under way in Geneva between the Syrian government and opposition, and widen sectarian fissures.

While the shrine itself was not damaged, the area around it was devastated. The iconic structure has been targeted before.

The militant Islamic State group has claimed the attack; considering that the mosque serves as the locus for Hezbollah and other Shia militias active in Syria, as well as pilgrims, it is one of the most sensitive locations in the Syrian theatre.

*Also read: [Bomb attacks near Hazrat Zainab's shrine in Syria kill 50, wound 110](#)*

The threat of communal violence that targeting such a significant religious structure can unleash should not be underestimated. For example, the 2006 bombing of the Al Askari mosque in Samarra triggered a horrific wave of sectarian violence that ripped Iraqi society apart, and the repercussions of which are still being felt.

The Syrian quagmire has already acquired an ugly sectarian colour. Attacks such as these will only fuel the fires of communal violence now burning in many parts of the Middle East. That is why it is essential that the UN-sponsored peace talks being held in Geneva make progress.

Of course, the Syrian conflict is an incredibly complex one, with internal and external actors pursuing varying agendas. However, unless the negotiation teams of both the Syrian government and opposition display the intention to move the peace process forward and make compromises, little can be expected from the talks. One key issue is that the opposition seems divided and unsure of what to do.

The Saudi-backed Higher Negotiating Committee only joined the talks at the last minute while for obvious reasons, the militant opposition, consisting of IS, Al Nusra and others of their ilk, are not at the table. Expectedly, both the regime and the opposition have taken maximalist positions; these must be loosened for there to be progress.

It would help matters immensely if both sides announced an immediate ceasefire, which would bring relief to the hapless Syrian population.

However, as both sides argue over the details of how to permanently end the conflict and establish a government acceptable to all sides, they must agree on one point: there must be a united front against extremist groups — though this is difficult as some of the ‘moderate’ rebels have fought alongside the extremist fighters.

The UN ‘road map’ for peace as envisaged in a recent Security Council resolution can only be implemented if Syria’s warring factions — as well as regional and international players — agree to make it work. Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey have a significant role in making this happen. Establishing peace in Syria is incredibly difficult, but not impossible if the principal domestic and foreign players choose to work towards it.

## Killings in Balochistan

A MONTH since the change at the top of the political leadership in Balochistan, there are disturbing signs that the security situation in the province may be worsening yet again.

Newly installed Chief Minister Sanaullah Zehri had pledged to continue the policies of his predecessor and suggested that political reconciliation with Baloch separatists would be a priority, but the spike in violence — admittedly by all sides — appears to be the only change discernible so far.

Since Mr Zehri took over, there have been several fatal attacks on policemen and FC personnel. Some of those attacks are likely the work of Baloch separatists, but the attack on a polio centre suggests that Islamist militants are once again flexing their muscles.

The response of the state has been predictable, especially against Baloch separatists. Encounters, killings and deaths have marked the new year so far and both political leaders and security officials have been using the tough language that usually accompanies a fresh crackdown.

Clearly, Mr Zehri is not entirely in control of or responsible for the actions of the state security apparatus. But his first month in office has made for a grim contrast with his diplomacy in London last year, when Mr Zehri tried to woo the Khan of Kalat back to Balochistan.

A new chief minister is not the only notable change in the ranks of those handling Balochistan policy. A new military

commander in Quetta with his predecessor installed as national security adviser in Islamabad created expectations in some quarters that a different Balochistan policy may be in the offing — or that at least some tweaks to the existing hardline policy were being contemplated.

Unhappily, a fresh crackdown has materialised and several Baloch separatists have been killed in recent days. The low-level insurgency and counter-insurgency that has gripped the province for over a decade shows no signs of abating. Chief Minister Zehri cannot afford to be a bystander.

Old as the cycle of violence in Balochistan has become, there is always a risk of events spiralling out of control. An early catastrophe in the second half of Balochistan's coalition government can be avoided if Mr Zehri becomes more assertive on two fronts.

One, the chief minister will have to convince the security establishment to end the spike in killings of separatists. Two, the chief minister will have to redouble his efforts to reach out to disaffected Baloch and their leaders, at home and abroad.

*Published in Dawn, February 2nd, 2016*

## Petrol politics

THE cut in petrol prices of Rs5 just announced by the government is being denounced by opposition parties as too little, and with good reason.

Consider that the cost of supply by PSO, the largest distributor in the country, of one litre of petrol comes to Rs38, and the final price at which the fuel is being sold is Rs71, as per Ogra's notification. Where is the difference of Rs33 going?

Some of this difference is understandable, like the IFEM, or the charge that the government uses to equalise the price of fuel across the country, which comes to Rs3.76 per litre.

The dealer commission and margins allowed to oil marketing companies are also easy enough to understand, since oil distribution is not free. Both of these come to Rs5.43 together. But this comes to about Rs9 in total.

The rest of the price per litre of petrol is taxes and charges, totalling Rs24.48 or 34pc of the total price of the fuel at the pump. And even before these, regulatory duties at the import stage are already factored into the cost of supply of PSO.

The opposition parties have a point when they say that the declining oil price in global markets ought to be passed further to the consumers, and that the government is shy of doing this for obvious reasons: it will negatively impact revenue collection.

As a pragmatic measure, it can be appreciated that any government in power at this time would have had a difficult time passing all of the declines in oil prices through to end-consumers. The fallout on the fiscal framework would be too difficult to manage.

Even in neighbouring India, the government cancelled out a price reduction with a hike in the excise duty at the same time. Nevertheless, Pakistan has gone further in promising market pricing of fuel, and the opposition parties are entitled to demand that the government share a greater chunk of the price declines with the consumers.

*Published in Dawn, February 2nd, 2016*

## Striking PIA

THE government has comprehensively fumbled with its plans for PIA. Invoking the Essential Services Act of 1952 to break the strike of PIA unions against the proposed privatisation plan appeared to be an act of sheer panic.

But the subsequent clashes between striking workers and security officials at the airport, resulting in the tragic death of two employees, have turned the plans into a fiasco.

It must also be mentioned that the reported resort to aerial firing at an airport by the security agencies, where there are aircraft circling overhead, is beyond stupidity — it is

February 2016

downright dangerous and those responsible must be made aware of this.

Beyond the follies of the moment, the entire episode has turned a delicate matter into an open contest of wills of the sort that is usually won by the party with more grit, which in this case would be the unions.

The signs of mismanagement were there all along. Nobody was sure who was overseeing the exercise to find a 'strategic investor' for the airline. Was it the aviation adviser or the privatisation minister?

Frequent and, apparently often unwanted, input from the finance minister didn't help things either.

All felt free to give all sorts of commitments publicly, including reassurances to the workers that nobody would lose his or her job in the process. When the ordinance to convert the airline into a corporation was defeated in the Senate, we had three different committees in the National Assembly overseeing the affairs of PIA. When the Supreme Court restrained the aviation adviser from taking any independent decisions, he gave his resignation to the prime minister which the latter did not accept, creating further confusion about the role of the adviser.

As the government hurtled towards the end-December deadline it had set for itself, matters appeared to be spinning out of control. In response, it leaned on the law-enforcement agencies to get a grip on things as protests spilled out onto the streets. The result is that two people are now dead, the union has

gained two 'martyrs' to rally around, and is now stronger than ever before. So much for the best-laid plans.

Nobody should doubt that PIA is in grave difficulty, with accumulated losses having risen to Rs300bn, an amount that is almost equal to the circular debt in the power sector.

Few also doubt that the situation can be credibly improved without some sort of game-changing intervention that injects private-sector energies into the management of the airline. But the manner in which the government has pursued this ambitious goal is clumsy and smacks of haste and hubris.

The PML-N has never been famous for its ability to bring people together, to reach out to adversaries and carve a consensus around a highly contested goal. The way in which they have dealt with the restructuring of PIA only reinforces this perception.

*Published in Dawn, February 3rd, 2016*

## Safety of students

FOR now, the storm seems to have been weathered. It had been a week of chaos during which many educational institutions were asked or decided themselves to temporarily close their gates.

Many took with a pinch of salt the Punjab government's Jan 26 statement that it was because of the cold snap. With the decision taken shortly thereafter by several army- and navy-run institutions to close, many private establishments in various parts of the country followed suit, and only added fuel to speculations of the most worrying nature.

Amidst all this swirled allegations of institutions' managements and staff being harassed in the name of security and of their protection measures being reviewed. While some schools did open on Monday, it was the agreement the same day between the Pakistan Education Council (representing nearly a dozen major private school chains) and the Punjab education minister that appeared to finally restore normalcy.

The minister accepted that the primary responsibility for the security of students and their schools rested with the government, and promised that private schools would not in future be closed without consultation with the institutions' managements.

That said, Pakistan is far from home and dry. On Monday, during a high-level meeting held at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad to discuss progress on the National Action Plan,

the prime minister emphasised that "those who are threatening our kids from going to schools will be defeated".

But all the resolve in the world will not help unless it translates to concerted and multi-dimensional action.

The threat cannot be denied; it is vital therefore that school managements and the relevant arms of the state work in tandem.

Ensuring the safety of staff and students is paramount; but where it is impossible for the state to divert the full strength of its law-enforcement personnel to schools and colleges, so it is impossible for all institutions to meet the standards of fortification set by the state in its safety guidelines issued after the APS assault.

Then, both the state and school managements need to take into much closer confidence those who are the biggest stakeholders: the parents and guardians of students. Given what is at stake, there is overarching reason for them to have a say in what measures are being undertaken to protect institutions, and what the costs will be. The ugly new reality allows no room for the usual obfuscations and prevarications.

*Published in Dawn, February 3rd, 2016*

## New Nacta website

THE battle against militancy in Pakistan can hardly be won through sound bites and noble intentions. What is needed is a multifaceted response — which in many areas appears to elude the state.

Take, for example, the affairs of the National Counter-Terrorism Authority, a body that was set up to be the premier institution to lead the charge against militancy. Unfortunately, Nacta is known more for its lack of activity rather than any stunning counterterrorism success.

One manifestation of this lethargy has appeared in the form of the authority's 'revamped' website launched recently. As reported on Tuesday, there is very little that is new, or informative, about Nacta's supposedly refurbished web portal.

For instance, it contains only the most basic data such as the text of the law under which the body functions, along with a bland organogram, as well as other random bits of information and links.

Where, as it has been pointed out, is the list of groups banned by the state, or information about who does what at Nacta? When one clicks on the 'threat alerts' link, one is relieved to know that there are "currently no threat alerts". While that may be great news, does it actually reflect the reality?

The fact is that there is much that can be done to make the Nacta website an information hub of all issues relating to counterterrorism in Pakistan. But for that to happen, the

government will have to make the authority itself an active concern. It can reasonably be asked that if the rulers cannot set up a proper website, how will they run Nacta as per the authority's lofty aims?

As some lawmakers have suggested, details of Nacta's working, as well as updates on what progress has been made on different points of the National Action Plan, can be regularly uploaded onto the website, along with other important information. There is simply no excuse for the state to leave the website, or Nacta itself, in such a languid condition.

*Published in Dawn, February 3rd, 2016*

## PIA crisis needs cooler minds

It is unbecoming of a leader of a democracy to talk in a way that is insensitive. Despite the tragedy that befell the protesting PIA employees, when two of their colleagues were killed on Tuesday, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif adopted a hostile approach towards the union protesters.

In close proximity were some of his ministers who echoed his tone and practically equated PIA union protesters with 'enemies of the state' and warned that they may lose their jobs. All this at a time when workers were insecure about employment and on a day when they were absorbing the shock of the law-enforcement action against them and the death of their comrades.



Whatever one's own opinion of the unions, the protesters and the health of the airline may be, allowing peaceful demonstrators to be killed or injured is a grave tragedy and should be acknowledged as such by the leadership.

For their part, the protesters also need to realise that many people are getting weary of their tactics. They have proven their point by grounding the airline and should now work towards winding down their protests.

Disrupting the lives of the people for too long may not win them the sympathy they see as crucial to their cause. They need to realise that the status quo has become untenable in PIA and a large effort is needed to rescue the national carrier before it collapses altogether, or becomes an even bigger burden on the taxpaying public than it already is.

One of the demands that has been put forward by the union's joint action committee is that "PIA's employees be provided a chance to reform the airline". How are we expected to take this demand seriously? Do they have any plan or vision that goes beyond bravado or sloganeering to undertake such a massive task? What do they propose be done about the accumulated losses which have climbed to Rs300bn?

Cooler heads need to step in to save the situation from deteriorating further.

The opposition parties should not see in this episode an opportunity to make political hay. The PTI thought it could ride the anger of the traders against a withholding tax and ended up looking foolish when the traders cut a deal with the

government and wound down their protests. That mistake ought to be avoided.

The need of the hour is for all political forces to urge calm and restraint, stop taking extreme positions, and work towards getting PIA back in the air once again rather than fan the flames of anger. As a first step, the government should refrain from applying the Essential Services Act to PIA.

Instead, the focus should be on how to put the airline back on track. But that will not happen so long as bluster and bravado are calling all shots.

*Published in Dawn, February 4th, 2016*

## Indo-Pak visa regime

WHILE there are differing accounts of why exactly Bollywood actor Anupam Kher was not issued a Pakistani visa, one thing is clear: the episode is reflective of the byzantine and thoroughly nebulous visa regime that exists between India and Pakistan.

The actor, who was supposed to attend the Karachi Literature Festival, which kicks off tomorrow, says he was denied a visa as Pakistan's interior ministry did not issue a no-objection certificate.

However, Pakistan's high commissioner in New Delhi says Mr Kher never submitted a visa application, while a KLF organiser

claims they were told “not to apply” for the Indian actor’s visa. Of course, many high-profile individuals from both countries have been denied visas or censured for using undesignated ports of entry.

If this is the state of affairs public figures face, it can be well imagined what the common Indian or Pakistani has to go through when applying to visit the ‘other side’. The fact is that miles of red tape have been put up by both bureaucracies to consciously discourage people from putting in a visa application.

A 2012 agreement governs the visa regime between India and Pakistan. But despite its promises, this arrangement is anything but liberal. For example, applicants have to attach reams of paperwork, duly attested of course, establishing their identities, proof of residence etc along with the visa application.

Furthermore, India requires Pakistanis applying for a visitors’ visa to submit a ‘sponsorship certificate’, in which their Indian host promises to vouch for their ‘good conduct’ while in India. Also, for the vast majority of visitors with police reporting visas, the exercise can be a nightmare, with people often shaken down for bribes over minor technical issues.

Visa processing, which is supposed to take a little over a month, can take much longer, throwing travel plans off kilter. If there is to be peace in the subcontinent fostered by people-to-people contacts, and if the dream of a connected South Asia is ever to be realised, these mediaeval rules need to be changed and the visa regime must be truly liberalised. Presently, divided families as well as ordinary people who desire to visit the other

country are suffering, much to the delight of hard-line lobbies on both sides.

Whenever dialogue is resumed between Islamabad and New Delhi — and we hope this occurs soon — a more humane visa regime should be on top of the agenda.

*Published in Dawn, February 4th, 2016*

## Intizar Husain

FOR someone who had something to say on so many things for so long Intizar Husain has taken his leave too suddenly.

An agile man for his 90-plus years, this giant of Urdu literature passed away on Tuesday, leaving his fans and the literati the impossible task of deciding a definite place for him in the literary world. That exercise will continue for a long time to come.

He was incomparable and is more likely to inspire writers, with few committing themselves to emulating his style. One of a kind, he will always rub shoulders with the best that we have been blessed with. And some of his contemporaries in this company — especially a host of those belonging to the old progressive bloc — he could take face-on.

Like many, Intizar sahib was influenced by the friction he created by the clash of one ‘brand’ or ‘type’ of literature



against the other. He loved debate and was not averse to allowing himself an emotional outburst or two.

It is remarkable how his own journey that had begun under the watch of Hasan Askari, who wasn't exactly enamoured of the progressives, was marked by crossovers which Intizar sahib never ventured to fully explain — such as his stint with the very obviously progressive Imroze newspaper. He spent much more time responding to what was labelled as obsessive nostalgia in his writings.

Then again, this was perhaps one area where the conservative Intizar Husain may have been ahead of many of those around him, including some who would be offended by his urge to preserve the past.

The dominant thinking of the time aside, his ideas turned out to be worth pursuing, given Intizar sahib's command over the craft of storytelling and the insatiable appetite which made him produce quality literature decade after decade. This was work ultimately defined by one individual's desire to stand out. It provided other individuals and the groups they formed so much to read and to read into. Thank you, sir.

*Published in Dawn, February 4th, 2016*

## Road to CPEC

THE completion of a stretch of road from Turbat to Hoshab as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is reason to feel gratified that the project is moving ahead with speed.

The length of the road is 193kms, and it is going to connect the port city of Gwadar with the road network in Sindh for northward travel. It will finally provide Gwadar with an alternative route to the Makran Coastal Highway, the route of which defeated the purpose of landing goods at the port.

We are told another route going directly north from Gwadar is also being built, passing largely through Balochistan, and in part through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Punjab as well, which will provide a third alternative.

Following this, an airport and a railway line is also to be laid down, along with the necessary infrastructure for expanding residential facilities in Gwadar itself, including the provision of fresh water.

The completion of an admittedly small link of this expansive vision lends credence to the overall idea of laying down a large transport infrastructure across Pakistan, and further completion of the road network will be similarly welcome news as the project advances.

But it is important to keep in mind that questions about the overall vision of CPEC remain unresolved. At a seminar held only a few days before the inauguration of the Turbat-Hoshab link, for instance, queries were raised about how the project

will actually help Pakistanis, beyond opening up a small cottage industry for roadside services.

In the words of one adviser to the Balochistan government, will Pakistanis basically be fixing punctures on Chinese trucks? The reply reportedly given to the participants of the seminar, from the commander of Southern Command of the Pakistan Army was that Chinese companies ought to be asked to explain how Pakistan will benefit from the larger vision of CPEC.

Whether this is fair or not, given that the companies are basically here as contractors to execute a project that they did not really develop, the fact remains that an answer to this question is important.

It is also true that the plan ought to be kept above politics, although given the scope of its vision and the nature of the projects under it, some amount of political wrangling is inevitable. Political questions notwithstanding, it is important to keep asking how CPEC is going to serve the interests of the people of Pakistan.

Roads and other transport infrastructure are badly needed in the country, but will the economic corridor help strengthen the internal links upon which the economy of Pakistani critically depends? Will a large highway serve our interests better than a slew of farm-to-market roads?

These are critical questions, and we need to keep asking them as more and more projects are completed to ensure that ultimately CPEC serves our interests first and all others' second.

## Obama's reassurance

AMERICA'S Muslim community in particular and the Muslim world in general must welcome the comforting words President Barack Obama uttered when he visited a Baltimore mosque on Wednesday to reassure his listeners that "you fit in here" and that Muslims were part of the American nation.

In what can be considered his second major outreach to the Muslim world since his historic 2009 Cairo address, President Obama's supportive words come at a time when the fire of Islamophobia in the aftermath of the St Bernardino atrocity is being stoked by right-wing elements, including Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump.

Without naming Mr Trump, President Obama denounced in unequivocal terms what he called "inexcusable political rhetoric" emanating from the election campaign, with children being "bullied" and "mosques vandalised".

He was categorical that Americans must reject "a politics that seeks to manipulate prejudice or bias, and targets people because of religion".

The visit, his first to an American mosque since becoming president, was, of course, made with an eye on the presidential election, but its contents should be seen in the correct perspective, for Muslims worldwide have to suffer in more ways than one because of the horrific deeds of a tiny minority among them. As the Baltimore community leaders told the president in a meeting, they had to suffer discrimination, feared their neighbours and were "constantly under surveillance".

President Obama's speech coincided with yet another crime that added to the disgrace heaped on Muslims: the Afghan Taliban shot dead a 10-year-old boy, who had been a child soldier, on his way to school. The incident underlines the extent of extremism — in fact, militarisation — in Muslim societies.

Not only did the Afghan militants have no qualms about taking their revenge on the boy, his own family had allowed him to take part in the fighting.

