

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of September 2016

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Table of Contents

US-India ties	6
Jailed Karachi mayor	7
Tobacco advertisements	8
Accountability suffers	9
Rangers' gaffe	10
Expat workers in limbo	11
KP attacked again.....	12
SBP governor's take	13
Gross medical negligence	14
MQM's fortunes.....	15
Health sector reforms	16
PM changes tack	17
Fighting politics with politics.....	18
Women workers.....	19
APS victims' families	20
Kabul attacks.....	21
Medical waste	23
Pakistan's ODI loss	24
Pak-India hope	24
NA speaker's role	26
Discriminatory law	27
Chasing tax defaulters.....	27
Saudi-Iran Haj spat.....	28
Contaminated water	29
Divisions in women's caucus.....	30
'Voluntary return'	31
Smuggled coins	32
Rangers in Punjab	33
Karachi by-election	34
Blood transfusion law	35
Taxing parliament	36

'Ordinance factory'	37
Eidul Azha hygiene	38
Transit trade spat	38
PSEs in a shambles	40
Transgenders' travails	41
Muslim world in flux	41
Electoral reforms.....	43
Red-faced in the Senate	44
Islamic banking.....	45
New Syria truce	46
Motorway incident.....	47
Flawed approach to Pakistan	47
Railways' safety.....	48
Another 'honour' killing	49
Policing Sindh	50
Mohmand bombing	51
Banks' performance	52
Attack on Indian army.....	53
Tax convention.....	54
Cinema revival.....	55
Dar's dominance	55
PTI's Raiwind plan	56
Malaria resurgence	57
Regional tensions	58
Militancy nexus	59
Executing the mentally ill.....	60
Pak-India media war	61
Chasing bad money.....	62
Bugti's asylum request.....	63
PM's speech at UN	63
'Remittances' to India	65
Questionable scholarship.....	66

Stunted development 66

Peace pact in Kabul 67

Prison conditions..... 68

Ties with Russia..... 69

Altaf’s call..... 70

Monetary policy 71

Modi's speech 72

KP police powers..... 73

Syria truce in tatters..... 74

CPEC security force 74

Freezing terror funds 75

A polio-free Pakistan..... 76

Water wars..... 77

Police brutality 78

KP tuberculosis law 79

Undermining Saarc..... 80

Women & Fata reforms 81

T-20 clean sweep 82

US-Saudi relations..... 83

Farmers’ protest 84

Women’s sport..... 85

US-India ties

In Delhi, the India-US Strategic and Commercial Dialogue; in Washington, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, one of four so-called foundational pacts the US signs with defence partners.

Taken together, this is yet another step towards a closer US-India strategic, defence and commercial relationship, a process kick-started a decade ago under a Congress-led coalition and now accelerating under a BJP government.

In the US, meanwhile, there is rare bipartisan consensus on deepening ties with India — hence, US Secretary of State John Kerry's fulsome praise for India and the absence of any substantive comments on India-held Kashmir in New Delhi.

Meanwhile, a trilateral US-India-Afghanistan talks process is also to be restarted. Inside Pakistan, the developments are sure to be keenly followed in security circles, though perhaps India's internal political opposition to deepening military ties with the US and concerns about unduly antagonising China are likely to be discounted.

Do the Indo-US moves really amount to a challenge for Pakistan's security situation, however?

While it is to be regretted that not only has the US ignored the violence in IHK and India has aggressively tried to blame Pakistan for allegedly seeking to stoke trouble inside IHK, there is another reality that must be addressed.

On the terrorism front, it is true that Pakistan has suffered violence from the now Afghan-based anti-Pakistan militants and it does appear that India is willing to intrude deeper into Balochistan's troubles. Yet, it is also true that Pakistan's fight against militancy has not extended to anti-Afghan and anti-India militant groups operating from its soil.

That duality, whether implicit or officially unacknowledged, is problematic because these groups predate and pose a bigger challenge to regional stability than anything the anti-Pakistan militants have been able to threaten.

The immense suffering of Pakistanis is equal to — in some cases even greater than — what neighbouring populations have endured, but the commonality is that all have suffered.

The foremost duty of the Pakistani state is to secure the homeland and the people of this country — but the security threat cannot be fought in isolation.

Consider that the Mumbai trials and Pathankot probe have effectively stalled and while there may be narrow, legalistic explanations for why that is the case, it appears to be a lack of will on the part of the state.

Troubling too is the space being accorded to pro-Kashmir, anti-India militants groups and their leadership here. When in many cases those leaders are either banned or indirectly linked to militancy, why are they being allowed to address public rallies and engage in political discourse?

Pakistani authorities rightly bristle at any attempt to sideline this country internationally. But security is neither one-dimensional nor country-specific. Terrorism is a common threat to the region and little will change if a piecemeal, ad hoc approach continues to prevail.

Jailed Karachi mayor

THE Pakistani political scenario is known for its frequently strange occurrences. One can add one more episode to the list: on Tuesday, Waseem Akhtar, the mayor of Pakistan's biggest city, was let out of jail briefly in order to take the oath of office. Earlier, Mr Akhtar had been elected Karachi mayor from jail — a first in our chequered political history. He has been in custody since July and faces a number of cases — all bailable according to him. These include involvement in the May 12, 2007 violence in Karachi. At the time of the ugly events, Waseem Akhtar held the portfolio of home adviser to the Sindh chief minister. These and other charges the mayor faces are serious and must be probed impartially. If he is found guilty, Mr Akhtar must face the penalty under the law and would obviously have to leave the mayor's office. However, as the highest elected official of Karachi, it is unacceptable that Mr Akhtar runs the metropolis's affairs from inside prison, especially if the charges are bailable. Besides, it appears a tad strange for the mayor to be locked up for his alleged role in the May 12 mayhem while retired Gen Musharraf — who ruled the country unchallenged at the time — enjoys his liberty. Until the charges against Waseem Akhtar are proved, he should be allowed his freedom.