The boy's murder cannot be dismissed as specific to Afghan society; in Nigeria, the Boko Haram militia has used boys and girls as soldiers and suicide bombers, because the brains behind terrorism are following an age-old axiom — catch them young. What are Muslim societies and governments doing about this?

As last year's Safoora Goth incident in Karachi shows, mass murderers do not emerge from madressahs alone; even institutes of higher learning can produce killers. A military response to terrorism is no doubt needed, but a greater challenge lies in saving the younger generation from falling prey to brutal ideologies couched in religious terms.

*Published in Dawn, February 5th, 2016*

## Media persons' safety

TUESDAY'S showdown at Karachi airport was a prime example of how the authorities should not handle large-scale protests.

The killing of two protesting PIA employees came as a major shock; an unbiased investigation is needed to look at how exactly the men were killed and who fired the shots.

What was clear, though, was that the law-enforcement personnel were using brute force to push back the protesters.

Amongst those on the receiving end of the law enforcers' high-handed tactics were at least six journalists. As reported, the media persons were injured when security forces resorted to lathi charge against the PIA workers; some of the media persons were hit from close range.

While the general use of brute force is condemnable, there is also a possibility that media professionals may have been specifically targeted as they were reporting on the use of force by the law enforcers.

Reporting from the scene of such fluid situations carries immense risk for media personnel.

The environment can change within moments and sometimes journalists have to make a choice between getting the story and ensuring personal safety. But this is really no choice at all as the personal safety of journalists is of prime importance.

While the rough tactics of the law enforcers are inexcusable — and our police and paramilitary forces would do well to undergo intensive training in non-lethal methods of crowd control — the role media houses play in egging on their workers to get the story, come what may, also needs to be discussed.

Often camera operators, photographers and reporters are urged to get footage or interviews in clearly unstable environments. However, it should be emphasised that while getting the story is important, it is essential that media personnel maintain a safe distance when covering volatile events.

Journalists need safety gear, first-aid kits and training in order to deal with such situations.

This is an area media managers must focus on to ensure the protection of journalists and promote a safer work culture for media personnel.

*Published in Dawn, February 5th, 2016*

## ISI-NDS meeting

GIVEN the outsized influence that the two organisations have on their state's policies towards each other, the ISI and the NDS coming together at the director level for a meeting is a significant moment.

Clearly, DG ISI Gen Rizwan Akhtar and acting NDS chief Masoud Andrabi have a great deal of ground to cover — and a poisonous mutual history to overcome.

After all, Mr Andrabi is only at the helm of the premier Afghan intelligence service because his former boss, Rahmatullah Nabi, was forced out in December after launching an unprecedented public tirade against Afghan President Ashraf Ghani for visiting Islamabad.

It is unlikely that with the departure of Mr Nabi the NDS has been purged of its ultra-hawkish elements that are implacably opposed to improving ties with Pakistan. But try both sides must and it is a welcome sign that Mr Andrabi has travelled to Pakistan to meet his counterpart and discuss intelligence matters alongside American and Chinese representatives.

What is also encouraging is that the ISI-NDS meeting appears to be part of a broader strategy of high-level engagement,

military-to-military, civilian-to-civilian and leader-to-leader. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and army chief Raheel Sharif have both personally invested time and effort in stabilising the Pak-Afghan relationship and nudging the reconciliation process forward.

Meanwhile, the DGMOs of Pakistan and Afghanistan appear to be trying to work out a new framework for cross-border management. Yet, whatever the breakthroughs at the political level or arrangements forged at the operational one, it will ultimately come down to the ISI and NDS being able to work together — certainly to not work against each other.

Intelligence agencies the world over do cooperate, and even at the nadir of the CIA-ISI relationship some years ago, it was clear that cooperation was continuing where mutual interests were at stake. Drone strikes against Al Qaeda and some TTP targets, for example, did not cease.

Where, though, is the middle ground for the ISI and NDS? Non-interference is the obvious ideal, but it is difficult to implement. There is also a tendency to be in denial of reality.

For all its hostility towards the Afghan Taliban, the NDS serves a government that is seeking political reconciliation with the insurgents. On this side, for all the anger at anti-Pakistan sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan, is the ISI really creating the space necessary for the civilian law-enforcement and intelligence apparatuses to fight terror when terror seeks to strike inside Pakistan, from Afghanistan, Fata or the four provinces?

Critically, a peaceful, stable and united Afghanistan through an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process would redefine the nature of the Pak-Afghan relationship and the primacy that the ISI enjoys here in Pakistan when it comes to Afghan policy.

Is that profound, though much-needed, institutional change something that the ISI, and the army leadership, is willing to accept?

The questions are manifold, but the answers remain elusive.

*Published in Dawn, February 6th, 2016*

## PIA crisis

The strike by the PIA workers [has proved crippling](#). Further escalation carries grave risks of turning the affair into a larger trade union issue, as other unions voice support for the disgruntled employees, and political parties make plans to capitalise on the moment.

The government must refrain from threatening the unions with dismissals and other legal action since an increase in tensions will only exacerbate the situation. Meanwhile, the unions must realise that bringing PIA operations to a standstill is untenable for all parties — for the employees, the airline, and the passengers.

There have been many flight disruptions and several people have been left stranded. In this context, it is a relief to know that there has been some [effort on the part of the government](#) to approach the union leadership; while at the time of writing the situation was still uncertain, what is clear is that the matter

must be resolved as quickly as possible for the airline to resume operations – and then move on to the larger issues.

An earlier meeting between some senior ministers ought to have discussed ways of de-escalating matters rather than exploring options to proceed against PIA employees. It is understandable that the government wants to take strong and decisive action in a matter that has dogged successive governments for years, and pushed the national airline to the brink of financial collapse.

But aggressive words can do more damage under the circumstances and efforts to seek a less disruptive way forward should not be abandoned. It was an attempt to get tough with the unions that led to the deaths of two protesters and galvanised the strike in the first place, and resulted in the government losing the moral high ground. Now the government should not give the affair the appearance of a showdown.

This would be compounding error with folly. As part of a larger initiative, the government should extend the leaders of the strike an invitation to come to Islamabad for talks to comprehensively sort out the issue. Talks should focus on ending the current impasse even as they address the workers' grievances.

While it is obvious that the national airline is in need of dire reform, it is also important that the government handle the matter in a sensitive manner, without attempting to ride roughshod over the unions that claim to work for the employees' rights.

## PSL launch

THE launch of the Pakistan Super League in the UAE this week is being hailed as the dawn of a new era for national cricket. The ambitious, cash-rich T20 league, that will be played over three weeks in Dubai and Sharjah with five teams participating, is the realisation of a cherished dream for the Pakistan Cricket Board after the idea was shelved twice owing to logistical problems and security concerns. Inspired by the Indian Premier League, the PSL will provide a rare opportunity for scores of local youngsters to rub shoulders with international stars such as Chris Gayle, Kevin Pietersen and Kumar Sangakkara. According to the experts, the 24-day competition will do well if it achieves its main objectives, which is grooming Pakistan's players for a more competitive environment besides sending out a positive image of the country internationally.

However, critics have correctly warned that any expectations of the league dramatically improving the national team's performance may be misplaced since the fast-paced culture of the T20 format is primarily meant to entertain and enthrall crowds all around. Pakistan, after having lost seven limited-overs series on the trot during the past 18 months, is placed among the bottom three in the current ICC rankings; remedial measures are desperately needed. While PSL promises to be monetarily rewarding for the PCB, the players and franchises, it is unlikely to redress the key problems afflicting Pakistani cricketers such as their inherent fickle-mindedness, inadequate techniques and their inability to take pressure in crunch games. Besides, by holding the league on foreign soil, the PCB is not giving an ideal message to cricketing nations around the world



that have been reluctant to send their team to Pakistan since 2009. Almost all the other contemporary T20 leagues are being hosted by their home countries including India, Australia, the West Indies, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and it is imperative that the government and PCB take measures for making conditions conducive for the Super League to be staged at home next time.

*Published in Dawn, February 6th, 2016*

## Quetta targeted again

THE war in Balochistan will be won, the political and military leadership of the country vowed in Quetta this week. Whether it can — or ever will — be won militarily is an unknown, but that it is a murky and dirty war is indisputable. Quetta was once again attacked yesterday, this time a bomb killing Frontier Corps personnel near the district courts and adjacent to the so-called red zone in the city. That militants can strike in the heart of Quetta is worrying enough; that they could belong to any of several groups and affiliates is more worrying. While the banned TTP has quickly claimed responsibility for the attack, there is a fair amount of uncertainty at this stage — the TTP and breakaway factions have in recent months taken to claiming any attack that can be fit into the narrative of the Taliban's war against Pakistan. While Baloch separatists or, in the security establishment's favoured parlance, the so-called foreign hand could also likely be behind the bombing on

Saturday, the incident has raised a very familiar set of questions.

First, how was it possible for attackers to penetrate the thick layer of security that has blanketed Quetta for many years now and the creators of which have had many years of experience in identifying bombs and suicide attackers? After each such attack, there is some attempt at explaining that there is no such thing as fool-proof security or surveillance and intelligence that will in every instance be successful against militants. Yet, the frequency and seeming ease with which militants attack obvious or high-profile targets is worrying. It appears that the militants tend to be one step ahead of the state rather than the other way around. If that is indeed the case, what is being done about it and who is being held responsible? The tendency to close ranks and reject transparency and accountability in the security and intelligence apparatus may well be feeding a sense of complacency. The denizens of not just Quetta but other places in Pakistan surely deserve better.

Second, if the bombing was carried out by the TTP, have they opened a new front against the state? The bombing of a polio centre in January suggested religiously motivated militancy rather than Baloch separatists. If the TTP has, in fact, turned to attacks in Balochistan, where are they coming from? From inside Balochistan? From Fata? Or from across the border in Afghanistan? Given the implications for national stability, the source of possible TTP activity in Balochistan needs to be quickly established. There is also the possibility that a provincial crackdown on sectarian militants has triggered a blowback against the security forces. Will the provincial authorities clarify? And if the bombing on Saturday is the work of Baloch separatists, where does that leave the political and

security strategy of the new Balochistan government? As ever, in Balochistan, there are only dead bodies and unanswered questions.

*Published in Dawn, February 7th, 2016*

## Intervention in Syria

WHILE it is positive that the international community has pledged \$10bn to provide relief to the Syrian people, all such well-intentioned efforts will come to nought unless the guns in Syria fall silent. One indication that the conflict may heat up further came in the shape of reported comments from a senior Saudi defence official, who ‘offered’ to send ground troops into Syria. The proposed move, to be carried out in coordination with Turkey, is ostensibly aimed at pursuing the militant Islamic State group. The Saudi proposal has elicited a strong response from Iranian military figures. The humanitarian effort to address the Syrian people’s plight is commendable, considering that the civil war between Bashar al-Assad’s government and a variety of opposition groups is about to complete its fifth year, and has cost over 250,000 lives. Yet eclipsing such welcome efforts is the fact that there is now a very real threat of the Syrian civil war transforming into a wider regional conflagration. As British Prime Minister David Cameron noted recently in London, despite the humanitarian pledges “we still need a political transition”. It is highly doubtful that further foreign military intervention can help bring about this peaceful transition.

In fact, any moves to send ground troops into Syria by the Saudis, Turks or others to pursue extremists, without the willingness of the government in Damascus, will be a recipe for disaster. And coordination between Damascus, Riyadh and Ankara is presently highly unlikely, considering the latter have no love lost for Mr Assad. Moreover, Iran, Bashar al-Assad’s primary external backer — along with Russia — has reacted strongly to the proposal, with the head of the Revolutionary Guard on Saturday terming the Saudi move “suicidal”. If Syria is a mess right now, further foreign intervention will only complicate the situation. Besides, the Saudi military’s intervention in Yemen has failed to pacify the country or defeat the Houthi militia; in fact a stalemate persists in that impoverished state and civilians have borne the brunt of the violence. Instead of adding to the chaos in Syria, all regional powers, as well as the international community, must put their energies into reviving efforts for a political settlement to the civil war. And while there indeed needs to be an international effort to uproot IS and other militant groups from the region, this should be done with the Syrian and Iraqi governments on board.

*Published in Dawn, February 7th, 2016*



## Child deaths in Thar

AS much as the Sindh government may want to wish it away, the issue of infant and child mortality in Thar continues to stay in the news. The furore is certainly justified: over 160 infants and young children have reportedly died in the district since the beginning of this year. Malnutrition is a pervasive problem here, with babies of malnourished mothers at a disadvantage from birth and susceptible to a host of health problems that have been compounded by the long-running drought. Waterborne diseases are particularly common: last Thursday alone, according to a local health officer quoted in this paper, 435 children suffering from that category of ailment were brought to six hospitals in the district. The same day, legislators from the ruling party in Sindh defended themselves in the provincial assembly against accusations of indifference and callousness with assertions, once again, that the scenario depicted in the media was grossly inaccurate and exaggerated.

This back-and-forth has continued for long enough, with one side presenting a diametrically opposite view from the other and creating confusion and obfuscation in the process. It is high time that studies are undertaken in a dispassionate, scientific manner to put at least some of the speculation to rest and point the way towards the fundamental changes that need to be made on the public health front in the district. Thar, whose human development indices are among the lowest in Pakistan, needs sustained, policy-driven investment of resources to improve the lives of its population. For many of them, even primary healthcare remains elusive: according to a recent report in this paper, a shocking 70pc of health facilities here are virtually non-functional. The drought has also further

compromised food security, and the government's ad hoc, reactive modus operandi to address this issue is no solution. However, long-term policies — on the anvil for some time — are yet to be finalised, which means that institutional mechanisms needed so desperately are nowhere on the horizon. Such lethargy is simply indefensible.

*Published in Dawn, February 7th, 2016*

## Census complications

HOLDING a census was never going to be an easy exercise, partially due to the politics that surround the event, and partially to the immense logistics involved.

The decision to hold the census was made in March last year after the planned exercise received the blessings of the Council of Common Interests; the population count is scheduled for March this year, which is only a few weeks away.

Meanwhile, we have heard many things — that the logistics are proving too daunting to be completed in such a short time, that the funds have not been released, and that ideas are being discussed to possibly scrap the census and use the Nadra database as a proxy to arrive at estimates of total population instead.

According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, each of these difficulties has been surmounted, and as of the latest

announcements made in the last few days, not only is the exercise still scheduled for March, but the government has reiterated its resolve to ensure transparency to make the exercise credible. So far so good.

However, now at the last minute, a hitch has arisen. It turns out that the requirement for army personnel to accompany the census enumerators is far too large for the military force to afford at the moment, given the multiple operations under way around the country.

According to estimates given by the PBS, almost 365,000 army personnel will be required to cover the 167,000 census blocks in the country, even if there is only one soldier per block and the accompanying chain of command to oversee the entire process.

The government is categorically opposed to holding the census in phases as this departs from international practice and could end up skewing the results because it raises the likelihood of people being counted multiple times. The army escort for the operation is considered vital for security reasons, but also to lend some credibility to the exercise.

So the whole exercise appears to be heading towards an impasse since it is unlikely that the required troop strength will be available by March, and the government is unwilling to conduct the exercise without army supervision and security.

It is bewildering that the matter should come to the forefront so late in the day, only weeks before the exercise is scheduled to start.

It is hard to say what compromise can save the exercise from suffering a delay at this point, given that there is no end to the military operations in sight. But the government must ensure that all efforts are made so that it begins the exercise on time and sticks to the schedule.

Further delays in the census exercise will negatively impact the conduct of the forthcoming elections, as well as policy formulation and implementation, not to mention dent the credibility of the government itself.

*Published in Dawn, February 8th, 2016*

## KP budget cuts

THE government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is most likely going to be slashing its development spending by Rs77bn, dealing a severe blow to the beleaguered economy of the province.

Most, if not all, of the cuts appear to be due to the overestimation of revenues in the last budget. Reportedly, the government had been warned that many of its revenue estimates were overly optimistic, and the funds allotted for the Annual Development Plan would not materialise.

But the objections were overruled by the chief minister. More specifically, the overestimation happened in collections under net hydel profit, an area that has historically been a bone of contention between the province and the centre.

Considering the total ADP of the province was set at Rs174bn, a cut of Rs77bn is a severe blow and calls for accountability of those responsible for setting such a target.

The provincial government had left some heads scratching when it announced its budget back in June 2015. It contained very optimistic revenue estimates from activities like the sale of felled trees and sales from housing colonies being erected under government aegis, as well as optimistic assumptions of recoveries of arrears from the centre.

Against this very confident revenue assumption, the provincial government had made some of the most lavish promises to the forthcoming local governments.

Development funds to be made available for local administrators have been reappropriated by the provincial authorities to help control the fiscal situation in the province, which now appears to be struggling to meet its commitments as revenues are not materialising in line with budgetary estimates.

Thus far, it seems that the bulk of the impact will be on what is being called the ‘dormant portfolio’ in the ADP, which means projects that are either dormant or should be rendered so, owing to the lack of funds.

The finance department has already written to the planning and development department of the provincial government asking it to identify the “portion of ADP to be made dormant” due to lack of availability of funds.

With the passage of time, there is a growing likelihood that the provincial authorities will face many difficulties in managing

their fiscal framework, something that was pointed out when their budget was announced in June last year.

The provincial authorities should now modify their spending plans in line with revised revenue receipts and acknowledge that their budget contained overoptimistic revenue assumptions.

*Published in Dawn, February 8th, 2016*

## Lethal waters

CONSIDER a couple of unpalatable realities: the amount of solid waste that is dumped or finds its way into the Karachi harbour every day, just from the city, is estimated at some 8,000 tons; moreover, some 350 million gallons of raw sewage and untreated industrial waste flow into the harbour on a daily basis.

These are not the only ways in which Pakistanis’ activities are harming the oceans.

On Friday, a workshop ‘Ghost Nets and Fisheries of Pakistan’ was held in Karachi, jointly organised by the World Wide Fund for Nature-Pakistan and the Olive Ridley Project for the conservation of the Indian Ocean.

Experts pointed out that ghost gear — ie fishing equipment that has been discarded, lost or abandoned in the marine

environment — has become a serious, escalating threat to marine life and the fisheries sector.

Stressing upon the need to educate fishing communities and launch clean-up drives, they explained how the gear continues to trap and kill creatures, damages the marine habitat and constitutes a hazard to navigation.

For a country where the fishing sector is counted as a component of the economy and is a vital source of livelihood for scores of communities, there certainly seems to an absence of regard for the waters.

Yet Pakistan constitutes one of the relatively minor abusers of the oceans as compared to many highly developed and industrialised countries.

The rate at which the global marine habitat is being destroyed and species' numbers depleted, either as a result of a hostile environment or overfishing, have in recent decades led to legislation and regulations being formulated at different levels.

But experts say that the worldwide marine conservation regimes in place are, literally, a drop in the ocean of what requires to be done. Will the trajectory be corrected before it is too late? Sadly enough, mankind's track record is not so encouraging in this regard — the decades of naysaying and foot-dragging over recognising the phenomenon of climate change is a case in point.

*Published in Dawn, February 8th, 2016*

## A road map for Afghanistan

THE Quadrilateral Coordination Group on Afghanistan has produced something of a surprise: talks with the Afghan Taliban are to resume by the end of the month.

With the fighting season in Afghanistan rapidly approaching, delayed talks would have meant the possibility of the Taliban making fresh gains on the battlefield and therefore being in a stronger position for delayed talks.

Now it appears that talking and fighting will take place simultaneously, giving the Afghan government and the QCG some additional leverage at the negotiating table — or at least not losing further ground to the Taliban at the outset. Also sensible is the reported phased approach to a peace process.

*Know more: [Taliban-Kabul direct talks expected by month's end](#)*

Part of the delay in resuming peace talks was known to be the Afghan government's insistence that Pakistan take action against so-called irreconcilables among the Taliban, some of whom are thought to be based in Pakistan. In recent weeks, there has been some suggestion that the US too was looking for Pakistani action against the Haqqani network and parts of the Taliban.

Both the Afghan demands and American suggestions were deeply problematic — a peace process should begin by identifying those willing to reconcile rather than singling out those unwilling to do so.

It now appears that better sense has prevailed as the QCG joint press release over the weekend once again mentioned “Taliban groups” — a formulation that does not at least rule out any factions. Yet, the very mention of ‘Taliban groups’, used since the first joint press release of the QCG in January, suggests a difficult road ahead. How many groups are there?

Who leads them? And which ones are inclined to come to the negotiation table? The fracturing of the Afghan Taliban has possibly added to the logic of a negotiated peace — can factions and small groups really wage endless war against a state that while weak is not collapsing?

But it will also make the peace process more difficult to manage. A fractured Taliban means multiple leaders, each with agendas of their own. The QCG’s intensive diplomatic efforts will need to be sustained for quite some time.

There are some early lessons to be learned, however, for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. For the Afghan side, the spells of public rancour against Pakistan need to be reconsidered.

For a year now, it has been clear that the Pakistani state is committed to helping create an intra-Afghan peace process and has wanted to work with the Afghan government to address mutual security concerns.

The Afghan side should respond with equanimity when obstacles in the peace process appear, as they will inevitably.

For the Pakistani side, the concerns about TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan should not overwhelm efforts to nudge the Afghan peace process forwards. The dividends of a successful Afghan

peace process will be of an enormous magnitude and will positively impact many other national security concerns here.

*Published in Dawn, February 9th, 2016*

## JI’s textbook concerns

AT a time when the rest of the country is worrying about how to protect our children from militants who have vowed to attack more educational institutions, the Jamaat-i-Islami appears unduly preoccupied with school textbooks that show people wearing trousers, girls in short sleeves and drawings of human body organs.

Such absurdities — especially the last, for what else would a biology textbook be expected to contain — would perhaps be easier to stomach had the party, which is a coalition partner of the ruling PTI in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, actually made some useful contribution towards the ongoing discussions on the best way to protect our educational institutions from terrorist threats.

*Also read: [JI points out ‘objectionable material’ in textbooks to govt](#)*

But thus far we have heard nothing very constructive from it as far as that conversation is concerned. Instead, there is a long list of what the JI, or at least its chapter in the province,

considers objectionable that has already been submitted to the education department.

One wonders how this list has been received. Some reports suggest the list has been rejected.

At a time when the education department of the province, headed by a PTI minister, is striving to rebuild schools damaged by floods and protect other educational sites from terrorist attacks of the sort that KP has already witnessed, how exactly does the provincial government perceive this list?

Already the education department has tried to appease the JI, mainly by removing a chapter on Helen Keller — whose story is a ray of hope for the deaf and mute — which was a bizarre response.

Others have shied away from allowing the use of Malala Yousafzai's book in higher education for fear of offending some with an extremist mindset.

One sincerely hopes that the education authorities will not now feel they have to indulge in further acts of appeasement, if, for instance, they are asked to rewrite science and history textbooks; and that the ruling party will prove equal to the task of imparting a sound education to the children of the province.

The provincial chief of the JI has pointed to an 'agreement' that he says his party has with the PTI on education matters in KP, and hopes that all issues will be settled 'amicably'. It would be troubling if this meant giving in to demands that can only deal a lethal blow to all efforts to bring education back from the brink in KP.

## Train compensation

A NOTE from the Lahore Development Authority on Saturday said that the counters processing compensation claims for people who will be displaced by the orange train in the city would remain open on Sunday.

Not only this, the LDA press release rather quietly reminded all concerned that these counters had been set up temporarily.

The obvious message was for the claimant to make a dash for the money on offer lest the 'temporary' offer was withdrawn.

*Also read: [Orange train project: Most compensation seekers dissatisfied with offer](#)*

The essential element of speed was very much there, which would once again elicit calls for caution from those who believe in a measured and disciplined approach towards doing a job, any job, in order to avoid problems.

The government has chosen to answer the criticism of the orange train project with a brisk processing of claims. It is probably hoping that the positive vibes emanating from some of those who are paid against the loss of their home or business will act as an effective answer to the critics.

But just as there are instances where the compensation has been to the satisfaction of a claimant, not only has there been protest by those who blame the officials of underestimating the value of their property, there are other, newer dimensions that need to be taken into consideration.



There is some kind of a formula that promises to pay the land cost, structure cost and, over that, 15pc acquisition charges to the affected people. But these efforts by a government at its most persuasive will still leave quite a lot of room for doubts and unease among those who are to lose their home and employment because of the fancy train.

There is fear among the affected lot that could lead to some apprehensions regarding the compensation scheme. The process has to be more transparent not only for those who are to be compensated but for everyone around. Otherwise, the rumours that are already doing the rounds will get more vicious over time.

*Published in Dawn, February 9th, 2016*

## No consensus yet on Fata reforms

THE role of provincial governors may stand diminished since the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, but as the symbolic representatives of the federation, the governors are still influential in their provinces.

Therefore, for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Governor Mahtab Ahmad Khan to quit ostensibly of his own accord less than two years into the governorship suggests Mr Khan has his eyes on a greater prize.

The resignation has not come as a surprise — for weeks there had been speculation that the governor wants a more direct political role and intends to contest the 2018 general elections.

*Take a look: [Fata reforms panel heading nowhere](#)*

Stepping down now would not disqualify Mr Khan from political office in 2018 as all parliamentarians and provincial assembly representatives are required to not hold a post “in the service of Pakistan” for at least two years prior to an election.

The resignation also indicates the PML-N’s growing confidence about its electoral prospects in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — Mr Khan is believed to be eying the chief ministership in the next assembly.

Yet, Mr Khan’s resignation will not have a bearing on provincial politics alone — as governor he has also been the de facto civilian in-charge of Fata.

And it is perhaps in Fata that Mr Khan’s departure may be felt immediately and deeply. While the army-led security establishment controls most major decisions on Fata, there are at least two areas in which civilian input has been sought, perhaps if only because the military leadership cannot go it alone: return of IDPs and Fata reforms.

The quick return of IDPs has been a priority of the military as evidenced by the ISPR statement released after a provincial apex committee in Peshawar yesterday — Governor Khan leading the civilian representation in his last official meeting. But for IDPs to return en masse to a sustainable living

environment, Fata reforms are essential — something that both the military and civilian leaderships appear to agree on.

Where the difference lies is in just how far those reforms should go and, crucially, whether Fata itself should be upgraded to a full province or absorbed into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The absorption of Fata into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has proved to be a controversial issue — and is perhaps one that should ultimately be decided by the people of Fata themselves in a referendum. But is the military leadership willing to move quickly on other Fata reforms, not least defanging the anachronistic Frontier Crimes Regulation?

Thus far there has been no suggestion that the military is willing to contemplate far-reaching and rights-driven reforms in Fata — nor, indeed, is there any indication that the civilian leadership is close to a consensus among itself.

So while the priorities may be right — IDPs must be resettled at the earliest and Fata reforms are a necessity — the lack of consensus on the speed, direction and sequence of reforms appears to be thwarting positive change in Fata.

*Published in Dawn, February 10th, 2016*

## ‘Judging’ IP pipeline

THE nuclear-related sanctions against Iran may be gone, but the ambiguities remain. For many years now, American officials have been clear in their response to questions about the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project: it violates US sanctions, they would always say.

When Pakistani officials raised the possibility of exempting the pipeline project from US nuclear-related sanctions back in 2013 on the sidelines of the strategic dialogue, they were told quite clearly that no exemptions could be granted.

*Also read: [Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline to be completed by 2017](#)*

Last year, when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reportedly raised the issue with Secretary of State John Kerry on the latter’s visit to Pakistan, no response was received. But as of Jan 16, when the nuclear-related sanctions against Iran were formally lifted, the responses have become ambiguous.

Most recently, an assistant secretary from the US Department of Energy was asked about the pipeline project during his visit to Pakistan, and his only response was that the matter “is still to be judged”.

One could read any number of meanings into this odd choice of words, but its ambiguity and non-committal nature stands in stark contrast to all earlier pronouncements by American officialdom on the matter.



This ambiguity on the project may be new to American language, but Pakistan's continued shilly-shallying even after the lifting of sanctions paints a confusing picture.

Most recently, the petroleum minister did the project, and Pakistan's standing in the eyes of its newly resurgent neighbour, no favours when he flatly stated that the pipeline project could "not be completed due to international sanctions on Iran".

What made this otherwise bland statement remarkable was that it was given only a few weeks before the sanctions were formally lifted.

The words did not go down well in Iran, where official media said that the minister had "put the kibosh on expectations that a pipeline intended to take Iranian gas to the country could ever be completed".

The same article noted the ambiguous and even "contradictory" statements from senior officials in Pakistan and failure to take gas deliveries from the end of 2014 or even build its section of the pipeline.

It would have been better if the creeping ambiguity in American language was met by growing clarity in Pakistan's stance, that the time had come to push this project, and all excuses to not commence gas deliveries now stood exhausted. It is indeed time to judge this project favourably and get moving on it.

*Published in Dawn, February 10th, 2016*

## Top conspiracies

EVEN when the collectors of creative data are not counting, it can be safely assumed that the average Pakistani unmask a couple of conspiracies every hour.

Some Pakistanis are more prolific when it comes to seeing through 'nefarious' designs, while others are in a perpetual state of being conspired against.

They would be all very pleased to have found justification for their preoccupation with theories voiced in absolute tones by the very leaders who should be assuring the people that no one is plotting their downfall.

Two new conspiracies that were revealed to national readers on Tuesday stood out. Teachers in Sindh blew up the embarrassingly inadequate cover on the dark scheme to take over public universities, and the prime minister ordered an investigation of the PIA management's role in the ongoing strike that has crippled the operations of what is still a national airline.

Reports say the management might have colluded with the workers, 'hand in glove', to bring PIA to a halt. Needless to say, this latest conspiracy follows the slow, deliberate death the airline was subjected to by a government out to dispose of state assets.

It would appear that no other term has the expanse and efficacy of the word 'conspiracy'.

Consider a group of officials forced to explain to the boss, say a prime minister, how a certain package, for example about privatisation, didn't quite unfold as it had been predicted to. Would it suffice for them to come up with a straightforward note explaining the dissenters' grievances and the possible answers to address those?

Not quite when there is at hand a worthy term that can so profoundly cover all aspects of an issue and project one as the victim of a sinister plot.

The conspiracy theorists will be emboldened when topnotch functionaries can at will parade a handful of conspirators shamelessly working against development.

The creative monitors of fancy trends need not despair. Given the current acceptance of the term, conspiracy talk is not leaving this land anytime soon.

*Published in Dawn, February 10th, 2016*

## After the strike

THE end of the PIA strike is a moment of relief for everyone, not least the government.

The latter might be tempted to think that it has triumphed and crushed the workers' protest, but such a feeling would be misplaced.

As for the workers, while they demonstrated their ability to bring airline operations to a standstill, they were not able to win significant concessions from the government, at least none that have been made public.

This is not surprising considering they had no exit plan as such, no demands that could be credibly met without having grave ramifications for the larger economy. With no clear road map about what to do afterwards, the workers' decision to end the strike was not entirely unexpected.

But the strike has also put PIA employees at the centre of a national conversation, a debate about public-sector enterprises and what path forward is best to bring them out of their serious difficulties. On that front the workers can still strike out, if they have the capacity.

The union leadership should now acknowledge that overstaffing is a problem at PIA. It may not be the biggest problem and is certainly not the only one, but it is indeed a challenge, and they should present a viable plan for addressing it.

Simply demanding that the privatisation agenda be abandoned is not going to win them any battles. The government should also resist any temptation to overreach.

Protests by workers of the sort that we have just witnessed have not been seen in Pakistan in many years, and there still exists the possibility of a resurgence. This is a moment to consolidate and negotiate for both parties, and it should be utilised as such.

The entire episode, particularly the tragic deaths, was avoidable and the product of mismanagement by the government, and the government would be making a mistake if it were to start behaving like a conquering army at this stage.

The privatisation agenda outlined by it is an ambitious but delicate affair; it also lies at the heart of the structural reforms that the government is trying to undertake.

The promises made to the workers that their grievances will be given an audience, should be upheld, and both parties should sit down and decide on the path to rationalise the staffing of PIA.

Many amongst the airline's staff may need to be moved to a surplus pool, and agreements should be in place that the unions will cooperate with the future management in return for a stable and orderly rationalisation of the human resource requirement of PIA.

Both government and the unions need to realise that they are not the primary stakeholders in the airline. It is the customers, and all decisions should prioritise the customer experience.

The matter remains sensitive, and due care should be taken to put the recent disruptions firmly in the past.

*Published in Dawn, February 11th, 2016*

## Saudi coalition

AS speculation grows over whether Saudi Arabia and its allied states will deploy troops on the ground in Syria, lawmakers have rightly asked the government to explain where Pakistan stands on the matter.

At a meeting of the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs on Tuesday, legislators stated that the government had failed to inform the committee whether Pakistan had joined the 'anti-terror' coalition cobbled together by the Saudis.

*Also read: [Govt's 'vague policy' on Saudi-led coalition worries Senate committee](#)*

When asked about the matter, the foreign secretary said details about the coalition "were still not clear". This opaqueness on such a key foreign policy issue is frankly unsettling.

While the Saudis have said that a possible deployment in Syria would be designed to target the militant Islamic State group, clearly, considering that Riyadh has called for regime change in Damascus, the reaction from Bashar al-Assad's government will hardly be welcoming.

In fact, senior Syrian officials have minced no words in criticising the Saudi plan. Any effort to counter IS and other extremist groups must be aligned with Damascus, or else chances are fair that the Syrian conflict will get even more complicated than it already is.

The reason for increased talk of Saudi, Turkish or other anti-Assad boots on the ground in Syria is because the government in Damascus, backed by Russian air power as well as Iran and Hezbollah's help, is on the verge of retaking the key city of Aleppo.

Should the Syrian government retake this strategic city, it would be a major blow to the opposition — moderate or otherwise.

The question is: if the Saudis decide to embark on a mission that can only be described as folly, should Pakistan plunge itself into the maelstrom also?

The logical response to this would be that Pakistan should maintain its neutrality and refrain from getting involved in what will be a very messy fight.

Pakistan can surely continue its counterterrorism cooperation with Saudi Arabia, but committing our troops to an unclear, ill-defined mission would be a huge mistake.

This country did the right thing by resisting Saudi pressure to join the war in Yemen. By all accounts that conflict is not going well for the Saudis and the Yemeni rebels are far from neutralised.

Where Syria is concerned — though the peace process may be all but dead — regional states must not give up on a negotiated solution. However, if the Syrian conflict takes an unpredictable turn, Islamabad must very clearly state where it stands.

*Published in Dawn, February 11th, 2016*

## Farcical terror exercise

THERE is obviously something wrong when a nation faced with danger that threatens to cut down its very future, chooses to reduce that horror to the level of a spectacle.

Consider the farce put up at Karachi's Jinnah University for Women on Tuesday when the student body attended the Sindh police's 'hostile environment awareness training' session on campus.

Students were informed about weapons of different calibres and told which ones the militants use most commonly, such as the AK-47 or M16 rifles — as though being able to identify a particular gun would in any way translate into being able to ward off an attack.

This piece of rather meaningless detail was followed by Special Security Unit commandos staging a mock battle with armed attackers, and killing them amidst gunfire, smoke and explosions. At the inception of the proceedings, SSU SP Mohammad Muzaffar Iqbal told the students that the

programme would equip them with the basic skills to counter such a situation.

Other than give physical shape to nightmares that the young in Pakistan already suffer, how would such an exercise help prepare the students in any way?

This was not a one-off; the tableau was held at the University of Karachi last week and more are planned at different institutions.

Neither are the Sindh police the only ones to react in such a bizarre fashion. From other parts of the country have come reports of efforts to teach students and teachers to handle weaponry so that they can act as the first line of defence, the suggestion that if a guard is not trained in handling weapons he can bring in a relative who can do the job, and other such foolishness.

Meanwhile, exercises that could actually save lives, such as evacuation drills, have taken place hardly anywhere. Perhaps those are not of high-enough visibility to interest those who plan counterterrorism procedures, but there is nothing to be gained from drills such as those outlined above other than the waste of time and resources.

*Published in Dawn, February 11th, 2016*

## IS threat

It is a blunt, though perhaps unsurprising, warning: the country's top civilian spymaster, director general of the Intelligence Bureau, Aftab Sultan, has told the Senate Standing Committee on Interior that the militant Islamic State group is in fact an emerging threat in the country, particularly because sectarian militant outfits and elements of the banned TTP are sympathetic to its ideology.

The DG IB's warning stands in stark contrast to the interior ministry's repeated claims that IS is not a factor inside Pakistan and that suggestions to the contrary were mere propaganda — claims that never quite sat comfortably with the facts emerging operationally.

*Also read: [IS emerging as a threat, warns IB chief](#)*

The logic of what Mr Sultan said on Wednesday is both undeniable and worrying: militant groups have morphed before and many have borrowed bits of ideology from one another.

The experience with Al Qaeda is a particularly dangerous example. Sectarian groups latched on to the sectarianism ingrained in Al Qaeda's worldview, while other militant outfits learned tactics from and shared operational resources with the organisation.

If Al Qaeda's ideology and tactics proved seductive enough for some militant groups here in Pakistan, the IS's ideology is frighteningly close to what sectarian groups in particular would automatically be drawn to.

The problem is particularly acute in Punjab, where, for all the ambivalence and outright denials of the PML-N, reside some of the biggest threats to national stability following the launch of Operation Zarb-i-Azb in Fata.

Both demographics and virulent ideology allowed to spread itself over decades have turned areas in Punjab, and not just in the south, into virtual sectarian tinderboxes.

It is not unknown for villages to be divided spatially along sectarian lines and now that trend is emerging in some of Punjab's cities and towns — across the province.

Similarly, the TTP — unlike the Afghan Taliban — are an easy ally of IS. Unlike the Afghan Taliban's more nationalist aims — dominance of Afghanistan — the TTP has a more pan-Islamic view and has always sought to extend its influence outside the geographical boundaries of Pakistan.

Moreover, with the TTP fractured and on the run, a boost in the form of new alliances, such as with IS, is likely to be sought by the group.

The DG IB is not alone in the assessment of a threat from IS; the military leadership too appears to be aware of the dangers that lie ahead nationally, particularly as the bulk of the fighting in North Waziristan winds down.

While army chief Gen Raheel Sharif on Wednesday once again identified “hostile external intelligence agencies” as responsible for some of the terrorism inside Pakistan, he also referred to “sympathisers at home” who provide “refuge and shelter”.

Surely, many of those sanctuaries are in Punjab — the only province that has not had a major crackdown in any part of it. Terrorism being a national problem, the time has come to focus on the Punjab-based aspects of it.

*Published in Dawn, February 12th, 2016*

## Investing in people

FOR too long now, economic orthodoxy has focused on macroeconomic fundamentals to assess the health of an economy.

So when reserves rise or growth resumes, celebratory pronouncements pour forth without much thought as to who exactly is reaping the benefits.

But for people to benefit from an improvement in macroeconomic conditions, greater measures need to be taken to ensure broader participation in the institutions that dominate the economy, and to ensure that a fair share of the benefits are reaching those who need it the most in the form of strengthened institutions for delivery of health and educational outcomes.

*Also read: [Inclusive financing improving in Pakistan, says Queen Maxima](#)*

This is why the words of the World Bank president, who just concluded a two-day visit to Pakistan, are welcome.

He acknowledged the growth story being peddled by the government, but added that he “would encourage the country to be more ambitious with reforming its economy so that more people are lifted out of poverty more quickly, and prosperity is more widely shared”.

As part of the reforms to lift people out of poverty, and ensure prosperity is “more widely shared”, the World Bank has ramped up its engagement with programmes that seek to reach those traditionally neglected by the macroeconomic growth process, with some emphasis on financial inclusion.

Three sectors are notoriously underdeveloped in their capacity to reach and empower the poor: the financial sector and health and educational institutions. In each of these, Pakistan has some of the most dismal realities compared to most other countries.

In the financial sector, for instance, only 13pc of Pakistani adults have a bank account, with only 5pc of women included in the financial sector, compared to a South Asian average of 37pc.

Likewise in education, Pakistan has one of the highest numbers of children out of school, and almost 20pc of the population was undernourished in 2012 when the last figures were released — sadly, almost 32pc of children were also undernourished.