However, even if the Karachi mayor were to be released, it would be fair to ask if Mr Akhtar would have the necessary powers to administer the city. As the provincial

government has kept many civic powers, such as solid waste management, we can safely say that the elected heads of municipal bodies in Sindh will not have full authority over their respective jurisdictions. This situation needs to be reversed as municipal bodies must have more than just ceremonial powers to carry out their tasks. Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah has brought vigour to the erstwhile moribund provincial government in many ways. He must realise that empowered and active local governments are essential for the prosperity and progress of Sindh, which is why he ought to make it a priority to transfer all civic duties to the elected municipal bodies. It will take a long time to address all the issues that have cropped up in the long absence of elected local bodies. But with responsive local leaders and a supportive provincial government, the rot can hopefully be reversed.

Tobacco advertisements

THE proceedings at a meeting of the Senate Standing Committee on National Health Services in Islamabad on Tuesday could well be described as a theatre of the absurd. On the agenda was a discussion on The Prohibition of Smoking and Protection of Non-Smokers Health (Amendment) Bill 2016, which calls for a ban on tobacco advertisements. The proposed legislation, tabled by PML-Q Senator Mushahid Hussain, seeks to prevent retailers from putting up advertisements for cigarettes inside their outlets that can tempt the youth. If passed into law, it would also ban tobacco companies from sponsoring health camps, tree plantation campaigns, and sporting and other events. In other words, the participants at the meeting had a more or less straightforward task at hand. However, most of those present outdid themselves in defying logic and science to oppose the bill.

The worldwide trend against smoking began in the West decades ago with the emergence of incontrovertible data showing the link between smoking and various diseases. Studies have found that up to 50pc of smokers die of a smoking-related illness, and smoking decreases lifespan by up to 10 years. As it does in Pakistan today, the powerful tobacco industry in Western countries used a range of tactics, which included issuing outright denials, manipulating facts, co-opting lobby groups to influence policy, etc — all to avoid government regulation of its products and protect its colossal financial interests. That battle has now moved to the shores of developing countries. However, given the benefit of hindsight, it is outrageous that we are revisiting old, discredited arguments, and that our public representatives can see fit to tout the tobacco industry's 'contribution' to our economy while ignoring the enormous cost it exacts on public health and productivity. Instead of pandering to powerful corporate

interests, the government must strictly enforce the ban on public spaces in the country and follow through on its decision to enhance pictorial warnings on cigarette packs. Every attempt by tobacco companies at marketing themselves must be firmly resisted.

Accountability suffers

THE accountability of public officials is back in the news, though perhaps not in the most encouraging of ways. Competing bills by the government and opposition to reshape the legislative landscape for inquiry commissions are ostensibly meant to pave the way for a judicial commission to investigate the Panama Papers revelations and other alleged financial crimes of public officials and figures. But the true purposes are, unfortunately, far removed from an honest attempt to cleanse the body politic of corruption: the government wants to dilute any probe against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family, while the opposition appears to have little interest in anything beyond what can politically damage and embarrass the Sharifs. Sadly, anti-corruption mantras have become little more than political delaying tactics or cudgels to beat political enemies with.

Where parliament could play its role under the existing system, the committee system has found itself shackled. The Public Accounts Committee, supposedly the linchpin of oversight over spending by the executive, was reduced to bemoaning its ineffectiveness because of the unwieldy, protracted audit process of ministries and the toothlessness of the PAC when it comes to having wrongdoing punished. Here, too, however, politics is never far from the surface. The PAC headed by Khurshid Shah, leader of the opposition in the National Assembly, now wants the committee to have expanded resources and a permanent secretariat created to serve it. While a sensible idea, why has it taken three years for Mr Shah and some in the PAC to wake up to the structural and resource constraints? Could it perhaps have something to do with the wrangling over a Panama Papers inquiry? Perhaps also the PPP is awakening to the need to position itself for the 2018 general election by working to expose corruption in the current government. And, finally, could Mr Shah's newfound enthusiasm for one of his most high-profile duties have something to do with the fact that the PAC is nearing the end of its scrutiny of the previous, PPP-led coalition and will soon be delving more deeply into the accounts of the present set-up?

Where the politicians are disappointing in their familiar, self-serving games, other institutions are trying to pick up the slack — but with mixed results so far. A bench of the Supreme Court has clashed with NAB yet again, this time over the latter's focus on petty corruption at the expense of so-called mega-corruption scams. NAB is a flawed

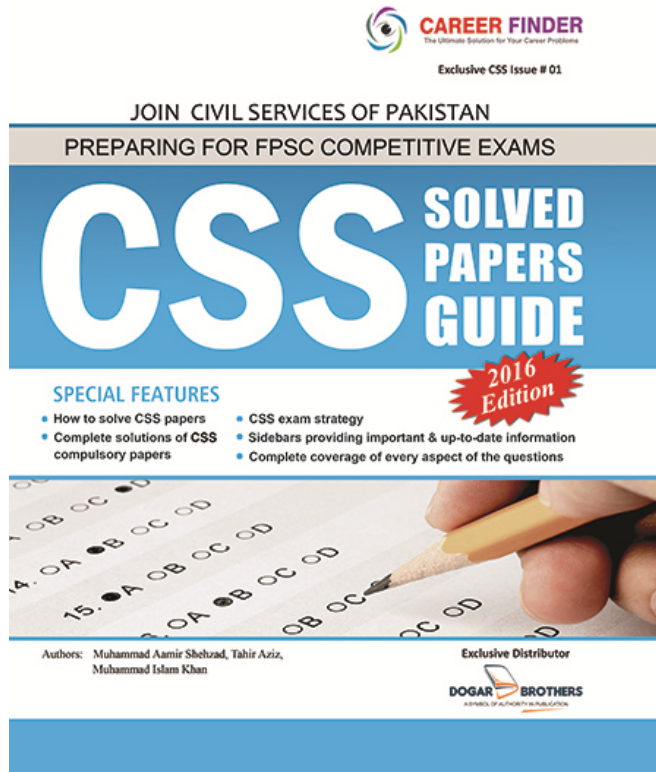
institution that needs legislative revamping, but surely it can act with a modicum of independence, especially with a watchful Supreme Court nudging it along towards fair and transparent action. But NAB appears to be conflicted about its fundamental role and there is only so much the superior judiciary can do as an institution. True accountability remains a distant dream.

Rangers' gaffe

HAD it not been a question of misleading state institutions and trivialising the serious issue of human rights violations, one could look upon it as an amusing tale. At a Senate committee hearing in July, a Sindh Rangers representative claimed that a group by the name of the Human Rights Commission South Asia had endorsed the Karachi operation in a report. Many senators, suspicious of this assertion, have now discovered that no such organisation exists. There is a website which appears fake: it has spelling mistakes, and its 'resources and links' page only has links to newspapers, mostly Pakistani. Even those the website claims are its 'correspondents' in the country have denied any connection with the group. The fact that a high-level officer would appear before the Senate and present a 'report' by such a manifestly fictitious group that casts doubt on allegations of extralegal tactics, shows the poor level of concern that exists — both for human rights in Pakistan, and for the sanctity of the country's elected institutions.

We are living in a world where propaganda is ubiquitous. There are websites for everything —from quack science and fake news to bogus degrees from universities that don't exist. Social media has provided a potent tool to propagandists who can, with the help of a large number of robotic accounts, actually manipulate traffic and plant disinformation. Very often dubious news items and other dodgy pieces of information that circulate among us as if they were fact are traced back to such accounts and websites. It's not very difficult to tell who is behind a certain operation — one can judge from the kind of material that is being put out and the position that is being taken on a specific issue. It is the responsibility of every citizen to be on guard against these scams. The Rangers officer who saw it fit to cite a 'report' by a group that appears to be nothing more than a thinly built website with no content beyond a few links demonstrated a grievous error of judgement — at best. Regrettably, the Rangers have refused to send a representative to appear again before the committee before November. In this case, it seems that the Senate has very little power to seek any kind of redressal; still committee members should do everything they can to at least highlight the egregious breach of professionalism that the paramilitary force displaced.

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Expatriate workers in limbo

DESPITE the state's intervention, the ordeal of Pakistani workers stranded in Saudi Arabia for many months without pay seems no closer to a solution. As reported on Thursday, around 100 Pakistani workers of a Saudi company, United Seemac, say they have not seen any pay cheques for several months. The period they have gone without pay ranges from nine to 16 months. If living in a foreign country with an empty pocket were not bad enough, the workers told this paper their residency permits had expired as their employer had not paid the renewal fee for the documents. This amounts to double jeopardy because if the workers are caught without valid residency documents by Saudi police, the consequences will be dire — most likely a one-way flight home after a stay in jail. These workers are not alone, as over 8,000 individuals employed by other Saudi firms have made similar complaints about inordinately delayed pay cheques.

The Foreign Office and minister for overseas Pakistanis have said they are pursuing the matter. In fact, the minister concerned, Saddaruddin Shah Rashdi, was in the kingdom recently to discuss the matter with the Saudi authorities. However, the fact that he reportedly told a National Assembly standing committee on Tuesday that blowing the matter "out of proportion" may harm ties between Riyadh and Islamabad is indeed strange. The livelihoods and well-being of these overseas Pakistanis should be the state's top priority. While cordial ties with Saudi Arabia are indeed in Pakistan's interest, these should not come at the cost of denying the affected workers their rights. Some of the employers have said the Saudi government has failed to clear their dues, due to the financial crunch the kingdom is facing, which has affected cash flow to workers. Considering the situation, Pakistan must use diplomatic channels to communicate to the Saudi authorities the need to clear the outstanding dues of Pakistani workers in the kingdom immediately.

KP attacked again

KHYBER Pakhtunkhwa has been attacked once again, and once again a familiar set of questions have arisen about the seeming ease with which multiple suicide bombers and fidayeen attackers were able to arrive at their targets in the heart of the province. A day earlier, the ISPR chief had asserted that significant successes have been notched up in the fight against militancy, but the attacks in Mardan and Peshawar have reinforced that a long and complicated fight still lies ahead. While the military is keen to discuss its successes in the various operations ongoing across the country, perhaps it should also be more candid about the extant threats and the terror networks that are still

operational. The need for a more realistic outlook is essential for the public, otherwise the incongruity of a military claiming successes while attacks continue in various parts of the country will only add to the national confusion.