These are sobering statistics and if they are not corrected, then we are surely laying the groundwork for a human catastrophe for the next generation.

The government’s efforts to promote financial inclusion through the Universal Financial Access Initiative launched during the World Bank president’s visit is a welcome development, but the bulk of the work to rectify the dismal state of the human condition in the country lies ahead of us. The time to start work on it is now.

*Published in Dawn, February 12th, 2016*

## Bajia’s departure

SOME names reveal everything about a personality — such as bajia, a variant for the respected, loved (and in command) elder sister in Urdu. It is impossible to separate Fatima Surayya Bajia, the individual, from family — both hers in real life and the one she breathed life into on television screens all those decades back.

And as the search for microcosms goes, her personal struggle can be equated with that of her adopted city — and this country after the demise of its founder in September 1948. Bajia’s family arrived in Karachi a week after the passing of the Quaid.

*Also read: [Bajia — the lady with old-world charm](#)*



Faced with challenges, this resolute lady was, in time, to lead her siblings' search for a new life, she herself graduating through various stages to ultimately emerge as a playwright of merit — and a much-loved, respected sister and an in-command mentor.

She was able to portray a culture with all its intricacies, fallouts and conflicts that defined the contours of her drama.

This was in the tradition of the so-called social novels written in the era of Partition, like the ones by A.R. Khatoon that she was apparently inspired by.

The reader — and later television viewers under the guidance of Bajia — was taken on an exhaustive round of a complex world filled with interplaying family connections exposed to pressures brought about by new influences including education and a collapsing feudal structure.

It was a life that was attractive but that also encouraged reform. Bajia wove her stories around the scenes she must have first come across before her migration and that, post-Partition, were transported to her new home Karachi in bulk. She contributed richly to a vibrant cultural stream and without trying to expand her canvas too much.

She covered the one robust parallel she was well versed in and did it with quiet grace and pride, and what is paramount for a communicator, effectively and in a distinct style. There has been no one like her. She remains incomparable in her field.

*Published in Dawn, February 12th, 2016*

## LNG: the second round

EVER since the government proudly declared the completion of the LNG terminal to be one of its emblematic successes, there has been a barrage of attacks against it, and the petroleum minister in particular, for failing to have made the arrangements to actually import the gas.

Almost a year after the terminal began commercial operations, we finally have a signature on a long-term supply contract for LNG, at a price that is lower than what most other customers are paying.

In the meantime, it has been a story of epic muddling through as the embattled minister tried to bulldoze his will through a reluctant and lethargic bureaucracy to make the arrangements for importing the fuel that he claimed would change the destiny of the country.

Makeshift arrangements were resorted to, in the meantime, as the minister attempted to get the bureaucracy to furnish the approvals he needed. Along the way, LNG was controversially declared to be a petroleum product to get around messy provincial government claims on natural gas.

But now the deal is finally done and we can be reasonably sure that regular deliveries are about to begin a full one year after the commencement of commercial operations.

It may not make for a story of tight management, but the minister has delivered and the country is one step closer to



February 2016

achieving a truly historic landmark as it prepares to receive the first of its regular supplies of imported gas.

This is his moment and it would be unfair to try to tarnish the scale of what has been accomplished, or to place hurdles in the way.

So despite all the attacks that his performance was subjected to throughout the year, and despite the delays, it is time to give credit where it is due.

Now comes the difficult part. How to transfer the gas which lands at Port Qasim in Karachi to its consumers in southern Punjab?

It turns out that here too the homework has not been done, and from the looks of it, we are now in for round two of muddling through our way to getting a workable LNG import scheme up and running.

Transferring the gas from the port to upcountry consumers can either be done through a dedicated pipeline, or through the SSGC network.

In the former case, the price tag is large and the gestation period long. The latter option activates provincial claims all over again.

Funding for the dedicated pipeline has not been arranged, and the controversial proposal to shift the cost onto consumers through a cess is likely to land the government in a new set of squabbles all over again. How hard the Sindh government presses its claims to the imported gas remains to be seen.

Let's hope round two is shorter and a lot less painful than the first round.

*Published in Dawn, February 13th, 2016*

## Karachi security

ON the day the head of the military's media wing was in Karachi to discuss progress on the city's law and order situation, three small explosions were reported from different parts of the metropolis.

A police station, college and school were among the targets attacked, though fortunately, there were no fatalities reported.

So DG ISPR Asim Bajwa was not off the mark when he observed that more work needed to be done to rid Karachi of terrorism and violence.

Lt-Gen Bajwa quoted a number of figures in his briefing, stating that since the commencement of the law-enforcement operation in Karachi in September 2013, there have been over 12,000 arrests.

Indeed, violent crime and militancy in the metropolis have come down in this period — a fact most independent observers will confirm. With the exception of last year's Safoora Goth carnage, there have been no major terrorist attacks in Karachi

over the past few years, and crimes such as targeted killings, extortion and kidnappings have also come down.

But as Friday's attacks have shown, the mission is not yet accomplished. Militants very much appear to be active under the radar.

For instance, over the past few weeks Rangers' check posts have been attacked, while earlier this month two schools in the Gulshan area were targeted with 'crackers'. The modus operandi in most of these incidents — explosives lobbed by motorcycle-borne assailants — has been similar.

Karachi's vastness and its seemingly unending urban sprawl provide an ideal environment for militants of all hues to melt away into anonymity, and then strike at an opportune moment.

In order to further reduce the space for militants in the city, it is essential for law enforcers to conduct intelligence-led operations to uncover extremists and their sympathisers.

*Also read: [More work left to be done in Karachi operation: DG ISPR](#)*

For this, along with the Rangers, the civilian intelligence apparatus, especially outfits such as the police's special branch, must be increasingly deployed as it is these units that have an ear to the ground, especially to gauge the situation in neighbourhoods.

Moreover, considering the fact that several educational institutions in the city have been targeted, the police as well as

the schools' administrations must speed up efforts to implement the 'safe schools' project'.

As police officials have stated, over 100 of the city's some 5,000 schools have been declared 'sensitive'. Hence the state must make every effort — in an unobtrusive and sensitive way — to protect youngsters from violence.

*Published in Dawn, February 13th, 2016*

## Pakistan's lost universe

IF the world of science, in particular physics and astronomy, is referring to the Ligo discovery in superlative terms such as "transformational" and "the beginning of a new era" for mankind's understanding of the universe, it is for good reason.

Albert Einstein first postulated the existence of gravitational waves, or what have been described as "ripples in the fabric of space-time" a century ago.

*Also read: [Gravitational waves detected in scientific milestone](#)*

Then followed 50 years of trial and error, and a quarter century was spent merely perfecting instruments that were sensitive enough to identify a distortion in space-time — in this case the collision of two black holes 1.3 billion light years away.

Finally, on Thursday, having completed the scientific arc of prediction, discovery and confirmation, physicists of the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory team announced in Washington, DC: “We did it.” Researchers say that the confirmation of the existence of these waves will allow them to probe the universe, even its origins, in new ways.

A moment of such breathtaking excitement comes all too rarely in any field of study.

There is no doubt that like other great leaps of scientific understanding in the past, the Ligo discovery will galvanise further interest in astronomy and physics. But when such interest is considered in the context of Pakistan, the picture becomes immediately bleak.

Academic decline in this country is evident in most subjects, not least those included in the sciences. Both the quality of textbooks and teaching have done nothing to inculcate a sense of curiosity and wonder in our children. Rote learning, rather than an understanding of even fundamental concepts, has led the way. And few schools and colleges have science clubs that could have fostered interest in young minds.

Our students are thus deprived of a chance to come together to explore the many mysteries of the universe.

The grim reality is simple: this is a nation where even those trained as scientists can put their stamp of approval on a car said to run on water. Could there be a greater indictment?

*Published in Dawn, February 13th, 2016*

## Deep-rooted sectarianism

AS opposed to much more recent problems with ‘jihadi’ militancy, the state has been battling the monster of sectarian terrorism since at least the 1980s. Regrettably, it is also true that both the military and civilian leaderships have played ball with the political facilitators of sectarian militants whenever the need has emerged.

But the scenario may finally be changing, especially in the aftermath of the APS tragedy in Peshawar, as the state has begun to take visible action against sectarian militants.

For example, in his media briefing in Karachi on Friday, DG ISPR Lt-Gen Asim Bajwa announced that amongst 97 arrested militants were three ‘most-wanted’ leaders of banned outfits. This included Naeem Bukhari, a dreaded Karachi-based militant associated with Lashkar-i-Jhangvi.

On the same day, the Punjab Counter-Terrorism Department said it had apprehended nine militants in Lahore, again associated with various militant outfits.

And 2015 was marked by the killings of Malik Ishaq and Usman Saifullah Kurd, in separate ‘encounters’; both men were associated with LJ and were notorious for perpetrating sectarian violence.

For there to be effective and long-lasting action in Pakistan against sectarian militant groups, two things must be considered. Firstly, it appears as if the establishment is continuing with its ‘good militant, bad militant’ policy.

For instance, while the ‘bad’ militants are being pounded in Fata and rounded up in the cities, the ‘good’ ones — especially Kashmir-centric fighters — are hardly being touched. The authorities must know that sectarian outfits and jihadi groups have a symbiotic relationship. In many cases, they share ideologies, while also providing each other with manpower.

For example, Naeem Bukhari, the LJ leader, has been described as being instrumental in bringing his concern closer to Al Qaeda.

The criteria must be simple: any group espousing or condoning violence against innocent people — whether in the name of religion, sect or ethnicity — must be dismantled. Unless action is taken against all militant groups, efforts against sectarian concerns will not prove effective.

Secondly, while the state pursues counterterrorism activities, there is a lack of movement on countering extremism and sectarian tendencies within society, which are arguably high.

Taking out sectarian killers will not be helpful in the long run unless the factors contributing to sectarian intolerance in society are addressed. Of course, communal violence in the Middle East has done much to fuel sectarian feelings in Pakistan.

And while there is little the state can do to shield the country from what is happening in Syria or Iraq, or the effects of the Saudi-Iranian spat, it is entirely possible to at least mitigate the effects of these situations.

A credible counter-narrative is needed which stresses that while doctrinal differences and various interpretations of Muslim history have always existed, in today’s Pakistan such differences must be tolerated and accepted. This message must particularly resonate within the mosque, madressah and curriculum.

*Published in Dawn, February 14th, 2016*

## Military ‘justice’

IT is a strange pattern: the army chief endorses death sentences handed down by military courts operating under the 21st Amendment and the Supreme Court suspends the executions pending a decision on the judicial appeals.

This week has seen 12 more individuals accused by the military of terrorism being condemned to death, and the death sentences of four earlier terrorism convicts suspended by the Supreme Court.

As noted by the Supreme Court judges hearing the appeals, the endorsement by the court of military courts in the 21st Amendment judgement has left a narrow window for appeal by those convicted by military courts.

What is troubling is that neither is there any light emerging from the military court trials nor is the Supreme Court moving swiftly enough to examine if justice is indeed being carried out.

This newspaper stands against the death penalty in all its manifestations — but the conveyor-belt manner in which military courts are handing down death sentences is especially troubling.

The approach so far by the military has been to give no details to the public or the media about ongoing trials and then revealing the sentences and the crimes the terror suspects are accused of at the time of endorsement by the army chief.

No evidence is provided — often to even the family members — and the trial record is withheld. This in trials of individuals the state has accused of being ‘jet-black terrorists’ — how can evidence be so lacking and the willingness to produce it so low when it comes to terrorist acts that are some of the worst in the country’s history?

There are few answers. More than halfway through the life of the 21st Amendment, the state’s approach has only seemed to worsen.

Perhaps the only hope is the Supreme Court. Some of the justices have shown a willingness to examine military court convictions and, at least in verbal remarks, acknowledged the heavy burden on them when it comes to ensuring justice is done.

While the 21st Amendment judgement left only relatively narrow grounds on which military court convictions can be overturned, there are two things that the court can still do.

One, it can expedite the appeals process, prioritising them over normal court work. Two, the Supreme Court can act to set

aside death sentences in cases where basic doubts still exist and the trial is deemed patently unfair.

The death penalty is fundamentally and morally wrong — the court must act to curb it where it can.

*Published in Dawn, February 14th, 2016*

## Valentine’s Day

IT is not the hammer all through. There are practices discouraged and prevented by law and official decree and then there are acts which those who find them offensive must counter by setting a personal example.

With all its ‘outrageous’ and ‘unwanted’ public manifestations, Valentine’s Day, ultimately, is about too personal a sentiment to be open to a legal, official or societal intervention or censure.

Whatever plausible or implausible reasons those opposed to the occasion may have, if the truth according to their own values is what they are out to prove, they must try and convince people by debate instead of taking the easy option of browbeating the vulnerable, in the process betraying their own weaknesses.

But then, this is not what the ‘powerful’ in this land are inclined to do, their urge to control is reflected in a series of bans and other acts meant to control popular freedoms.

February 2016

It is not just about a government stopping people from flying kites or a student organisation barring interaction on campus.

The attitude that encourages a ban as the final solution is there to be contended with in many everyday situations. It is an attitude steeped dangerously, and conveniently, in self-righteousness.

In a country where a large number of people quietly submit to restrictions on wedding feasts, many of those in positions of authority show off their influence when violations propel them to stop the proceedings forcibly.

There are district governments and administrations in the country that have barred Valentine's Day in their areas and these authorities have since been joined by a functionary of state no less than the president of Pakistan.

President Mamnoon Hussain didn't say he did not celebrate the day — for this would have amounted to an attempt at setting an example, something that those in power here are reluctant to do.

He chose to take sides where he could easily have been neutral. He urged Pakistanis to not observe Valentine's Day. Perhaps he should have been quiet on that point.

*Published in Dawn, February 14th, 2016*

## Madressah reforms

IT is a strange situation: an interior minister who is not exactly known for his hostility towards the conservative segments of society is still struggling to convince, and being openly contradicted by, the representatives of the country's madressah networks.

Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan has once again suggested that the federal government is on the verge of reaching an agreement with the five major madressah networks in the country to document and regulate religious schools, a suggestion that the networks' leaders have already seemingly rejected.

*Also read: [Nisar claims accord with madressahs](#)*

It is perhaps worth revisiting first principles here: in a country where no other educational system is outside the purview of state regulation, why should the madressah networks be a class apart?

There is no obvious answer to that question, notwithstanding the claim by madressah representatives that the matter ought to fall in the provincial purview, as opposed to the federal.

The appeal to the provincial domain is an obvious attempt to avoid regulation all together — the calculation being that what cannot be enforced at the federal level is unlikely to be pushed through at varied provincial levels. But the ploys should not allowed to be endless.



A decade ago, the Musharraf regime also attempted to regulate madressahs, but was quickly thwarted by intense political opposition — and a dictator’s fear of being on the wrong side of religious lobbies that helped originally solidify his power.

A decade later, after the worst atrocity in the country’s history — the APS Peshawar attack — the country’s political and military leadership drew up a National Action Plan that specifically required that madressahs be “regularised and reformed”.

Yet, the latest efforts too were resisted by madressah representatives, who latched on inter-ministerial rivalries and have tried to play the religious affairs ministry against the interior ministry, a ruse meant to delay registration and oversight.

Clearly, not all madressahs are hotbeds of extremism or sponsors of terror. But just as clearly some madressahs and their patrons are agents of extremism and sponsors of terror.

It is, therefore, not only absurd to claim that madressahs ought to continue to avoid regulation, but that somehow the simple act of enumeration and basic oversight will undermine the rights and freedoms of religious lobbies in the country. What is that the madressah networks are truly afraid of?

It is simply inconceivable that regularisation and reform will prevent fundamental religious education from being imparted in the country. But if regularisation and reform can lead to successes on the counter-extremism front and breakthroughs in counterterrorism, is there really any moral or legal justification for resisting change?

Ultimately, it will come down to resolve by the government. Like the Musharraf regime, the last PPP government too tried to document and regulate the madressah networks, but then backed down in the name of political expediency.

The present PML-N government has at least one advantage over previous administrations: the consensus NAP. Chaudhry Nisar has a penchant for thundering against sundry opponents; surely he can prevail against recalcitrant madressah networks.

*Published in Dawn, February 15th, 2016*

## Right to information

THE right of citizens to have the state and bureaucracy answer questions is of such significance and has such a wide-ranging impact that the first session of the UN General Assembly in 1946 adopted Resolution 59-1 calling for an international conference on the freedom of information.

It noted that this “is a fundamental human right and the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated”.

*Also read: [‘Pakistan’s draft right to information law is the best’](#)*

Decades later, Pakistan made a promising initial start when in 2002, it became the first South Asian country to promulgate an

ordinance in this regard, even though the law was criticised for being too weak and having too much room for exceptions.

Since then, though, progress has been spotty. In 2010, the right to information was recognised as a fundamental constitutional right under the 18th Amendment, and a draft RTI law at the federal level was finalised by a Senate committee on information in February 2014.

But two years later, that is where matters still stand — even though this legislation has been judged as amongst the best in the world. On Thursday in Islamabad, at a talk on the subject hosted by Pildat, the executive director of Canada’s Centre for Law and Democracy, Toby Mendel, said that the RTI law drafted by Pakistan had been awarded 148 points out of 150, “but this seems scary, because nothing is so perfect”.

He urged the public to lobby for the law to be put in place, adding that the number of requests for information made by citizens in the recent past was woefully low.

There is no doubt that the law needs to be passed at the federal level. Yet it must be noted that the RTI law that is in place in the provinces has not been having the impact that would have been hoped for.

Even where the legal framework is considered adequate, such as in Punjab and KP, citizens and rights groups report being stonewalled by the bureaucracy when it comes to the actual release of information. This is hardly surprising; yet ways must be devised to change hidebound attitudes.

The first, and most crucial step, is for government functionaries and departments to internalise that governance is meaningless if it is not inclusive, and that the administration functions on behalf of the citizenry. Most other freedoms flow from effective RTI laws; Pakistan must accelerate progress on this front.

*Published in Dawn, February 15th, 2016*

## Hockey win

PAKISTAN’S stunning, though unexpected, 1-0 victory over India in the South Asian Games hockey final at Guwahati has provided the beleaguered national sport with hopes of a revival, besides giving the country a chance to rejoice.

In a rare exhibition of focused hockey in a pressure-cooker situation, the Pakistan team held its nerve to beat its arch-rivals on their own turf in a closely contested final which deserves high praise.

*Also read: [Pakistan beat India 1-0 to clinch gold in South Asian Games hockey](#)*

Other than the performance, the significance of the victory is underscored by the fact that Pakistan has managed to thwart the psychological factor of facing up to India in a final of a tournament, after ending up on the losing side on many such occasions in the recent past.

In cricket and snooker too, Pakistani teams have found it too difficult to overcome a mental block of sorts while facing India in the finals of nearly all major events, despite winning league or round matches against them.

The win on Friday has enabled the national team to complete a hat-trick of victories over India in the South Asian Games — the previous two titles coming their way in 2006 and 2010.

It must also be acknowledged here that at the time of its departure, Pakistan's rather large contingent for the South Asian Games had already been written off by critics who scoffed at the ill-preparedness of the athletes and at the 'joy-riding' officials.

To everyone's surprise, however, the national athletes have lapped up quite a few medals at the Games in swimming, shooting, weight-lifting, squash and now hockey.

Having said that, any notions about the win reflecting an upward trend in Pakistan hockey — the team has not qualified for the next Olympics — need not be entertained.

While the new PHF set-up continues to emulate its predecessors by making tall claims about rebuilding the national team with efforts at the grass-root level and through the new academies, hockey in Pakistan continues to grapple with a number of negative factors.

These include political wrangling, ego tussles, lack of exposure and the debilitating state of infrastructure.

*Published in Dawn, February 15th, 2016*

## Interference in AJK

AZAD Jammu and Kashmir is entering the election season, but unhappily the PPP and PML-N appear determined to ignore the democratic lessons they have learned outside the ostensibly self-governing territory.

A violent clash on Saturday between PPP and PML-N activists resulted in the death of one man, as well as angry, though self-serving, denunciations by both sides.