While responsibility for yesterday's attacks cannot yet be known definitively, the claim by Jamaatul Ahrar does seem credible. Alarmingly, not only does the banned TTP faction appear to have a growing reach, from Quetta to Peshawar, but its resources, manpower and organisational capacity seem to be growing. Pakistani security officials point the finger of blame at Afghanistan, where TTP militants have apparently found sanctuary in the eastern region bordering Pakistan and where sections of the state and intelligence apparatus are evincing a renewed hostility towards this country. Addressing the evolved TTP threat has not proved easy because it involves everything from military strategy to national security and foreign policy to border management. Unhappily, not only does the necessary military and civilian cooperation here appear non-existent, but there is perhaps a fundamental divergence over the path ahead. While the civilian government rightly emphasises a policy of peace and reconciliation with neighbouring countries, it seems to have neither the space nor the inclination to deal with a tough set of national security and foreign policy challenges. Yesterday, the anomalous situation was on display yet again as Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif inaugurated one more road project and talked about Pakistan being on the path to prosperity — while Peshawar and Mardan were bleeding yet again.

Where the civilian government may be out of ideas or lack space, the military establishment seems far too keen on externalising blame rather than working towards understanding the sustained and simultaneously evolving militant threat. Wherever the Jamaatul Ahrar leadership may be based, the attacks are taking place deep inside Pakistan. Why is the intelligence apparatus always one step behind the militants? Peshawar and Mardan were no lone-wolf attacks and likely required a network of individuals to facilitate the attackers. While the bravery of security personnel helped limit the damage, it is virtually impossible to stop a suicide bomber who has already been deployed. But why are militants still operating with relative ease?

SBP governor's take

THE role of central banks is a delicate one. Central banks are the custodians of the confidence that is so essential to the smooth functioning of the financial system, particularly in the area of sovereign debt. This can be a high-wire act in bad times when the data says one thing and the job demands another. The State Bank governor tried to perform this fragile balancing act on Thursday when he held a news conference to try to

reassure the markets that the country's debt-servicing capacity remains strong and whatever drop in remittances we saw in July owed itself mostly to temporary factors. But then he went far beyond the data in suggesting that the future is strong because the energy situation had been sorted, exporters had received assurances of expedited tax refunds, the law and order situation was improving, and more. In short, instead of an economic analysis, he presented a list of positives that sounded more political in tone.

In doing so, he has gone beyond his role as a curator of the financial markets. He was absolutely right to reassure the markets that Pakistan has not defaulted on its sovereign debts, even in bad times, and nothing in the data suggests that debt-service difficulties are around the corner. He was also right to point out that in the two years preceding 2013, debt-service obligations were higher than they are now and they were still met 'successfully'. But it is worth recalling that at the end of this period, Pakistan landed up on the doorstep of the IMF. So how 'successfully' were these obligations really met if addressing the challenge landed the government in the emergency room? More than the present level of foreign exchange reserves, what determines a country's debt-service capacity is the state of its external deficits. Is the economy really accumulating non-debt-creating reserves? If so, where is the \$7bn windfall that came our way in the past couple of years from the decline in oil prices? Now that the data shows deterioration in the health of the three main pillars of the external account — FDI, exports and remittances — it is indeed time for the State Bank to step in and breathe a little confidence into the debt markets. But in doing so, it would be better to leave the rhetoric to the politicians and stick to what the data allows one to say.

Gross medical negligence

KARACHI can be a rough, violent city. But what makes matters worse is the callous attitude displayed by many of those who are supposed to be providing succour to victims of violence. As pointed out in a letter published on these pages on Friday, sometimes even basic human compassion is missing at public hospitals in the metropolis. According to the letter, a young man named Asim was shot in a botched mobile phone robbery attempt on Aug 18. As if this traumatic experience were not enough, it is shocking to know that the victim was turned away from three public-sector hospitals — for varying reasons — in his precarious condition. The staff at Abbasi Shaheed Hospital told his attendants they lacked the ability to treat him; the people at Jinnah declared it to be a 'cardio case' and referred him to the cardio section, only to be told at that facility that the patient should be shifted to Liaquat National Hospital. Sadly,

the victim died as he reached that hospital.

We are quite sure that this is no isolated case; many such undocumented cases probably occur on a frequent basis in Karachi's crime-infested streets. What is especially unfortunate is that this incident occurred despite the Sindh government's directives that emergency services should be provided by all hospitals — public and private — even in an apparent 'police case'. Yet as the abovementioned incident illustrates, many major health facilities in Karachi are wary of taking cases that may require the involvement of a medico-legal officer. This state of affairs is untenable and violates medical ethics. Regardless of the circumstances of their injuries, patients must receive immediate medical attention at all hospitals; legal formalities can follow once the patient has stabilised. The provincial authorities need to investigate why Asim was denied medical help despite his critical condition and passed around from hospital to hospital; they must also ensure that all medical facilities provide immediate emergency care to all patients — including victims of crime.

MQM's fortunes

THESE are interesting times for the MQM. On Friday, the party's lawmakers in the National Assembly did what even a few weeks ago would have been unthinkable: they supported a government-initiated resolution condemning party supremo Altaf Hussain and announced they were now 'disconnected' from the man in London. A day earlier, the party had said it had written Mr Hussain out of the organisation's constitution. These developments — surprising as they are — come in the aftermath of the speech Altaf Hussain made on Aug 22. However, for those aware of the Muttahida's history, this clean break with Mr Hussain, if indeed genuine, is pivotal. After all, not too long ago the party supremo's word was law on the streets of Karachi, with his cadres rushing to defend his every outburst, and carrying out his questionable commands with zealous dedication. But the anti-Pakistan rant seems to have been the last straw, pushing the Muttahida's political leadership to the wall and forcing them to denounce their founder's remarks.

Today, the MQM stands at the crossroads more than ever before in its over three decades of existence. For neutral observers, the party appears to be a bundle of contradictions. It has frequently courted the security establishment, yet has also suffered the consequences when the men in khaki cracked down due to Muttahida 'crossing the line'. It has returned middle-class candidates to the assemblies otherwise dominated by feudal, tribal and financial 'elites', yet has also ruthlessly plundered its constituents in the name of zakat, fitra and 'donations'. It has emerged as a secular

voice of urban Sindh's Urdu speakers, yet has unambiguously dabbled in political militancy. It has claimed to speak for the descendants of those who 'fought for Pakistan', yet has also followed this up with talk of secession. On top of all these contradictions, it runs a powerful electoral machine in urban Sindh, one with a solid vote bank that even without the use of strong-arm tactics and electoral malpractices has genuine support, as the recent local government elections and various by-polls have shown.

The million-dollar question is: will the MQM from now on purely concentrate on its political activities and forever forsake the gun? The answer to this question depends on the 'Altaf factor'; the MQM founder has been unusually quiet ever since his Aug 22 diatribe. Some have smelt conspiracies, saying the split is deliberate and cosmetic, while his London-based acolytes have trashed talk of a 'minus-one' formula. It remains to be seen whether Altaf Hussain will go quietly into the sunset and let the Pakistan-based party rebuild itself. Or will the dreaded militant wing — seen as still loyal to Mr Hussain — try and wrest control from the political faction? The days ahead will reveal what path the Muttahida takes, and how this will affect Karachi's politics, and the fate of the MQM in general.

Health sector reforms

IT is expected that healthcare systems serve the population with efficient and transparent mechanisms guaranteeing universal medical access. This mandate does not hold for Pakistan's health sector that is beset with challenges spanning decades of neglect. If the government at all wants to fix its dysfunctional public health services, it must first demonstrate political commitment — even if national consensus on a health vision has come 15 years after a previously failed policy. That said, the new healthcare blueprint, the National Health Vision is a move in the right direction requiring monitored action for wider impact. Overhauling the state-owned health sector not only requires that health be put at the top of the priority list, increased funding, efficient cross-sector linkages and medical training are also imperative, if the NHV is to be implemented. However, with financial constraints, it is judicious to triage areas with the goal of maximising health access and ensuring quality and affordability. This approach, particularly in primary health, disease prevention, universal coverage and service monitoring could eliminate disparities in provision. It has been observed that when the wider world of public health and well-being is grim, education, gender equality and employment will be adversely impacted, putting brakes on economic prosperity.

Increasing spending to 3pc by 2025 will benefit healthcare — currently allocated 0.6pc of the GDP — though more money is not the only solution. When strategising, the government must know that poverty results in health conditions controllable with low-cost medical interventions at the primary- and secondary-care levels — communicable diseases, maternal health and malnutrition. Investment in preventive health breaks the cycle of poor health and poverty, for instance. Also, government-funded medical facilities cover only part of the population's demands because few offer specialised care. This has led to the mushrooming of an unregulated private sector with disparate services and prices. If hardly 20pc of the population uses primary healthcare systems, then coverage and functionality need improvement. When the government pays lip service to human development on international podiums while their citizens go to bed ill and hungry, it is reflective of a disinterested state without foresight. While implementing the NHV, it is critical that this government-led initiative pledging universal health access is independently monitored by either international donors or local advocacy/citizen groups ensuring those in need of healthcare are not deprived for yet another generation.

PM changes tack

THERE has always been a debate on how far heads of government can go and how direct they can be in their criticism of political opponents. The temptation to take a swipe or two at the more annoying personalities in the rival camp is hard to resist, especially when the government is out to celebrate an achievement. In the case of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the responsibility of giving tit-for-tat replies to the opposition rests with his firebrand ministers and some of the more irritable members of his family. But of late, in tones and gestures reminiscent of poll campaigns, Mr Sharif has not been averse to taking a few shots himself at opposition politicians of his choice. His latest target in a speech after the inauguration of a road bypass near Lahore is a gentleman from Rawalpindi with a habit of stepping on political toes much bigger than his own — until their owners are forced to acknowledge his presence. Notice taken, the Pindi politician by the name of Sheikh Rashid may be found gleefully claiming vindication of his tactics.

On the other hand, how does the change of gear suit the prime minister? Maybe Mr Sharif's willingness now to drop clear hints about his views on certain politicians needs to be seen in the context of the increasingly hawkish tendencies in his party. There are sections within the PML-N which have for long been uncomfortable with the prime ministerial emphasis on ignoring the opposition's criticism of his government. This group advocates an aggressive tackling of the opposition — similar to the 'successful'

handling of the latter part of the PTI's dharna in 2014 and again during the period when Mr Sharif was away for medical treatment in England earlier this year. The approach has increasingly won favour with the PML-N leadership. Prime Minister Sharif chooses to now refer to the next general election, predicting a rout for solitary-seat Sheikh Rashid in 2018. There is every likelihood that his words will get more emboldened with time.