After Saturday's violence, itself a product of an increasingly heated electoral battle between the PPP and PML-N, AJK Prime Minister Abdul Majeed blamed the PML-N government in Islamabad for interference and excessive control of Kashmir's affairs.

*Also read: [PPP, PML-N on warpath in Azad Kashmir](#)*

In response, the PML-N unleashed a close aide of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Asif Kirmani, who launched a sweeping counter-attack against the AJK prime minister and demanded that Mr Majeed resign immediately.

If the physical violence was tragic, the verbal fusillades of the PPP and PML-N are making a bad situation worse. Better sense needs to prevail.

There is, inevitably, a great deal of background to the present tensions. The PPP, which was in power in Sindh, Balochistan, Islamabad, Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK until 2013, now faces the

possibility of being reduced to a single government in Sindh following the next AJK elections.

AJK Prime Minister Abdul Majeed and his administration have been heavily criticised and there are frequent allegations by opponents of corruption in the administration.

But the real problem lies elsewhere: the federal government dominates the affairs of AJK, so whichever party is in power in Islamabad tends to regard the government there as its personal fiefdom.

The PML-N allegation that Mr Majeed's government is a mere puppet of the PPP central leadership — Asif Zardari, Bilawal Bhutto, Faryal Talpur, et al — may be true, but it is also clear that a new N-League dispensation in AJK would be firmly under the control of the central PML-N leadership, starting with Prime Minister Sharif himself.

Until the central leaders of the PPP and PML-N learn to regard AJK as what it constitutionally is — a self-governing entity — the practice of democracy there will continue to be shallow.

As ever, for all the sins of politicians themselves, there is another facet to the systemic problems: the role of the military.

Seen from the military prism, AJK is primarily a security issue — an area that intrinsically cannot be separated from the broader Kashmir dispute and as such must always be guarded against from outside, third-country interference.

That overarching national-security narrative tends to filter down to the politics of AJK and ensures that questions of deepening democracy there are endlessly delayed.

If there is one area where the Pakistani civilian and military leadership could positively and immediately impact on the lives of the people of AJK, it is in the push for rapid inter-Kashmir confidence-building measures in the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue — a dialogue that is already far too delayed.

*Published in Dawn, February 16th, 2016*

## Fixing power tariffs

THE government's move to seek lower power tariffs in renewable and LNG-based power plants is laudable but it also reveals significant weaknesses in crucial areas in our power-sector management.

In an unusual move, the ministry of water and power has said that the power regulator, Nepra, has set tariffs for renewable, hydropower and some LNG plants far above their market value, and underlined that it will not be notifying these projects on the basis of the tariffs set by Nepra.

*Also read: [Govt blocks notification for 10 tariff determinations](#)*

Instead, it will move towards international competitive bidding in an effort to bring down the costs. Any step to bring down the

cost of power generation is to be welcomed, but this particular case points to significant deficiencies on the part of Nepra to determine upfront tariffs, and do the due diligence necessary to arrive at a fair figure.

As an example, the Quaid-i-Azam Solar Park was inaugurated under an upfront tariff regime at Rs19 per unit, which is almost triple the solar tariffs being offered in other countries. The first project in that park, a Chinese partnership with the government of Punjab, has already locked in this higher tariff.

Moreover, Nepra simply relied on the costs furnished by the Chinese company that was setting up the first plant in QAS for its determination, leading to allegations of favouritism by rival groups.

What doesn't help in this case is that the earlier higher tariffs have already been locked in by groups in partnership with the government.

In the case of QAS, for instance, the partner was the government of Punjab, and the prime minister himself showed up to inaugurate the park, while the chief minister of the province touted it as a big success of his administration.

Now we have added fuel to charges of favouritism. Why did the government wake up so late to the fact that the tariffs being offered by Nepra were on the higher side? And why did Nepra go ahead and issue such exorbitant tariffs in the first place?

Tariffs for power producers are notoriously hard to adjust once they have been notified and power purchase agreements signed

in accordance with them, which makes it all the more important to vet them thoroughly before they are announced.

Apparently, Nepra has not been doing this, with the result that there is a cloud of suspicion and confusion hovering over the government's plans for the power sector at such a late date.

*Published in Dawn, February 16th, 2016*

## Pakistan's sportswomen

IT is a man's world, they say. And sports fits rather neatly into this category if one takes into account the kind of money, publicity and recognition that male athletes receive in comparison to women.

However, many high-achieving women during the past several decades have successfully thwarted such discriminatory attitudes with their brilliance on full display in the sports arena.

*Also read: [Pakistan women boxers make history in Shillong](#)*

Illustrious names such as Martina Navratilova, Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Nadia Comaneci have matched their male counterparts by bringing as much glory and laurels to their countries, if not more. In Pakistan, too, we have seen our own Naseem Hameed, Sana Mir, Carla Khan, Kiran Baluch, Hajra Khan and others do their country proud with their remarkable feats.

The ongoing South Asian Games in India have seen fair participation by Pakistani sportswomen who have kept pace with the men to lap up a few surprise medals at the extravaganza. Swimmers Lianna Swan and Bismah Khan, squash player Maria Toorpakai, and taekwondo player Yasmeen Maryam have spearheaded the country's otherwise not so dazzling performance at the games by clinching the gold and silver.

In the limelight, however, are the country's debut-making women boxers and shooters who pulled off a real coup by bagging bronze medals against a top line-up.

Amid mounting opposition and negligible support from the government and the private sector, the three women boxers Sofia Javed, Khoushleem Bano and Rukhsana Parveen have made it to the Games by dint of their talent and hard work which has earned them high praise from all quarters.

All the more remarkable is the fact that the female boxing trio took up the sport as late as early 2015 and responded wonderfully to some focused coaching by Nauman Karim — himself a bronze medallist at the 2003 World Boxing Championship.

Besides, in a generous gesture, the three women boxers of Pakistan have credited India's Mary Kom, a five-time world champion who is also competing at the 12th South Asian Games, as their inspiration.

*Published in Dawn, February 16th, 2016*

## India-Pakistan talks

THE start of the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue has now been delayed by more than a month, but comments by the Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan Gautam Bambawale suggest that officials from both sides are trying to create the so-called right environment for the CBD to begin.

While not mentioning any preconditions for the start of the CBD, Mr Bambawale did reveal that the foreign secretaries and national security advisers of Pakistan and India are trying to determine when the talks can begin, a timeline presumably linked to progress on the investigations into the Pathankot air base attack.

*Also read: [Talks with Pakistan not conditional on Pathankot probe, says Indian envoy](#)*

But what stage have the investigations reached? After early and seemingly rapid movement, the trail appears to have gone cold — or at least news of further progress has been missing.

The relative restraint that both sides showed in the face of immediate accusations and recriminations over the Pathankot attack will only matter if it can lead to meaningful cooperation.

There are still some basic questions about the Pathankot attack that have not been definitively answered. Who were the attackers? Did they cross the international border? Who were the architects and planners of the attack?



Each of those questions needs not only a factual response, but a legal one so that justice can be pursued on both sides of the border.

Yet, neither India nor Pakistan seems keen to publicly put all speculation to rest immediately.

Perhaps behind the scenes there are disagreements over what amounts to actionable intelligence and which parts of the public allegations are speculative, but that would suggest that politics is interfering with forensic investigation.

Given the resources of the two countries and the importance of what took place in Pathankot in early January, a month and a half ought to have been enough for at least the basic facts to be mutually established and shared with the public in both India and Pakistan.

Worryingly, it does not appear that lessons have been learned from the investigations into the Mumbai attacks of 2008.

Perhaps what is needed is a further dose of direct prime ministerial intervention. After all, had it not been for the boldness of prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Narendra Modi, the CBD was unlikely to have materialised.

In making the decision to resume full-fledged talks, the two prime ministers rightly realised that the India-Pakistan relationship cannot be reduced to a single issue for either side.

Discussing terrorism to the exclusion of all other issues was unlikely to bring peace, a fact that Mr Modi eventually realised.

Similarly, notwithstanding the centrality of the Kashmir dispute, the Pakistani attempt to cast terrorism as a side issue was never going to succeed.

The Pathankot attack has not undone the logic of the CBD; far from it, the attack has reinforced the need for India and Pakistan to engage each other.

Surely, a purposeful investigation can proceed alongside and become an early success of the CBD.

*Published in Dawn, February 17th, 2016*

## Hindu marriage law

AFTER an inexcusable delay, the Sindh Assembly on Monday became the first legislature in Pakistan to pass a law governing the registration of marriages for the Hindu community, as well as other religious groups, such as the Sikhs.

Though the passage of the Sindh Hindus Marriage Bill 2016, is welcome, the fact is that it was long overdue, and the lack of legal recognition for Hindu marriages had created major problems for members of the community, especially women.

*Also read: [Sindh Assembly approves Hindu Marriage Bill](#)*

The campaign for legal recognition was spearheaded by minority rights activists and civil society, while even the

Supreme Court had to step in and call for such a law. Experts say the law should help curb child marriages — it fixes 18 as the minimum age for matrimony — while also helping clamp down on forced conversions of Hindu women.

It is significant that Sindh took the first step, as the vast majority of the country's Hindus reside in this province.

Moreover, it is welcome that a controversial clause calling for the union to be annulled should one partner convert to another faith has not been included in Sindh's law.

Though some minority leaders and politicians have criticised parts of the law, it is important that a legal structure has now been established; should shortcomings emerge in its implementation, these can always be addressed through amendments.

Beyond Sindh, there is now the need to enact marriage legislation for Hindus living in other parts of the country. There can be two ways to go about this.

Firstly, the other three provinces can pass their own respective laws governing non-Muslim marriage. Or, if the National Assembly passes legislation in this regard — the lower house's Standing Committee on Law and Justice has already cleared a Hindu marriage bill, which now awaits passage — the federating units can adopt the national law.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan assemblies have already passed resolutions authorising the centre to legislate on the matter.

Whatever legislative route the federating units choose, the process must now be expedited as legislation related to non-Muslims' marriage cannot be left in limbo forever.

As it is, the issue had been left unattended for decades, which resulted in major problems for Hindu women having their unions recognised by the law, having official documents issued etc.

Also, to reflect the fact that the law will cover other religious groups apart from the Hindu community, a suggestion is that its name could be amended accordingly.

*Published in Dawn, February 17th, 2016*

## Mayor for ICT

IT is a measure of Pakistanis' short memory that the election of a mayor and his subsidiaries for Islamabad Capital Territory is being hailed as the first chance at local government that the country's capital has been allowed to have.

How easily it has been forgotten that Karachi — now a shambles of legendary proportions — was the original seat of the federal government until the machinations that led to the creation of a new city altogether.

Nevertheless, even though it is incorrect that this is the first time the country's capital is poised to have an elected person

February 2016

assume the mayorship, it is a first for the area that now holds the seat of honour.

*Also read: [PML-N's Sheikh Ansar Aziz elected Islamabad's first-ever mayor](#)*

While other cities have intermittently been allowed to form local governments in recent years, Islamabad has been a glaring exception; the reason why this is so is no secret: successive governments have seen the area as the exclusive domain of whichever party is ruling at the centre, with city affairs — even basic ones such as housing, sanitation or road maintenance — often being dictated from senior ministerial platforms that ought to have little, if anything at all, to do with such matters.

However, as it became increasingly clear on Monday that mayor-elect Sheikh Ansar Aziz would take charge of ICT in the coming days, there can be hope for a different trajectory.

There is no shortage of issues to be resolved, and a number of departments and responsibilities are to be fully devolved to the Islamabad Metropolitan Corporation, of which the mayor will be the elected head.

But success rests almost entirely on the ability of Mr Aziz to carve out a role for himself and his team in city management, and the willingness of the bureaucracy to respond to a changed environment.

Given that the mayor-elect belongs to the ruling party at the centre, dare we hope that the local and federal governments

might find a way to work in concert for the greater good of the city?

*Published in Dawn, February 17th, 2016*

## Criticising NAB

NOBODY likes accountability and ferreting out traces of corruption in government affairs, but given the sad realities of our country, it is an indispensable task.

In some form or the other, constant vigilance over government conduct is required by a strong and independent body empowered to detect, investigate and prosecute corruption wherever it may be found.

*Also read: [Sharif threatens to clip NAB's wings](#)*

But unfortunately, this is not the only sad reality of our country. In the past, hunting down corruption has taken on a political hue and, on many occasions, the exercise has been selective.

The result is that it is difficult to tell when the National Accountability Bureau is actually pursuing a corruption investigation and when it is allowing its strings to be pulled from the shadows for the purpose of settling political scores.

Today, we have a situation where everybody is annoyed with NAB, the prime minister and the chief ministers, which means they might be doing something right, or perhaps the anti-corruption bureau is drawing its strength from Rawalpindi.

That question will be hard to answer in the absence of strong evidence one way or the other.

What is not hard to see, however, is that those indulging in criticism have no alternative suggestions on how to institutionalise accountability in Pakistan. Keeping accountability under governmental control has aggravated the politicisation of corruption allegations in the past.

In 2004, for instance, NAB famously issued a clean bill of health to the PML-Q leadership while continuing to pursue cases against the opposition leaders.

And who needs to be reminded of how the Ehtesab Bureau acted during the last Nawaz Sharif government in the late 1990s? Even today, evidence of how corruption has become a political football is in painfully high supply.

The PTI, which only recently reformed its own accountability law in KP in an apparent move to clip the powers of the Ehtesab Commission, is assailing the PML-N over the prime minister's statement that NAB is harassing civil servants and serving as an obstruction to the completion of important projects.

The PPP too seized on the prime minister's outburst and momentarily forgot its own complaints against the heavy-handed exercise of accountability powers.

The parties need to agree amongst themselves on how to institutionalise accountability in the country, then allow the process to operate.

A truly independent accountability set-up is needed, with its head being chosen by consensus, perhaps along the lines of the ECP.

Stronger rules are also required on what conditions are necessary before an inquiry can be initiated. Above all, a consensus needs to be built on how accountability will proceed in the country, and its writ needs to be respected.

It is an unseemly sight when political parties rally around NAB as it goes after their opponents, and then start to cry foul once it begins to go after them.

*Published in Dawn, February 18th, 2016*

## Price of drugs

A RECENT increase in the prices of drugs has put the focus back on the remarkable laxity and leisure that characterises the crucial area of health in Pakistan.

As expected, the increase has the media and stakeholders such as the chemists protesting on behalf of the people. A ‘mafia’ is alleged to be behind the hike, in partnership, indeed, with ever-willing officials.

The still unsettled Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan has tried to appear blameless, saying that the prices have been increased without its approval and in pursuance of the proceedings in court.

*Also read: [Ministry trying to get drug prices reduced](#)*

Just as the pharmaceutical companies ask to be heard over the din of objections to the hike, the Punjab government has declared it will ensure the old prices by applying tough administrative measures such as a close monitoring of the market.

It is because of the impassioned responses that the real issue causing the controversy remains eclipsed. The basic issue is that this country has failed to evolve a mechanism for regulating prices.

Meanwhile, this recent hike didn’t come out of the blue. The government and the drug manufacturers — local and

multinational — have been at loggerheads over a formula for the increase in the prices of medicines.

The makers point out that in the face of ever-rising costs, retail prices have remained constant for a decade and a half — since 2001.

Amid pressure on the government to make a list of essential drugs, whose prices it must keep under watch, in November 2013, Drap notified an increase of 15pc on a number of drugs, excluding those categorised as life-saving. The notification was withdrawn the next day on the direction of the prime minister.

The manufacturers have been demanding an increase calculated on the basis of inflation and they point out their court cases seeking hardship relief had been pending since the year 2008.

They say they were forced to increase the prices of a few drugs in the absence of a mutually agreed upon policy.

According to the drugs companies, all they are asking for is hardship allowance, a claim which is open to valid questions by the chemists and people at large.

The hike has been greeted by a shake of the head on the part of a disapproving government.

The officials, including those in Drap, could have better utilised their energy in building a reasonable mechanism with the people’s interest held above all else.

*Published in Dawn, February 18th, 2016*

## Syria invasion talk

OVER the last several days, there has been a series of statements coming from senior Turkish and Saudi officials indicating that plans for a ground invasion of Syria are on the table.

The latest comments came on Tuesday, when a Turkish official was quoted as saying that Ankara wanted a ground operation in Syria “with our international allies”.

*Also read: [Turkey proposes joint ground operation in Syria](#)*

These are troubling words and bring into focus the dangerous game of brinkmanship that is being played in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has also said it is willing to commit troops for a ground assault in Syria.

Till now, foreign countries — both those allied to Bashar al-Assad’s government and those opposing the Syrian strongman — have mostly been conducting aerial raids targeting the militant Islamic State group and others.

However, if foreign troops were to arrive in Syria, under whatever pretext, without the assent of Damascus, matters would be likely to spiral further out of control.

The Syrian regime has scoffed at the talk of invasion, while Iran and Russia, Mr Assad’s primary backers, have also let their displeasure be known. Turkey is already pounding Syrian Kurds, whom it refers to as ‘terrorists’, across the border. This has led to criticism that Ankara is more interested in crushing

Kurdish ambitions in the region rather than clamping down on IS.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is conducting ongoing massive military exercises in its northern region.

Numerous Muslim states are participating in these manoeuvres, including Pakistan. Some Saudi analysts have said the manoeuvres are designed to send a message to Iran. While there is no harm in counterterrorism cooperation between Islamabad and Riyadh, if the military exercises are a dress rehearsal for a Syrian invasion, then Pakistan would do well to stay away.

If foreign forces do invade Syria, the bloodbath in that unfortunate country is bound to get worse.

Therefore, if external actors are incapable of bringing Syria’s warring factions to the table, they should at least refrain from further complicating matters through direct military action.

*Published in Dawn, February 18th, 2016*

## Indian objections to F-16 sale

The sale of F-16 aircraft has appeared to annoy India more than it helps Pakistan's overall counter-insurgency efforts. It should not.

But the very fact that it does — that New Delhi appears to feel it necessary to [protest the American sale of F-16 aircraft to Pakistan](#) — demonstrates the extent to which the Pak-India relationship needs to be protected from reactionaries in India.

It may be true that the use of F-16s is not central or fundamental to the Pakistani counter-insurgency effort in Fata. But neither are the additional aircraft vital for Pakistan's overall deterrence efforts against India.

What is troubling though is that Indian authorities appear to insist that the Pak-US relationship has some automatic implications for the Pak-India context. It does not.

Examine: [India should not be concerned over F-16 sale to Pakistan: Pentagon](#)

Eight new aircraft does not change the strategic — or operational balance — anymore than a similar addition of similar aircraft by India would.

Much as Pakistan — and possibly India — is trying to restart dialogue between the two countries, it appears that the old approach continues to dominate.

The objections to the sale of F-16s to Pakistan are not the only recent Indian intervention.

It is fairly well established that Indian authorities attempted to — and perhaps succeeded in — temporarily blocking the sale of JF-17 aircraft to Sri Lanka.

There too the Indian intervention was neither bashful nor remotely principled. It was simply a case of leveraging influence to ensure a politically desirable — if short-sighted — outcome.

The Pakistani state's deterrence against armed conflict with India has neither been shaped nor determined by US arms transfers.

Much as Pakistan achieved deterrence capability against India while US sanctions were in effect against Pakistan, the same logic applies today: US transfers to Pakistan will not change the latter's fundamental ability to protect itself against Indian hegemony.

Take a look: [F-16 aircraft can be manufactured in India, says Lockheed Martin](#)

Perhaps what Indian authorities ought to consider is another reality: can Pakistan really ever defeat terror — the kinds that threaten the Pakistani state and also regional powers — if it does not have all the necessary tools at its disposal?

From Indian objections to American arms transfers to Pakistan, a strange pattern can be discerned.



India wants to not only dictate to Pakistan what the latter's national security interests ought to be, but also the manner in which they ought to be fought — and the resources with which they should be fought.

Pakistan has every right to the F-16s and doubly so when it comes to the possibility of using them to combat perhaps the foremost threat to regional stability.

It does not behove India to pretend otherwise or to try and prevent Pakistan from acquiring the weapons platforms from which it can defend itself.

What Indian officials really ought to be directing their energies to is achieving an immediate resumption of the bilateral dialogue. Pakistan and India deserve better than the old approach of endless complaints and no forward movement.