Fighting politics with politics

TRUE and eternal as the democratic right to protest must remain, yet another season of rallies raises questions of whether or not the country's political leadership understands the full spectrum of its responsibilities towards the public. PTI chief Imran Khan, political provocateur Tahirul Qadri and sundry opposition politicians appear so fixated on opposing Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the PML-N that there is no room for institutionalised thinking or even concern beyond their immediate goal. The contrast between the response to the militant attacks in Peshawar and Mardan and the aggressive political rhetoric in the opposition rallies could not have been more disappointing. Much as this country needs better governance, cleaner politics and a more transparent electoral system, the security threat is of fundamental concern. The militant threat has manifested itself from Balochistan to KP in recent days, but few, if any, of the opposition politicians agitating for the ouster of the government have shown much interest in contributing to a national strategy to fight militancy.

Where the opposition is on firmer ground is Imran Khan's criticism of some state institutions. While some of Mr Khan's wild accusations against specific public officials can only be taken seriously if reasonable evidence is produced, it is clearly the case that investigation, law-enforcement and accountability agencies are not acting as independently of the political government as they should be under the law. Can any reasonable observer of politics and governance here claim that the FIA, FBR, NAB, etc are operating autonomously and to the full extent of their powers as allowed under the law? Or can the claim be made that the revelations in the Panama Papers can be probed independently and authoritatively by any government agency operating under political control? If the parliamentary committee system had been stronger and more empowered, perhaps the legislature could have been the scene of serious revelations about unwarranted political interference in the workings of the executive. Unhappily, while the opposition rightly criticises eroding institutions, it does not appear interested in strengthening the most fundamental of democratic institutions ie parliament.

Yet, no amount of contradictions and failings on the part of the opposition can overshadow the basic truth: as the elected government, and therefore the chief custodian of the democratic project, it is the PML-N that must lead the way on institution-strengthening and truth-telling in politics. Instead of fighting politics with the rule of law and democracy-building interventions, the PML-N seems determined to fight politics with politics. Even in the FBR's decision to send notices to all individuals named in the Panama Papers lies a whiff of political strategy. The government is trying to show its willingness to move ahead on investigating the offshore companies while treating the Sharif family on a par with the other individuals involved, a tactic that is advantageous to the first family. It may be too much to hope for an elected government to not respond politically to attacks against its leader. But surely politics cannot be the be-all and end-all of democratic existence.

Women workers

It might be good to hear that the government wants to devise a 'road map' to narrow the gender wage gap to 10pc in the next three years, but it is hard to see how any road map to close the gender wage gap can be effective in the absence of the right to form associations and engage in collective bargaining. If they are serious in their intention, then we should see wide legislative steps that try to eliminate discrimination in various forms, as well as resurrect the right to form associations and engage in collective bargaining. Despite having ratified the relevant UN and ILO conventions more than a decade ago, the gender wage gap has only increased, and according to research done by the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research, now stands at almost 40pc in the garment industry that is a large employer of women. Moreover, it seems that only one-tenth of the country's labour force enjoys access to rights of association and collective bargaining.

Beyond the gender wage gap, there is a host of other issues that also need to be addressed to make the labour laws of the country more just towards the rights of women workers. Already the vast majority of the country's workforce is hired on a contract basis so the rights enjoyed by permanent workers need to be extended in order to be effective. There is no concept of maternity leave or other benefits, an absence that hits women workers harder than others. At the moment, the government appears to be reacting to pressure from the European Union which is demanding greater emphasis on women's labour in order to renew the GSP-Plus preferential trading scheme for Pakistan. In this situation, the will to actually move beyond meetings, discussions and drafts of legislative proposals is absent. The Justice Shafiur Rehman Commission

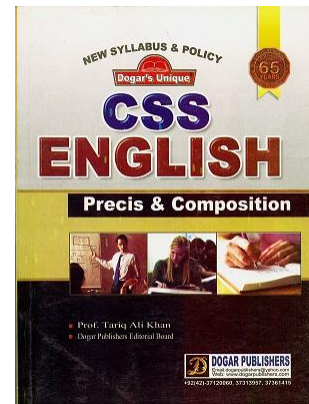
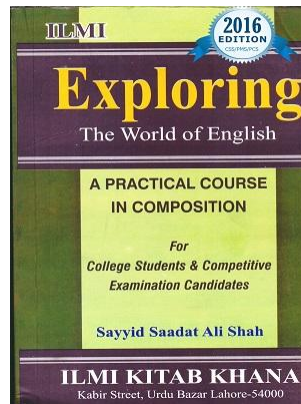
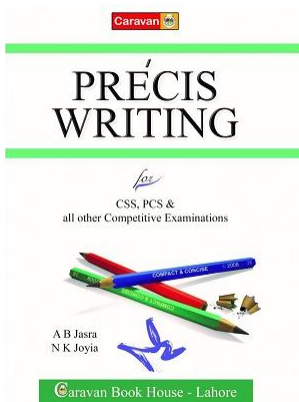
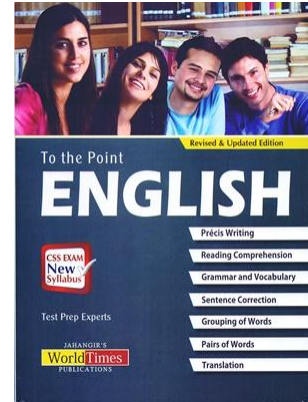
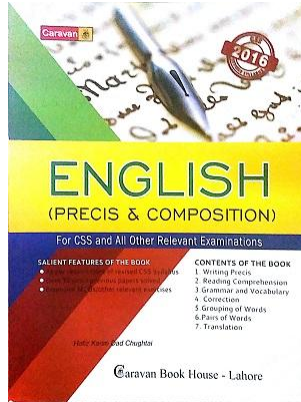
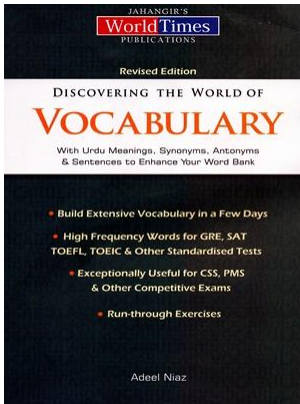
report makes for a good platform to develop such a road map. But the report has been lying dormant for over a decade now and there is little reason to suppose that the present effort to lift it out of obscurity will have any credibility. If the attorney general is serious, he should also lay stress on the rights of association and collective bargaining in developing this road map. Otherwise, it will be obvious they are working on a road map to eyewash and nothing more.

APS victims' families

SOME press is bad press, and always will be. Appearing insensitive to the parents of those who were murdered in the APS Peshawar attack falls in this category. On Thursday, around 60 protesters, including parents of some of the victims, were turned back by the police from entering Islamabad's high-security Red Zone after they arrived in the capital. The group was planning to stage a demonstration outside parliament to register their protest against the government's failure to order a judicial inquiry into the massacre, as had been announced by the president. They also wanted to meet the prime minister to demand that the state fulfil the commitments made to them in connection with the attack. Upon being thwarted, the protesters chanted slogans against the government and threatened self-immolation. Finally, a minister from Islamabad's development division, CADD, brought the fraught situation under control with assurances that the meeting they sought would take place next week.

One could argue that an appointment with the country's chief executive cannot take place without going through the formalities. However, the niceties of protocol are irrelevant here. For most of the country, Dec 16, 2014, was a watershed that, in its remorseless brutality, brought home the urgency with which the battle against terrorism had to be fought. But for the families of those who met their end that day, it was the beginning of a never-ending nightmare, a torment that can perhaps only partially be assuaged by getting answers to burning questions: eg, who exactly were the attackers, how did they succeed in their task in such a high-security area, etc. That is far from an unreasonable demand: we too should be asking the same instead of accepting glib, pre-packaged responses. Some of the planners and perpetrators of the attack have been brought to book, or so we are told. But as they say, "Justice must not only be done; it must also be seen to be done". Closure continues to elude the APS victims' families.

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Kabul attacks

A TWIN suicide attack in the heart of Kabul and inside a high-security zone could further destabilise the Afghan government and cause fresh tensions in the already acrimonious Pak-Afghan relationship. If there has been a consistent red line for the Afghan state, it has been attacks by the Taliban in Kabul — the seat of power for the government and the biggest target for insurgents trying to overthrow the state. In his initial reaction at least, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has focused on condemning the Taliban and avoiding directly blaming Pakistan. But with the national unity government riven by internal disputes and an Afghan intelligence apparatus that is overtly hostile to Pakistan, accusations will likely erupt and be difficult to contain. Meanwhile, there is already scepticism inside Pakistan about the true intentions of the Afghan government after the recent announcement of a rejuvenated trilateral dialogue between the US, India and Afghanistan. That latest peculiar diplomatic-cum-security manoeuvre comes at a time when the security establishment here has been openly accusing India and Afghanistan of facilitating militancy and terrorism inside Pakistan.

The twin priorities for Afghanistan ought to be the stabilisation of the political government and an expeditious path to dialogue with the Taliban. Yet, it may increasingly be the case that the former is undermining the latter: the non-Ghani factions of the national unity government are mostly strident in their criticism of Pakistan and do not believe that there can be political reconciliation with the Taliban, in the present circumstances or at all. Moreover, the trilateral dialogue between India, Afghanistan and the US may further erode the possibility of a revival of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group. While the Afghan government may be hoping that the trilateral dialogue will put pressure on Pakistan to curb Taliban sanctuaries inside Pakistan and nudge the Taliban to the negotiating table via the QCG or a similar group, in practice it may have the opposite effect given the hardening view of Indo-Afghan policy towards Pakistan in security circles here. The trilateral dialogue also adds to the diplomatic muddle by creating parallel tracks in which India and Pakistan are expected to engage with Afghanistan and other regional powers: China in the possibly defunct QCG; India in the trilateral; Pakistan squabbling with both India and Afghanistan and in tense relations with India — where is the harmony or even consistency in approach?

What ought to be kept in mind here, however, is that President Ghani came to office seeking to reverse his predecessor Hamid Karzai's approach of seeking closer ties with India. Now Mr Ghani is enthusiastically seeking deeper economic, political and military ties with India. Whether a potential friend of Pakistan's in Kabul has irreversibly become hostile towards Pakistan is not known. But the powers-that-be on either side of the

Durand Line need to remember the Pak-Afghan relationship is symbiotic and must always be nudged in a constructive direction.

Medical waste

MOST of Pakistan's urban areas, especially Karachi, have a severe waste-management problem. The large mounds of unsightly rubbish dumped unceremoniously in open spaces bear ample witness to this. And while this thoughtless manner of getting rid of waste poses immense problems to people's health as well as the environment, when the garbage happens to contain medical waste, the dangers are multiplied manifold. As reported in this paper on Monday, the Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre — Karachi's largest public-sector hospital — has no proper system of disposing of medical waste. As pictures published with the story illustrate, heaps of rubbish surround the medical facility's incinerator, with used syringes and IV bags in clear sight. If this is the situation outside the largest public hospital of Pakistan's biggest city, one can well imagine how hundreds of smaller — not to mention unregulated — facilities in Karachi and other areas treat their waste. Experts are of the view that most of the Sindh capital's public and private health facilities lack proper waste-disposal mechanisms, with reportedly only one private hospital meeting international standards. The situation in other urban centres, such as Rawalpindi/Islamabad, is of concern, yet Karachi's problem — related to the metropolis's overall waste-management dilemma — is particularly acute.