*Published in Dawn, February 19th, 2016*

## Altaf's 'appeal'

ON Wednesday, the familiar feeling of dread returned to Karachi, though only briefly. The source of commotion was a statement attributed to MQM supremo Altaf Hussain that started doing the rounds on TV and social media. The message was part cryptic prophecy, part weather report; the Muttahida chief asked the people to stock up on food and medicines as, according to him, the next 15 days would be critical due to “an uncertain political situation and chances of natural calamities due to climate change”. The London-based leader, as well as his party leadership in Pakistan, failed to give any details regarding this doom-laden augury. However, for the people of Karachi, the ominous statement indicated trouble on the horizon, unleashing a wave of panic and paranoia. In fact, the paramilitary Rangers, who have been in the forefront of recent law-enforcement efforts in the Sindh capital, had to issue a call for public calm after Mr Hussain's statement.

Altaf Hussain is, of course, no stranger to making impolitic remarks in public. In the past, his calls have often resulted in this city of teeming millions shutting down within hours, as if on cue, while his supporters have been accused of enforcing shutdowns by resorting to strong-arm tactics. Such announcements only result in sowing fear and spreading uncertainty in Pakistan's biggest city. In fact, it is largely due to Mr Hussain's unguarded public commentary that a court-ordered ill-advised ban on his speeches was announced last year. It is unfortunate that the MQM is reverting to its old style of confrontational, and controversial, politics. Calling for shutdowns or unending protests, or warning the public of dire days ahead without substantiating the facts ends up punishing

the people of Karachi besides dealing a blow to the city's economy — even if, ironically, the Muttahida claims to speak for the metropolis. Last month, the party had taken a positive step by peacefully demonstrating for its rights on Karachi's roads without causing any disruption to civic life or violence. Moreover, the party has proven its resilience at the ballot box both in by-elections and the recently held local polls in Sindh, despite being subjected to pressure by the security establishment. So why revert to the politics of fear? Altaf Hussain and his party leadership should refrain from making statements that can upset the law and order situation in urban Sindh and pursue their rights solely through democratic methods.

*Published in Dawn, February 19th, 2016*

## NFC award delay

THE delay in working on and finalising the ninth NFC award shows an utter lack of seriousness. At first, the award was delayed when Sindh took months to appoint its statutory member to the negotiating team. When it did so, the budget was too close to embark on the exercise. This resulted in an interim award under which the old allocations were to continue for another year. Then the statutory member from Punjab was appointed provincial finance minister and a replacement was not announced. After many months, when we finally have a new statutory member from Punjab, we are well past the halfway mark in the fiscal year. Once again, there are doubts that a new NFC award will be announced before the budget; a

second interim award cannot be ruled out. Serious efforts are needed to avert that outcome.

By now, there's enough evidence to lend credence to the belief that none of the parties appears interested in hammering out a new award. Nobody has objected to the delays or asked officially for the meetings to begin. Politically, it seems the parties are quite content to continue with the status quo rather than use the forum of the award to resolve important issues. Those concerns include the net hydel profits owed to KP, as well as provincial revenue generation. The former is being raised at the level of the finance secretaries, while nobody really wants to discuss the latter very much. The NFC award is not only about cutting the cake of the federal divisible pool; it is an important constitutional forum to resolve differences and address interprovincial politics and fiscal framework challenges. The fact that all parties appear to be treating it in such a lackadaisical manner is disappointing because it reveals a lack of interest to engage on differences in any serious manner. The ruling party should now urgently call the first meeting and move the discussions along, as well as issue a timeline indicating when they expect to finalise the award.

*Published in Dawn, February 19th, 2016*

## Possible census delay?

NOBODY ever said that the population census would be an easy exercise. Now that the time has come to deliver on a promise that was made last year to hold the population census by March 2016, suggestions are being floated that the exercise needs to be postponed.

The latest such suggestion has come from Sardar Akhtar Mengal of the BNP in Balochistan. He has argued that the security situation in his province is not conducive to holding such a large exercise, and that the presence of a large number of Afghan refugees is an obstacle; that they should be 'repatriated' before the population count.

*Take a look: [Need to create awareness of census stressed](#)*

The chief minister of Balochistan and his predecessor have made similar arguments. Earlier, the government hinted that the exercise might prove difficult to carry out according to schedule because of the large number of troops required, which the army apparently cannot spare at the moment given its commitments in the anti-terror operations in the country.

The census commissioner had told the media in January that he might need more than 350,000 troops for the exercise — one for each of the 167,000 census blocks and more for overall security of the military personnel.

These hints and suggestions regarding the difficulties facing the exercise are coming far too late in the day. The announcement to hold the census was made in March last year,

and we have had a full year almost to prepare for the mammoth exercise.

Yet work didn't begin in earnest until at least September, five months down the road, when the first funds for the immense logistics were released by the finance ministry. Delays have also hit the surveys of the mauzas and blocks along the way.

The security situation was known all along and it defies understanding why it was not addressed as a priority earlier. Likewise for the presence of refugees in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

If the state can identify who is and who is not a refugee for a repatriation exercise, why can't it do the same for a census exercise? None of these reasons are convincing when raised so late in the day.

Not only this, the government is also displaying its famous disregard for broadening ownership and stakes in the complex exercise.

All but one of the members of the governing council of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, which is tasked with conducting the exercise, are from Punjab, as are all of the bureau's executive members. Some of the provincial assemblies have passed resolutions complaining about this.

Having lost time, and failing to evolve a consensus among the provinces about the holding of the exercise, the government now appears to be looking for an excuse to back out of its commitment. Let's hope this is not so.

## JNU controversy

THE past few days have witnessed quite a stir on many university campuses in India. In various cities, students have marched to denounce the arrest in Delhi of Kanhaiya Kumar, president of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union on charges of sedition.

Mr Kumar's detractors claim he raised anti-India slogans at an event on campus — a charge he denies — held to mark the execution of Afzal Guru.

*Also read: [Thousands attend rally for JNU student leader](#)*

Political undertones are evident in these developments as Mr Kumar comes from a leftist background, while those leading the campaign against him mostly belong to the ABVP, a student outfit linked to the Hindu supremacist Sangh Parivar.

The student leader was thrashed by lawyers as he arrived for a court appearance in Delhi; police reportedly did little to stop the attack.

The controversy is yet another example of India's lurch towards the hard right. In today's India, those disagreeing with the Sangh's version of how things should be are usually branded as 'anti-national'.

These toxic levels of ultranationalism are diametrically opposed to democratic values; as we in Pakistan know all too well that if space is ceded to the hard right, very soon democratic principles come under attack.

The hard right in India has been rising steadily ever since it made its violent national debut with the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992.

Thereafter, the Sangh's influence, especially that of the RSS, has been increasing, particularly in the political arena, so much so that under the BJP's watch, the saffronisation of India is undeniable. While once the RSS worked in the shadows, today it proudly hosts massive public meetings to display its muscle.

Moreover, baiting minorities, especially Muslims, has become kosher, even though many of India's artists and intellectuals have spoken out against the rising levels of intolerance. This is unfortunate because India has a largely secular constitution and prides itself on being the world's largest democracy.

But when freedom of expression is threatened and dissent is crushed, secularism and democracy face imminent threat. Sedition is a very serious charge and should not be thrown around loosely.

It appears that a hard-hitting speech made by Mr Kumar critical of the Sangh had a role in his arrest.

Even some ABVP activists have spoken out against the witch hunt. Indian state and society need to reflect upon these developments; what is clear is that ultranationalism and hyper-patriotism are the first step towards the extinction of fundamental rights and freedom of conscience.

*Published in Dawn, February 20th, 2016*

## Vaccination refusals

THE apparent apathy of both state and society to Pakistan's polio problem can in some measure be attributed to the fact that this is an issue that has become calcified.

The back and forth between a state with sluggish capacity and a population that is in general under-educated, continues.

The situation has been worsened by a number of attacks, many of them proving deadly, in recent years on polio workers who in any case face a monumental task in ensuring that each and every child in the country is vaccinated.

*Also read: [Dozens of schools resist polio vaccination drive](#)*

Though the number of families refusing the OPV has decreased after the act was made an offence inviting arrest last year, Karachi's experience during the ongoing polio drive has highlighted a new dimension: some two dozen schools have refused to let polio teams enter their premises (even though they had earlier been sent letters in this regard from official quarters), relenting only upon the intervention of senior authorities.

Much can be read into the reasons cited by the schools for their unwillingness to cooperate. These managements insisted, first, that their students had already been vaccinated as a matter of course, following routine immunisation schedules; and second, that parents objected to their children being administered the drops in their absence and without their express consent.

Worth pondering on is the possibility that the parents' reluctance may stem from reasons other than the commonly cited ideological/religious ones, especially the trust deficit that is known to exist between citizens and the state apparatus.

Questions have been raised, after all, about the efficacy of the drops; for example, often it has not been possible to maintain the cold-chain process.

There have been reports of expired or compromised vials. Plugging this trust deficit requires long-term engagement and regular awareness drives.

Meanwhile, the predicament that schools find themselves in is easily solved: administrations could require copies of the children's routine immunisation records to be provided, which would immediately identify those who have already been administered the polio vaccine.

*Published in Dawn, February 20th, 2016*

## Lifting of Iran sanctions

MORE than a month after most other countries in the world lifted sanctions against Iran, Pakistan has finally followed suit. It is a welcome step, even if it appears to have been reluctantly taken and has come rather late. As a contiguous neighbour, Pakistan ought to have moved faster and deeper down the road to restoring normal economic ties with Iran than most other countries. This is especially true given the natural complementarities between the economies of the two countries. Iran has a surplus of energy but is food deficient, while Pakistan is food secure but energy deficient. Nevertheless, the fact that our own raft of sanctions, mostly issued through the Foreign Office, has now been lifted has cleared the way for parties on both sides to start re-engaging with one another. And this is precisely the point where the road towards the resumption of normal economic ties comes into view before us.

That road, it is becoming increasingly clear, is longer than what most might envisage. Even the act of lifting our own sanctions against Iran proved slightly more complex than imagined. The step was undertaken on prodding from the Iranian side during the prime minister's visit to Tehran last month, at the time the UN Security Council endorsed the nuclear deal through Resolution 2231. The language of the draft notification issued by the Foreign Office to lift Pakistan's sanctions then had to be vetted by various stakeholders within the government, such as the ministries of defence and law and the State Bank. This process could have begun sooner, considering that the IAEA had confirmed Iran's compliance with the terms of the nuclear deal as early as Dec 2, 2015.

Now that the lifting of the sanctions has been notified by the Foreign Office, the hard part of actually rebuilding economic ties can commence. No further legal obstacles stand in the way of private-sector parties to start engaging with the neighbouring economy, but significant logistical obstacles still remain. Banks need to build counterparty arrangements with Iranian banks so LCs can be processed, the road linkages need to be upgraded significantly to handle the clearing of containerised cargoes, and a clientele needs to be developed by traders on either side of the border. A visa regime needs to be developed that will facilitate a growing and thriving trade relationship through easier visa rules and by enhancing people-to-people contact. In time, air and rail links must be expeditiously built as well. The road to a \$5bn trade relationship is still a long one, and much work remains to be done. The private sector can be counted on to step up to the opportunities that will come its way, but at the moment it is the government that must shed the impression that it is being dragged reluctantly to the finish line.

*Published in Dawn, February 21st, 2016*



## Stain on ‘honour’

MEETING documentary filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy at the Prime Minister House in Islamabad earlier this week, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif termed ‘honour’ killings a ‘stain’ on society. Acknowledging that this was one of the most critical problems facing the country, the prime minister went on to promise that the premiere of Ms Chinoy’s documentary on the subject, *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*, will be held at the Prime Minister’s Office on Monday, Feb 22. Mr Sharif’s observations do raise a question or two. Primarily, did it take a short film — or perhaps the international spotlight on it following its nomination to the Oscars in the relevant category — to bring to the government’s attention the fact that this crime most dishonourable is amongst Pakistan’s most pressing worries? Had the government and its leadership so far remained oblivious to an evil that has for decades invited opprobrium from amongst the more civilised sections of society, and wreaked endless grief amongst countless families and communities? If so, then the fact that the ‘stain’ of ‘honour’ killings has finally been recognised at the top levels of governance can only be welcomed with relief. If it took a while for the administration to cut to the chase, it can only be hoped that now that the issue has been recognised in its full import the resolve to counter it will be of such proportions as to turn the situation around.

Attitudes around ‘honour’ killings have in fact become Pakistan’s dirty little secret. In the headlines, the news around women, equality and choice has in recent years been pledge after pledge by those in positions of power to build bridges of equity and empowerment. In all fairness, the country has

indeed managed to pass fairly significant pieces of legislation in this regard. But when it comes to engineering a sea change through awareness-raising and altering hidebound attitudes that are wrongly attributed to notions of culture and tradition, there is often frantic back-peddalling — as though the challenge is far too daunting to take on. Yet the legislative changes required have already been achieved, with there being no leniency any longer for the perpetrators of such acts. Now what is needed is a concerted push to spread awareness about the heinousness of this act, the fact that the law will not tolerate it, and the apprehension and trial of the guilty and their colluders.

*Published in Dawn, February 21st, 2016*

## Liberal visa regime

AS both diplomats and political experts have stressed, one key way of improving Indo-Pakistan ties would be to bolster regional integration and trade. However, integration — as well as peace and normalisation — will remain a pipe dream unless the visa regime in the subcontinent is liberalised in the true sense of the word. Speaking at a programme in Lahore recently, Indian high commissioner Gautam Bambawale said there was no better way of improving relations between Pakistan and India than trade. This is quite true, while calls for an integrated and connected South Asia are also imminently sensible. But what are the respective governments doing to encourage trade or even people-to-people contact? Not much apparently. For example, the exercise of getting a visa for the other country by the average citizen remains a test of

endurance and commitment. In Pakistan, citizens can apply for an Indian visa through courier services, which saves a trip to Islamabad. But the process is both lengthy and bureaucratic, with applicants having to secure 'sponsorship' letters from their Indian hosts, as well as attaching a thick file of paperwork. In India, those desiring to visit Pakistan have to come to New Delhi from across the far reaches of that vast land to lodge a visa application with the Pakistan High Commission.

If one is lucky enough to get a visa, the modes of transport to cross the border are relatively limited. For instance, the Thar Express — the train service that links Sindh and Rajasthan and which has been running for 10 years now — continues to suffer from inadequate infrastructure. Police reporting in both countries is also an odious, archaic procedure. Both governments can easily remedy this situation by easing visa procedures and making them less complicated, increasing the options for cross-border travel and reopening deputy high commissions in Karachi and Mumbai, respectively. Once people can freely meet and trade, and work with each other, the animosities of old can give way to a relationship based on trust and good neighbourliness.

*Published in Dawn, February 21st, 2016*

## Poor state of health

ONE of the most dismal numbers to come out of Pakistan is the paltry allocation of budgetary resources to health.

The figure stands below 0.7pc of GDP, both provincial and federal combined, and is among the smallest expenditure heads in the budget.

Even for a country known for its misallocation of resources, the smallness of this number is staggering, especially when we consider the kind of health emergencies that plague the land.

From diseases such as polio, TB and hepatitis, to malnutrition among a large proportion of the population, to high infant and child mortality rates — among the highest in the region — Pakistan shoulders some of the world's biggest health-related burdens. How then do we justify such meagre resource allocation to the health sector?

Economic surveys that are the government's own telling of the health story show that the myriad programmes being run in the health sector are the authorities' response to the challenge.

Data is presented on the availability of food, which, apparently, is sufficient to handle the nutritional needs of the entire country.

The availability of cereal, pulses and milk has only increased over the past five years. However, the data on calorie intake shows a deterioration, with 22pc of our population in the

undernourishment category and in the same league as countries that are food deficient.

Lack of food then is not the issue; the problem is how the food that is available is allocated, whether through market mechanisms that are highly distorted by speculative interests or through an ineffective, corrupt government.

The story is the same whether one looks at hospitals and medicines, or access to doctors. In general terms as well, both the centre and the provinces are more geared towards serving the interests of the rich, through the construction of roads and bridges, than of the poor.

Public-sector spending on health, which is the mainstay for meeting the health requirements of the poor, is a dismal 0.7pc of GDP as mentioned above. But when one adds private-sector spending, the figure jumps to 2.8pc of GDP; this is four times what is spent on the poor.

This shows that whatever allocation of resources to the health sector there is in the country, most of it is through private healthcare providers that serve the interests of those with more money.

It is no exaggeration to say that the poor have been left to their own devices while the rich have built for themselves a comfortable world where all basic needs are amply catered for, and sealed away behind a wall of high prices.

The state of public health in the country paints a truly dismal picture, especially when it comes to the skewed manner of the allocation of available resources.

## Accountability laws

IT is a bad idea to compound the original wrong. A week in which Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif shockingly attacked the National Accountability Bureau ended with the continuing speculation that the government may be seeking to instal a supra-commission to act as a brake on the workings of NAB.

Given the PPP's recent hostility to NAB and the PTI's own struggles with accountability in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the PML-N government appears to believe it may have the numbers in both houses of parliament to amend the NAB ordinance. That may be true, but it would set a terrible precedent — and set back the democratic project itself.

*Also read: [Govt neither irked at nor afraid of NAB, says Nisar](#)*

NAB is a flawed institution and accountability legislation needs to be redone, but to improve systemic accountability, not effectively defang it.

Currently, the threat of legislation is precisely that — a threat meant to curb what the government sees as unnecessary and unwanted interference in the workings of the administration.

Perhaps the government ought to consider what lies behind its present troubles with NAB: the delay by the PML-N itself in framing new accountability laws that are transparent and could be effective.

Having failed to reach an agreement with the PPP in the last parliament, the PML-N has not until now been interested in

pursuing a deal in this parliament. With accountability effectively in limbo, the Supreme Court intervened publicly, demanding answers of NAB in court and exhorting the organisation to pursue accountability with a new vigour.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the military establishment has likely also encouraged NAB to probe corruption by politicians — the recent enthusiasm for investigations in Sindh in particular surely being no coincidence.

While the administrations at the centre and in the provinces may have some legitimate grievances about the motives behind some corruption probes, they have no defence when it comes to explaining the political delay in framing new accountability laws.

Now that the PML-N government has shown fresh interest in NAB, some first principles ought to be revisited. The country needs a powerful and independent accountability body that is mandated to probe corruption in all institutions and by all public officials — civilian, military, bureaucratic or even judicial.

While the judiciary has balked at outside oversight and the military is likely to resist it too, the political class would do the country and itself a great service if it can draw up legislation that makes accountability real — and across the board.

*Published in Dawn, February 22nd, 2016*

## Militants online

THOUGH many amongst Pakistan's religious right prefer interpretations of faith anchored firmly in the past and shun most aspects of modernity as 'innovations', they have few qualms about using technology to their advantage.

For example, as noted in a recent report in this paper, the 'cyber team' of Jamaatud Dawa seems to be quite an active concern. Young, tech-savvy men are at the forefront of an operation designed to transmit the message of a group with barely disguised links to religious militancy.

Volunteers stream footage from rallies, send out live tweets and update websites.

In fact, the team claims to be active in 45 cities and towns in Pakistan. Its members say they are countering hostile propaganda from "anti-Pakistan" elements, which, surprisingly, include the TTP as well as the militant Islamic State group, along with 'secularists'.

Of course, this is a far cry from the ideology of old, according to which photography and film-making were both deemed unacceptable. But perhaps it is the ubiquitousness of technology, as well as the challenge posed by even more ferocious militant groups, that has caused JuD to change tack.

JuD is not the only militant group to embrace technology. A plethora of jihadi and sectarian outfits in Pakistan as well as internationally have used cyberspace as a recruiting ground and a propaganda outlet.

*Also read: [JuD's new 'Cyber Team' a far cry from conservatism of old](#)*

Al Qaeda and IS have both used technology to their advantage to communicate their message and boast of their gruesome 'exploits'.

In fact, as many experts have noted, cyberspace is a key battlefield for counterterrorism agencies the world over. Some may term this acceptance of technology by the hard right and militant outfits as hypocrisy, for they are using the same fruits of modernity that they have long railed against.

However, this also reflects a sense of pragmatism — in a world of smartphones, laptops and instant messaging, the extremists know they won't get too far by sticking to antiquated methods. Hence the 'battle for hearts and minds' is being waged in cyberspace.

*Published in Dawn, February 22nd, 2016*

## Census: now or never

WHATEVER may be the logistical difficulties, or the objections of various elements in the provincial governments, the population census must be held on schedule. At the moment, there are growing signs that the government will announce a postponement.

However, thus far the difficulties cited in holding the vital exercise are not of a kind that should necessitate further delay. The window of opportunity is narrow and must be availed of.

Those objecting that there are not enough troops available for the exercise should realise that the situation in the country is not likely to show a dramatic improvement for a number of years, and the census cannot be delayed that long.

Those arguing that ground realities, such as the presence of large numbers of refugees or non-domiciled migrants in the provinces, make the census impracticable or unfair should know that only a proper count can establish population ratios and indicate the demographic trend of various language groups and ethnicities.

It is not possible, nor is it logical, to present the case that the census will make any given ethnic group a 'minority' in its own province given the presence of migrants or refugees. In the absence of a reliable census, the numbers don't exist to make such an argument.

As the government prepares to take the decision to the Council of Common Interests, where the likelihood of the exercise

being shot down altogether is quite high, it is worth asking a few important questions. For instance, why was no CCI meeting held for more than 10 months?

Why did the authorities wake up so late to the logistical demands of the census? Why has no effort been made thus far to build some sort of agreement among the various contending parties who are apprehensive about what a new census might find?

A now-or-never moment appears to be taking shape. This is perhaps the only year in which the present government can pull off something as large as the census exercise. Postponing it further will only mean that the same obstacles will be angrily debated all over again, only to pave the way for further delay.

By next year, the government's focus would have shifted towards the general elections, and the next opportunity to even think about a population count will present itself only after a new government is in power after the 2018 elections.

Our policymakers cannot afford to ignore the matter till then. The urgency to sort out the differences, and develop out-of-the-box solutions to the shortage of army personnel and other logistical issues, is growing by the day. Much depends on the census — from socio-economic planning to resource allocation to the delimitation of constituencies.

Rescuing the exercise and ensuring it is held on time ought to now be the government's priority.

*Published in Dawn, February 23rd, 2016*

## Literary festivals

THAT spring has been ushered in with literary festivals in both Karachi and Lahore is befitting. The KLF has over the years grown into a solid institution, drawing large crowds from a cross section of society and providing an essential counterpoint to the narratives of violence and conflict that have so befuddled Pakistan in recent years.

Now that the success of the event has been cemented, the organisers must use the space to step back and assess how further diversification can be achieved and how the level of intellectual content can be raised further; there is no reason for complacency, especially with the Lahore Literary Festival setting the bar high.

This year's iteration of the LLF, which concluded on Sunday, deserves praise for an excellent line-up of litterateurs, academics, and cultural personalities, and it is highly unfortunate that what had been planned as a three-day event had to be downsized, as well as have its venue changed at the last minute, as a result of what was either incompetence or plain vindictiveness on part of the Shahbaz Sharif administration.

First came the news that the Punjab government was planning to withdraw the NOC for the festival to be held at the semi-government-run Alhamra Arts Centre, which is where the LLF has been held over the past three years.

Then, under the garb of security worries, the event organisers were asked to reduce the number of foreign attendees.



Crowning these impediments was the government requiring a change in venue, again apparently because of security concerns — the irony being that the new venue was Avari Hotel, just down the road from the Alhamra on the Mall.

Unsurprisingly, people are wondering whether sabotage was being attempted, given that some of the organisers of the LLF happen to be leading the opposition to the Orange Line metro project that Chief Minister Sharif is known to take a personal interest in.

The citing of security concerns certainly comes across as disingenuous, especially given the fact that such an event has proved possible year after year in Karachi, where the levels of crime and unrest are much higher. The KLF has brought its city prestige and cultural richness, and Mr Sharif needs to recognise the potential of the LLF to do the same for Punjab's capital.

The city administration ought to have been doing everything within its power to give the event a boost, rather than trying to pull it down.

*Published in Dawn, February 23rd, 2016*

## Pathankot steps

AFTER weeks of relative inactivity, at least on the public front, the Pakistan-India relationship appears to be inching forward. The registration of an FIR in Pakistan appears to have paved the way for a series of next steps.

The first of those steps is likely to be a trip by Pakistani investigators to India to gather evidence on the basis of which collaborators and architects of the Pathankot air base attack may be formally charged.

*Also read: [Pakistan's FIR on Pathankot attack is not enough, says Indian defence minister](#)*

Thereafter, though the sequence of steps has not yet been publicly revealed, or perhaps even decided, there will be several major opportunities for bilateral dialogue in March: first, between the foreign secretaries at a Saarc conference in Nepal mid-March; next, between foreign adviser Sartaj Aziz and Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj at a ministerial gathering to conclude the Saarc conference in Nepal; and finally between prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Narendra Modi at a nuclear summit in Washington, D.C. that both leaders are scheduled to attend.

As the flurry of high-level diplomacy late last year demonstrated, bilateral dialogue can quickly and meaningfully be restarted if the political will exists and dialogue is backed by the relevant institutions on both sides of the border.



February 2016

The Pathankot attack is an early and serious test of the intentions of both the Pakistani and Indian establishments.

Thus far, Pakistani officials have for the most part said the right things and demonstrated a refreshing candidness about the role that Pakistani organisations and citizens may have had in planning and executing the attack in Pathankot.

While not officially confirmed as yet, there has been no attempt here to downplay the Jaish-e-Mohammed role that India has alleged in the Pathankot attack.

Perhaps then India should heed the suggestion of Pakistani officials such as Sartaj Aziz that the resumption of dialogue and the Pathankot investigation can proceed simultaneously.

For reasons of both security and prosperity, the governments of India and Pakistan owe it to their publics to restart and sustain a bilateral dialogue.

*Published in Dawn, February 23rd, 2016*

## Uncertain times for NGOs

THE state's misplaced war on NGOs appears to be continuing. Eight months after the interior ministry tried to shut down a foreign NGO, Save the Children, and then mooted onerous new registration requirements for INGOs, the interior minister has had to direct his own ministry to expedite the pace of registration of foreign NGOs seeking to work in Pakistan.

As before, neither has the interior minister explained why registration has not been completed so far nor did he state by when it will be completed. It almost appears as if the government — and possibly the military establishment behind the scenes — wants foreign NGOs to operate in a state of prolonged uncertainty.

The suspicion of the development sector is not confined to foreigners alone.

A report in this newspaper yesterday suggested that \$22m in European funding to help IDPs return from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Fata may lapse because the National Disaster Management Authority and its provincial affiliate, the PDMA, have not issued no-objection certificates for nearly 30 local NGOs to operate in affected areas.

At the root of the government's campaign against NGOs is a misplaced understanding of security. The interior ministry and the intelligence apparatus appear to regard NGOs, particularly of the foreign variety, as a threat to the safety and security of Pakistan.

Presumably this is because, in the reckoning of the security and intelligence apparatus, foreign-funded development organisations and particularly foreign citizens are involved in spying on Pakistan, perhaps on the state itself and possibly on the networks of militant groups that operate across the country.

But the approach is a particularly perverse one. INGOs and NGOs are doing vital work in Pakistan, helping fill in the gaps where the state is derelict in its duties to its people. Security is not simply about protecting the secrets and dark corners of state and society, but also about human security — providing basic services to the disadvantaged sections of the public that the state has been unable to protect.

While it is obvious and indisputable that foreign spies should not be allowed to undermine national security, it is even more apparent that not all foreigners should be regarded as potential spies or destabilising agents of outside powers.

Many of the INGOs and NGOs operating inside Pakistan have been doing so for decades and have established a worthy reputation.

What does appear to have changed is the paranoia of the security establishment and its civilian façade. Counter-insurgencies in Fata and Balochistan and counterterrorism operations in KP appear to have hardened suspicions of foreigners and foreign donor organisations in some parts of the state apparatus.

But can security ever truly be established and the country stabilised if the population — the people of Pakistan and particularly its disadvantaged sections — are not put at the

centre of state policy? The misguided and dangerous war on NGOs must stop.

*Published in Dawn, February 24th, 2016*

## Tattered probes

THERE is a pattern in Pakistan of investigations into serious crimes taking sharp turns along the way, and eventually turning into a media trial rather than coming to a resolution through a judicial forum.

Part of the reason is due to lack of capacity on the part of the law-enforcement agencies, but an equally large part of the reason is because the investigation is politicised along the way and becomes hostage to an agenda that involves flinging dirt on certain parties.

At that point, it becomes difficult to tell who is telling the truth and who is fabricating a story, and the matter comes to no resolution in any judicial forum.

For example, look at the Asim Hussain investigation, which started out as a terror financing charge and has morphed into something completely different, with a few splashy media circuses along the way.

Another more recent example is the investigation into the Baldia Town factory fire which began as a probe into an

industrial accident, and has now become a sordid tale of extortion and politics.

The original charges of extortion surfaced in a JIT report that was ignored by the Sindh High Court, but a new JIT team formed in March last year claims to have found forensic evidence suggesting criminal wrongdoing.

We are being told that traces of a chemical have been found at the crime scene suggesting arson, and the movement of funds in certain bank accounts for the purchase of a property in Hyderabad was connected with extortion payments made by the factory owners.

But the new allegations will only become believable once they are presented in court, along with the evidence that the JIT members claim they have unearthed. Until then, JIT reports should not be taken at face value.

It is probable that the allegations in the new report, on the basis of which they suggest the withdrawal of the old FIR and the registration of a new one, are true and could form the basis for high-profile arrests.

But the fact that the story took a sharp turn precisely at a time when a large media campaign was under way against the MQM also suggests that political victimisation could have played a role.

The case involves the country's worst industrial disaster, with 259 people burned alive; therefore, it must come to a final and credible resolution in court. The matter is far too serious to turn into a political bargaining tool.

## Party democracy

COMMITTED to the tough job of prodding the system forward they may be, but these democracy-monitoring organisations can be very generous at times. Pildat has come up with a rating of political parties according to the extent of democracy in their ranks.

At the top, as usual, is the reluctant democrat, the Jamaat-i-Islami. The PTI trails JI and the National Party at number three, which may be a bit of a letdown given the new emphasis on having a party that is more than a family enterprise.

The more fancied and avowedly democratic entities such as the PML-N and the MQM languish at the bottom of the pack — a tribute to the success of a centralised, uncomplicated infrastructure that allows the leaders at the top to control these parties without too much fuss.

The formula took into account a 12-point framework to measure the degree of democracy in eight selected parties which showed a general deterioration.

The good old PPP is somewhere in the middle with a 36pc approval rate. This is a familiar figure for the PPP. That's the number around where its popularity hovered in its heyday.

Maybe it should be a cause of some satisfaction for the PPP that it has retained the figure at least in some estimates. Most parties should actually consider themselves lucky to have made the cut.

Given that many of them don't deem any election, other than provincial and national polls, as worth their while, they could have suffered an altogether more devastating snub had the monitor chosen a less charitable formulation of the question. It could have simply asked whether there was any democracy left in the party.

Having been saved the pain of the obvious answer, Pakistanis might be only too relieved to ask about the tools that helped trace the flourishing germs of pluralism and diversity and democracy within these ostensibly family outfits.

Only if all family members had an equal say would these parties appear to be more democratic.

*Published in Dawn, February 24th, 2016*

## Syria ceasefire

THERE is a concerted international push for a ceasefire in Syria, though strong scepticism is also being voiced about the latest proposal. The US and Russia — powers that have been supporting opposing sides in this brutal conflict — are the principal international backers of the latest peace plan.

Significantly, both the Assad regime and the 'moderate' opposition have also indicated support for the initiative, which is scheduled to go into effect this weekend.

Of course, what fuels scepticism about the accord is the fact that numerous attempts to bring the Syrian conflict to a negotiated settlement have failed up until now. If the ceasefire succeeds, it can lead to much-needed humanitarian assistance reaching civilians trapped in war zones.

It may also act as a confidence-building measure between Bashar al-Assad's government and his opponents — till now both sides have shown little faith in each other.

But if the ceasefire falls through, we may well see the Syrian civil war expand into a wider regional conflict, especially if Turkish and Saudi plans for a ground invasion materialise. That is why it is incumbent upon all internal and external players to support the peace deal.

It goes without saying that the major spoilers in this deal will be the militant Islamic State group, Al Nusra and other extremist concerns which, for obvious reasons, have not been included in the peace deal.

It is a fact that some of these militant groups have had alliances with Mr Assad's 'secular' opponents, and will not be very pleased at attempts to negotiate a settlement.

Along with the Syrian regime and the country's non-militant opposition, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran will have to play major roles in making the ceasefire work and convincing their allies inside the country to avoid violations of the truce.

This may well be the last chance to resolve the Syrian imbroglio before it transforms into something unmanageable

involving powers in the region and beyond, while giving IS and other militant groups even more room to operate.

*Published in Dawn, February 25th, 2016*

## Pakistan Super League

THE resounding, yet unexpected, success of the Pakistan Super League augurs well for the country in more ways than one.

Primarily, it promises to bring a swift change in the game's fortunes while allowing Pakistan a chance to reassert itself as a leading cricketing nation after a barren period of hardly any international cricket at home since 2009.

A much-trumpeted project of the Pakistan Cricket Board which was shelved twice since 2013 owing to reasons of logistics and security concerns, the PSL kept millions in and out of the country riveted for its entire 20-day duration.

Capitalising on the game's tremendous appeal in the region, the PSL created an air of competition that raised the spirits of millions of fans amid the many close contests witnessed in the UAE. The cash-rich league, which had five franchises competing for the title, was eventually won by Islamabad United.

The winners, buoyed by the brilliant combination of skipper Misbah-ul-Haq and coach Wasim Akram, proved superior to

their rivals as they held their nerve in key games to clinch the title.

The successful staging of the league also diluted the scepticism of many experts who doubted it would ever see the light of day. Here one must give credit to the persistence of Najam Sethi and his team who worked against heavy odds to make the PSL happen sooner than anticipated.

Having said that, Pakistan's cricket bosses should guard against becoming too starry-eyed. By holding the league on foreign soil, the PCB is not sending out the ideal message to other cricketing nations that have been reluctant to send their teams to Pakistan in the past decade.

While the league has provided valuable exposure to many local players who have had the rare experience of sharing the dressing room with some of the greats of the game, one would ideally like to see the league metamorphose into a major home project.

Many critics and former players believe that the country's cricket will only regain its lost status if the PSL is held on home turf. Their views are vindicated to the extent that no new batting or fast-bowling talents have been unearthed during the competition. It is no secret that the PSL has been inspired by the Indian Premier League and aspires to follow a similar pattern. However, our cricket officials would be well advised to ensure that the promising initiative does not get embroiled in the kind of controversies that dogged the IPL.

*Published in Dawn, February 25th, 2016*

## New terror-financing guidelines

THE State Bank's new guidance to exchange companies and banks regarding their foreign currency dealings are a step in the right direction, even if that step is a rather pusillanimous one.

The guidelines, contained in a circular that aims "to prevent the possible use of the banking sector for money laundering, terrorist financing and illegal transfer of funds" direct money market players to undertake certain diligence actions that ought to have been issued long ago.

The new guidelines say, for instance, that foreign currency accounts "maintained by individuals" where an amount larger than \$10,000 "is deposited in, withdrawn from or remitted out from the account during the month" must be recorded as per a given template, and that these records must be kept by the institution to be produced whenever required by the authorities.

It also reminds reporting entities to maintain due diligence when transacting funds to ensure that they know who their customers are and what the source of those funds really is.

The guidelines themselves are a reminder of another sort, however. They remind us of the severe capacity weaknesses that mar all efforts to interdict terror-related financial flows in an economy where tax evasion is rampant and informal cash transactions are massive.

Both of these — tax evasion and informality — automatically create the pathways through which funds can evade the gaze of the authorities, and also create perverse incentives in the financial sector to be more accommodating when dealing with the requirements for discretion from some of its high net worth clientele.

In such an environment, detecting terror-related financing naturally becomes nearly impossible through regulatory channels alone. The State Bank cannot wage the fight against terror financing on its own given this context, and the near absence of any framework for cooperation with law enforcement is a key weakness.

Besides capacity weaknesses there is also lack of will.

The circular issued by the State Bank is striking precisely because many of us would have believed that such movements are already under some form of surveillance, and that reminders to maintain records of financial transactions need not be issued when it is abundantly obvious that the country is in the midst of a war against internal elements who are using the country's infrastructure — like the payments system and telecommunications — to carry on their militant activities.

But a full year after the launch of the National Action Plan, which mentioned terror financing as a key priority, if forex dealers and banks need to be reminded to be vigilant about their customers and to maintain records, it only goes to show the overall lethargy with which this crucial goal is being pursued.



Even a thousand small steps of this sort will not get us anywhere in the efforts to choke off the sources of the militants' financing.

*Published in Dawn, February 25th, 2016*

## Zardari: no lessons learnt

Asif Ali Zardari, former president and still PPP boss, has surprised and confounded before. In recent times, Mr Zardari has even surprised his own party with his pronouncements on national politics, institutional relations and the role of the military establishment.

But perhaps never before has Mr Zardari simultaneously stunned the country at large and mystified his own party [as he did on Tuesday](#).

For several frenzied hours two days ago, the media and the political leadership tried to dissect a statement attributed to Mr Zardari in which the former president appeared to call on army chief, Gen Raheel Sharif, to reconsider his decision to retire in November.

It was a bewildering statement and directly contradicted Mr Zardari himself from just a month ago. What was the former president thinking?

The only thing that is clear at this point is that the PPP does not function coherently when its leader is trying to run its affairs from self-exile.

Neither apparently is Mr Zardari himself capable of staying on message when his personal spokesperson, Farhatullah Babar, is not around to vet the former president's words and opinions.

Desperately for national politics and the PPP itself, the party that was in power at the centre less than three years ago and that still governs Sindh appears to have become a parody of itself.

While Mr Zardari has now disowned the crux of his statement on Tuesday and his party spokespersons have gone into damage control mode, it is worth considering the implications of Mr Zardari's ruminations on a possible extension for Gen Sharif.

Perhaps most astounding is how unaware Mr Zardari appears to be of his own role in making it possible to have a debate on an army chief's extension in the first place.

Five years ago, had Mr Zardari not cravenly submitted to a power-hungry Ashfaq Kayani, then army chief on the verge of retirement, it is almost inconceivable that an extension for an army chief in civilian times could be considered today.

It is possible that at the time Mr Zardari had calculated that an extension for Mr Kayani would have ensured the PPP a full term in office, an unprecedented achievement in the massively interrupted democratic history of the country.



February 2016

Yet, just a few months after the extension was granted, the Memogate controversy rocked the PPP government — and it quickly and abundantly became clear that the targets were none other than Mr Zardari himself and his handpicked ambassador to the US, Husain Haqqani.

Worryingly, Mr Zardari appears to have learnt no lessons from his own and very personal history with extensions and the institutional problems they can cause.

Was Mr Zardari hoping to win a reprieve for his party in Sindh? Or was he hoping to drive a wedge between the federal government and the military leadership? If so, to what end?

Mysterious indeed have become the ways of Asif Ali Zardari.

*Published in Dawn, February 26th, 2016*

## Euro bond ghosts

FOR many months now, a persistent rumour has refused to go away suggesting that money belonging to individuals from Pakistan has been invested in the Euro bond auction carried out in September last year.

It is illegal for Pakistani residents to participate in a foreign currency bond auction of the government, and the issue raises serious concerns relating to money laundering.

The rumours have circulated ever since the auction was conducted, often appearing in dodgy TV shows and therefore garnering little credibility. But of late they have resurfaced. Most recently, the Senate Standing Committee on Finance asked the finance ministry about the matter, and the reported answers given by the ministry were unsatisfactory.

The committee has vowed to summon representatives from the State Bank and private banks that were underwriters to the issue and demand greater disclosures from them on the identity of any Pakistani resident whose funds may have been utilised in the auction.

That hearing should take place soon, and the committee must make a forceful effort to follow up on this line of questioning.

What's more, the rumours also allege that at least a part of the \$500m that was raised through that auction was money from Pakistan, fuelling further questions about the utility of the exercise since its prime purpose was to bring foreign exchange into the country.

If the allegations are true, and the fact that they are being raised in a Senate committee hearing says they are more than idle speculation from TV shows, it would mean that money belonging to wealthy Pakistanis has been lent to the government at some of the highest interest rates in the world, at a time when the government could not present a compelling case for why the auction was necessary in the first place, considering reserves were at a record high for that period.

The secretary finance was able to confirm only that the branches of two Pakistani banks, which are barred from

February 2016

participating in foreign currency auctions of the country, did indeed take part in the auction without any legal hitches since they are registered offshore.

It is vital now to get to the bottom of this affair. This set of allegations refuses to subside, and having been raised at the level of a Senate hearing, the government should make a strong effort to put the matter to rest. The implications are highly damaging.

*Published in Dawn, February 26th, 2016*

## Retirement in cricket

THE question of when a professional should call it a day continues to be an issue worthy of national debate. This time the discussion is centred round Shahid Khan Afridi.

It seems that the cricketer is not too inclined to agree with the theory that a professional should bow out at a certain point in time, vacating the place for others.

Having already quit the Test and one-day formats, he was to say goodbye to the shortest version of the game at the conclusion of the T-20 World Cup in April.

But according to reports, the mercurial cricketer, who is always in a hurry on the field, is reconsidering his decision. It was the great Majid Khan who once rubbished the idea of retirement,

maintaining the job of deciding when a cricketer could no longer represent his side was best left to the selectors.

If Afridi, the current Pakistan captain for the T-20 format, chooses to delay his departure, he will be placing himself at the disposal of the selectors.

This would be an uncomfortable situation for sensitive fans who would want their hero to walk away with his head held high instead of being dropped. But should this be the deciding factor given the changes the industry has gone through?

The case highlights a general trend where cricketers in their late 30s and beyond feel they are still fit enough for a T-20 game that is spread over just three and half hours. And it pays well both in terms of money and fame.

At 36 and still able to whack a few out of the ground, it is not too surprising that Shahid Afridi thinks he can extend his career by a few more seasons. It's increasingly and primarily an individual's decision.

Calls to retire may be outdated, even if there are concerns that a cricketer is no longer in top form. It must be realised that the change in the game's format could well prove there is still a lot of cricket left in the individual.

*Published in Dawn, February 26th, 2016*

## Nuclear restraint potential

THE National Command Authority, the apex nuclear body in the country, met on Wednesday and, among now-standard reiterations, “re-emphasised Pakistan’s desire for establishing the Strategic Restraint Regime in South Asia and the inescapable need of a meaningful and sustained comprehensive dialogue process for resolution of all outstanding disputes”.

In a week in which it was revealed that Pakistan and India are among the top 10 importers of arms globally, the NCA’s message was sensible and welcome.

The Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR) was first mooted by Pakistan in the wake of the 1998 nuclear tests in South Asia and is based on nuclear restraint, conventional balance and dispute settlement. In theory, SRR would eliminate the possibility of an arms race and, via dispute settlement, rationalise the investments in their militaries that India and Pakistan have deemed necessary. In reality, India has never been interested in SRR. Why?

Security hawks in Pakistan would point to India’s unbridled ambitions and its desire to project military power over its neighbours. The massive investments that India has made and is continuing to make to transform its military capabilities do suggest that ambition more than pure threat perception is driving India’s defence strategy.

An economy that is still growing at more than seven per cent per annum has created the fiscal space for India’s policymakers to pursue fanciful projects. Yet, there is another side to the

story. The SRR is a bilateral pact, whereas India is locked in a rivalry with China too.

The Chinese military budget, at an estimated \$150bn, is three times the size of India’s. The cascading security effect between China, India and Pakistan — and the global ambitions of China and India — have made the SRR a non-starter. But it need not be.

The elements of SRR — nuclear restraint, conventional balance and dispute settlement — are interlocking. For example, it was India’s consideration of Cold Start, a next-generation conventional capability, that triggered Pakistan’s interest in tactical nuclear weapons.

Cold Start was Pakistan-specific and had little relevance to China, suggesting that if India had shown restraint in its public posturing, the Pak-India nuclear threshold would not have been altered.

There is also a third aspect, as the NCA statement made clear: “a meaningful and sustained comprehensive dialogue process”. For all the rhetoric and occasional bellicosity, Indian and Pakistani policymakers are ultimately rational actors.

As long as there are outstanding disputes of a serious nature, the threat of conflict is a real one — and defence strategies and spending will reflect that reality. Resolve those disputes, however, and a rationalisation will eventually and necessarily take place. To assert that is not woolly optimism.

Dialogue may not yield immediate or significant breakthroughs, but that is why it needs to be meaningful and

sustained. The NCA statement suggests that the military is supportive of comprehensive dialogue. India should meet Pakistan half way.

*Published in Dawn, February 27th, 2016*

## Tax amnesty failure

WITH the deadline only two days away, the tax amnesty scheme launched with much fanfare by the government appears to have failed even more spectacularly than any similar schemes before.

The so-called Voluntary Tax Compliance Scheme was supposed to net one million new taxpayers from amongst the trader community, as per the optimistic announcements of the finance minister at the time.

As its deadline draws near, only 128 have reportedly taken advantage of the scheme.

This is a most dismal failure, and makes clear to all that the trader community is adamantly opposed to contributing anything to the tax base of the country, whether or not it is consulted or made part of the system.

In the past, the leadership of the trader community opposed tax measures that would make it incumbent upon them to file returns on income tax with arguments that they were “not

consulted” when the tax measures were drawn up. They had no trust of the taxman, they would say, going on to point out that they were already paying taxes under other heads, like sales tax.

All these arguments are now washed away. The tax amnesty that has just failed to fetch the compliance of the trader community was drawn up by the leadership of the community themselves.

It went through an extensive process of consultation. And paying taxes under other heads is no excuse; everybody pays taxes under various heads but that does not absolve anyone of the obligation to file an income tax return.

The traders have proved themselves to be a stubborn lot, and have made fools out of the government. The scheme had ownership all the way up to the top levels of government, with the prime minister himself approving its final shape, while the finance minister was intimately involved in the negotiations.

The fact that the senior leadership of the trader community consented to the terms of the deal, then praised it publically, only to fail so spectacularly to obtain compliance with its terms, shows perhaps the limits of a negotiated path forward in broadening the tax base.

All eyes will now be on the government to see how it responds. Will it approve another extension in the deadline, in the vain hope that more time will yield more filers? Perhaps the time has come to tighten the screws, and resort to penal measures should now begin.

## Novel protest

AS far as protests go, Alamgir Khan's method was definitely unique. On Thursday, the activist hopped on to a tractor trolley loaded with malodorous garbage and tried to make his way to the Sindh Chief Minister's House in Karachi, so that the rulers of the province could face what millions of city dwellers put up with every day.

The campaigner was arrested and reportedly granted bail on Friday.

The local chapter of the PTI staged a protest in support of Mr Khan, no doubt enjoying the bad PR the PPP-led provincial government was earning because of the episode.

Mr Khan has staged similar protests before, stencilling the words 'fix it', along with a picture of Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah, besides the city's countless open manholes.

Though we may not necessarily agree with the method of protest, and despite the activist's political links, the issues he has raised are entirely genuine and concern millions of citizens in Karachi and across urban Sindh.

The Sindh CM could try and escape censure by saying 'this is not my problem', as he has previously done. However, when confronted with dilapidated urban infrastructure and a collapse in civic services, where can the citizen turn? Karachi is touted as an Asian megacity.

However, wherever one goes in the metropolis, mounds of stinking garbage, crumbling roads and overflowing sewage are a ubiquitous sight, found in equal measure in posh localities, middle-class neighbourhoods and urban slums.

But the rulers — in their rarefied environs — are shielded from such ugliness. It is criminal that a city like Karachi has no proper solid waste disposal system. Whatever the criticism of the Musharraf-era local governments may have been, the set-up we have today has witnessed a considerable drop in service delivery.

Much of this is due to the fact that the Sindh government has clipped the wings of municipal authorities in the province. So, CM Sahib, can the people be blamed entirely if they end up knocking on your door for redress?

*Published in Dawn, February 27th, 2016*

## Karachi transport scheme

COMMUTERS in Karachi deserve to be recognised for their bravery and resilience, for they have to make do with a public transport system that is truly mediaeval. Buses are rickety, overcrowded, too few in number and rashly driven, while the KCR — the city’s commuter railroad — was put to pasture in 1999. Taxis have almost disappeared from the city’s thoroughfares, while rickshaws routinely fleece commuters. In such a dismal scenario, the inauguration of the Green Line Rapid Bus Transit plan by the prime minister in the city on Friday comes as a ray of hope. The multibillion rupee federally funded project is due to be completed in a year and is designed to carry 300,000 passengers daily on a key route running through the heart of the metropolis. The prime minister used pleasant-sounding adjectives while describing the project, saying it would result in a “brighter and developed” Karachi. We hope this rhetoric and optimism is translated into reality.

Though one rapid bus route will not radically alter the city’s transport landscape, it is an important first step. What Karachi needs is an integrated public transport system that utilises bus routes and commuter railroads and that is affordable and comfortable for the commuter. For decades, successive governments have miserably failed to achieve this. The provincial government has announced its own Orange Line Bus project; we hope these schemes are complementary and don’t work at cross purposes. Moreover, the federal, provincial and city governments must listen to experts and civil society to ensure the transport solutions are in the best interest of Karachi and its people. Badly planned and executed schemes will only add to the mess and increase the congestion and chaos that has

become a hallmark of the city’s traffic. Many a pipe dream has been sold to the people of Karachi in the name of a workable public transport system; we hope the current initiatives succeed in giving commuters in the metropolis respectable and safe transport options worthy of a city of its size.

*Published in Dawn, February 28th, 2016*

## Obstinacy over Siachen

IT was once thought to be a ‘low-hanging fruit’ of the dialogue process: an agreement to demilitarise Siachen and for troops on either side of the Actual Ground Position Line to withdraw to their pre-1984 positions.

But on Friday, Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar informed the Indian parliament that his government will not withdraw from Siachen because it could trust Pakistan to reoccupy areas vacated by India and therefore put India at a strategic disadvantage in the glacier region.

*Know more: [India won’t quit Siachen, says minister](#)*

Mr Parrikar’s assertion is both unfortunate and untrue. Pakistan has offered a mechanism for not only verifying mutual withdrawals from Siachen, but a joint patrolling system that would ensure that neither side ingresses into the region again to grab any territorial or military advantage.



February 2016

The Pakistani suggestion is not only sensible, but cost-effective, transparent and verifiable too. Yet, India has always balked at the idea.

*Also read: [Killer Siachen — 'where a Pakistani soldier dies every four days from the cold'](#)*

Part of the problem is history. In 1984, India grabbed an advantage in Siachen that its military has prized ever since and is loath to give up.

The Kargil conflict in 1999 is thought to be the Pakistani response to India's territory grab a decade and a half earlier — but a response that only gave the Indian military further reason to dig in its heels domestically.

After the Kargil conflict, inside India, the military leadership has effectively told every political government that withdrawal from Siachen would amount to betraying the sacrifices of Indian soldiers who gave up their lives to protect it.

But there is also a practical aspect to the Indian military's insistence on occupying Siachen: the investments in infrastructure over the years have made the glacier an attractive high-altitude training ground at relatively manageable costs (the recent deaths in an avalanche notwithstanding).

Meanwhile, for Pakistan a withdrawal to the 1984 positions would reverse the advantage India gained and also rationalise military expenditures — a factor that matters to Pakistan given the significantly smaller budget of the military here as compared to India's.

Yet, why the Indian military is determined to remain in Siachen and why the Pakistani military would prefer a withdrawal are perhaps beside the point.

*Read: [Indian soldier rescued from Siachen dies](#)*

Siachen is a conflict of egos more than an actual strategic gain — if the Indian government cannot even contemplate a sensible solution to the Siachen issue, then what of the bigger disputes between the two countries?

What is also disturbing is that Mr Parrikar's statement attempts to predetermine an outcome of the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue.

If each issue on which Pakistan's position has some merit and legitimacy is dismissed by India at the very outset, then how is dialogue supposed to proceed?

Siachen is not a symbol of India's strength or Pakistan's weakness, but of the foolishness and terribleness of war.

The real value of Siachen lies in making a success story of a meaningful peace process.

*Published in Dawn, February 28th, 2016*

## Nabbing Asim Hussain

SIX months after he was detained under charges of terror financing, a reference against former petroleum minister Asim Hussain is finally before a court. Even though he was initially picked up on serious charges of maintaining links with terrorists, which were later changed to money laundering, and then again for allegedly having had a role in the stock market crash of 2008, the reference filed before the court contains nothing about these. Instead, the case is built around three major allegations: land fraud for the commercial utilisation of land allotted for charity purposes, building assets abroad through money laundering, and gas curtailment to the fertiliser sector that caused a large loss to the national exchequer.

The gas-related allegations are the crux of the reference, accounting for 97pc of the Rs462bn worth of the alleged corruption. The reference argues that the burden of gas load management was made to fall on fertiliser companies unfairly, and contrary to an ECC decision of 2001 that placed the fertiliser sector on top of the merit order list in gas allocations. Because of this curtailment, the reference claims, fertiliser production in the country fell and the price rose by more than 100pc over three years, necessitating resort to fertiliser imports and price subsidies, the total value of which came to Rs450bn according to figures that were given in the reference. The logic is a bit puzzling for a number of reasons. ECC decisions are subject to change, and a new merit order list that had been drawn up later in the Musharraf era clearly put domestic consumers on top. The figure of Rs450bn in losses incurred due to gas curtailment to the fertiliser sector also needs further scrutiny, since it is not clear how it has been calculated and is

suspiciously close to estimates that were given by fertiliser industry representatives in those days of the total losses that would be incurred by the state if a complete shutdown of the sector were to take place. In any event, gas allocations is a highly complex executive decision to be made by the government in power and will always leave some sectors facing losses and crying foul. It will be interesting to see, once the detailed documents are released, how far NAB investigators actually understand the intricacies of such a complex issues upon which they have chosen to build their case.

*Published in Dawn, February 28th, 2016*

## Pak-Afghan cooperation

WITH the Quadrilateral Coordination Group on Afghanistan pressing for the resumption of talks between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban, it was always likely that Taliban groups either opposed to talks or seeking to gain an advantage at the negotiating table would ramp up attacks inside Afghanistan.

Adding to that possibility is the onset of the main fighting season as winter winds down in Afghanistan. Yet, attacks such as the one that took place in Kabul on Saturday, in which a suicide bomber struck near the defence ministry, carry a particular danger.

In the past, the Afghan government has reacted with great anger to attacks in the capital city and has accused Pakistan of not doing enough to stop the alleged planning and coordination of such attacks from its soil.

While the accusations may well have been exaggerated, it is likely that a fresh wave of attacks, especially in Kabul, could undermine efforts within the QCG to lessen the mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan and damage the talks process itself.

Intelligence cooperation and border management remain, as ever, the areas where Pakistan and Afghanistan need to do much more.

The high-level delegations that travel back and forth between Islamabad and Kabul and to border areas only appear able to achieve limited, short-term successes.

Neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan appear willing to have the frank discussions necessary at the political, military and intelligence levels to make the border less porous.

Nor do the outside powers in the QCG, China and the US, appear to have the inclination or tools to nudge Afghanistan and Pakistan closer to lasting solutions.

It is a strange, dangerous situation. With Zarb-i-Azb now in its last phase, a final ground offensive in North Waziristan will dislodge more militants and likely send a number of them scrambling across the border into Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the Afghans are bracing for what is likely to be the most ferocious fighting season ever — with eastern and southern Afghanistan remaining unstable. It makes sense, therefore, for Pakistan and Afghanistan to cooperate — and yet intelligence cooperation and border management remain piecemeal and ad hoc.

Perhaps, then, the best hope is for the soon-to-be-resumed Afghan peace talks to produce quick results.

Drawing the main or even some Taliban factions into peace negotiations will create some leverage over those groups to discourage the most destabilising attacks, like those in Kabul.

And, pursuant to a deal, a more stable Afghanistan would allow it address Pakistan's security concerns regarding anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries along the border.

Until then, the Pak-Afghan focus should be to cooperate when violence spikes rather than descend into a blame game.

*Published in Dawn, February 29th, 2016*

## Protection for women

AFTER seemingly glacial progress towards legislation dealing with violence against women, Punjab has surprised many by enacting, in some respects, perhaps the most comprehensive legislation passed on the issue thus far by the provinces — excluding Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which has yet to do so.

The Protection of Women Against Violence Bill 2015 defines violence to include domestic violence, sexual violence, psychological and emotional abuse, economic abuse, stalking and cyber crime, as well as abetment of such acts.

*Also read: [New domestic violence bill a good start: HRCP](#)*

Although it has been criticised for not criminalising domestic violence, the legislation nevertheless has the capacity to facilitate victims from the initial reporting stage to resolution of the dispute.

Some of the stipulated measures include a dedicated toll-free number to lodge complaints, protection officers to inform defendants of complaints against them, protection centres, shelter homes and expedited court proceedings.

Moreover, the legislation makes provision for practical hurdles, such as sanctioning alleged perpetrators of violence if they offer resistance to protection officers. It also takes into account the cultural realities that make women dependent upon their spouses in various aspects.

For example, under this law an aggrieved woman cannot be forced out of the house.

It is thus with good reason the passage of this law has been generally welcomed by progressive segments of society, and excoriated by those on the right. Moreover, as the country's most populous province where the vast majority of crimes against women occur, Punjab is well placed to spur the momentum for change.

Not only should KP expedite the enactment of its own women protection law, but Sindh and Balochistan must ensure that the mechanisms for implementation — still woefully lacking — are put in place without further delay in order to give teeth to the legislation they passed in 2013 and 2014, respectively.

However, and this brings us to the larger issue, this apathy is symptomatic of the deep-seated misogyny prevalent in Pakistan — which is often, and disingenuously, couched in the language of religion.

This social conditioning condones gender-based violence almost as a male prerogative, and for which women themselves are held responsible by virtue of their appearance or behaviour.

Changing mindsets is always a challenge but not an insurmountable one. The media — particularly the entertainment industry — can play an important role here. It is high time that the ideal of feminine virtue ceases to be a woman who stoically endures mistreatment at the hands of men, without a murmur of complaint.

*Published in Dawn, February 29th, 2016*

## Nanga Parbat ascent

IT is always uplifting to witness a historic feat of endurance, and all the more so when a Pakistani is part of the team.

Six months before mountaineering season opens, a small team of four climbers, including Ali Sadpara of Pakistan, made history when they made the first winter ascent of Nanga Parbat on Friday.

The feat comes after 29 teams had already made the attempt in previous years, many of them including members of the present team.

*Take a look: [Climbers make first winter ascent of Nanga Parbat](#)*

Over the decades, attempts to summit Nanga Parbat have produced some of the most brutal mountaineering legends, earning it the nickname 'killer mountain' because more people have died trying to summit it than any other mountain in the world.

Given its fierce reputation, the climbing team that just fulfilled its long-fought goal of being the first to ascend the peak in winter has rightfully taken its place in mountaineering history.

The team deserves all the congratulations that will inevitably be coming their way as they return to sea level.

Ali Sadpara was part of a team that attempted a winter ascent last year as well. This year he played a crucial role in the

ascent, when he was part of an advance party that carried essential supplies to Camp 3 at 6,700 metres almost a month before the summit attempt began.

Mountaineering is one of the most challenging pursuits in the world, and very few have the heart and mind to be successful at it.

Pakistan can afford to take greater pride in the accomplishments of our mountaineers, and greater interest in what the mountainous north has to offer by way of opportunities for travel and challenges.

The northern areas have produced some of the finest mountaineers in the world, famous for their stoutness of will and refinement of manners.

Hearty kudos to the team that made this historic ascent, and for us the achievement is all the more special because Ali Sadpara was amongst them.

*Published in Dawn, February 29th, 2016*