The hazards posed by unregulated medical waste are many. These include the spread of ailments such as blood-borne hepatitis, skin infections and tuberculosis amongst others. Those who scavenge through garbage heaps are at particular risk, while localities situated next to hospitals and clinics also suffer. There is an urgent need for provincial health authorities countrywide to look into the neglected area of medical-waste management. As experts have pointed out, waste should be separated within the hospital into hazardous and non-hazardous categories, before it is disposed of properly, and not thrown in the nearest garbage dump. While there is a shortage of incinerators in cities like Karachi, there has also been criticism of using incineration as a method of waste management, particularly where its effects on the environment are concerned. More environmentally friendly methods — such as 'green autoclaves' — have been suggested as alternatives. Health authorities must review the methods currently being used in hospitals across our cities and towns to treat their medical waste. There must be greater oversight by the state to ensure that public and private medical facilities are using best practices to get rid of their waste in an environmentally sound and responsible manner.

Pakistan's ODI loss

THE cricket team's disappointingly one-sided ODI series against England, that won 4-1, has exposed yet again the numerous shortcomings of the national team in the limited-overs version of the game. Azhar Ali's lacklustre leadership, the batsmen's inability to put up a total in excess of 300 on the board, a bowling attack lacking teeth and variety, and many dropped catches have all contributed to the defeat. But perhaps the most disturbing factor has been the players' own apathy that prevented them from making a contest of it. The truth is that the current ODI team has been submissive from the outset, both in attitude and play, not surprising for a side languishing at the ninth spot in world ODI rankings. The hosts, in contrast, started the series well, their aggression and style of play in keeping with the fiercely competitive brand of ODI cricket that they have exhibited since the 2015 World Cup.

The aftermath of the drubbing will see Pakistan having to bear the ignominy of playing the ICC Qualifiers 2018 in order to make it to the World Cup 2019 — the first time the national team has been relegated to a point this low. For a cricket-playing nation that is credited with the inception of the World Cup back in 1975, Pakistan's plight is a sorry one. A turnaround in ODI fortunes will require no less than an overhaul where not only is the skipper replaced but a more focused, regimented effort is made to groom a specialised breed of one-day players with the panache and skill to alter the complexion of the game in a matter of minutes. Dashing wicketkeeper batsman Sarfraz Ahmed, who shone the brightest in the England series — Tests and ODIs — highly deserves the leadership mantle besides his T20 captaincy. A determined man with a level-headed approach to the game, Sarfraz, along with coach Mickey Arthur, is Pakistan's best bet to bring the sinking ODI ship ashore. In this regard, swift measures by the PCB hold the key.

Pak-India hope

IT may be just a tiny ray of hope emerging from the storm clouds, but Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan Gautam Bambawale's assertion that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is looking forward to attending a November Saarc summit in Islamabad suggests that political dialogue with Pakistan is still a possibility this year. While the Indian prime minister has had a regrettable stretch in recent weeks with his comments about Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, it remains the case that Mr Modi has also previously approached the path of dialogue, most notably with the creation of the stalled

Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue and a surprise visit to Lahore last year. It remains within the Indian prime minister's ability to once again embark on the path of dialogue and to shun the recent war of words between the two countries. Whether he will, and whether Pakistani officialdom does too, remains to be seen. It is also the case, however, that Mr Modi and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif are contending with domestic forces in their respective countries that would perhaps like to see dialogue remain stalled.

In India, the political opposition, the security establishment and the hawkish elements in the BJP government all appear to believe that dialogue is futile — and seem willing to punish any domestic moves towards dialogue with Pakistan. A periodic conceit in India, one that is more evident as the country grows economically and acquires greater strategic influence on the world stage, is that global power can be aligned in a way which is advantageous to India, in order to punish Pakistan. The approach is rooted in the belief that not only is Pakistan a danger to the interests of the international community, but that it is irreversibly so and that there are no legitimate security interests which Pakistan is seeking to protect. It is a preposterous theory made all the more insidious by the implacable belief that, no matter what Pakistan does or the policies it pursues, this country is somehow a danger to itself, the region and the world. Few things are as dangerous as when policymakers, the political elite and influential citizens believe that dialogue itself is somehow inimical to their country's interests.

Yet, for all the poisonous politics in India, there are fundamental questions that Pakistan must address. Consider the antagonistic rhetoric that is frequently deployed in Pakistan, at times seemingly no more than an amateurish attempt to rhetorically equal the score with India. Consider that last year, when India decided to whip up nationalist sentiment around the 50-year commemorations of the 1965 war, the Pakistani political discourse was flooded with jingoistic rhetoric. A year later, following India's provocations on Balochistan, sections of the media and the political class are falling over themselves to condemn India as a sponsor of terrorism. Neither side appears to consider a mature response to the other.

NA speaker's role

FOR a flourishing democracy, one of the key components is a vibrant and active parliament. And within parliament, it is the speaker of the National Assembly who, as custodian of the house, sets the tone and ensures that all business is conducted as per parliamentary procedures. While the country has seen some exemplary speakers in the past, there has been criticism of the incumbent, Ayaz Sadiq, for his allegedly biased attitude. Such a situation emerged during Monday's sitting of the Assembly, when members of the opposition — particularly the PTI and PPP — protested against the speaker's 'partisan attitude'. As reported, Mr Sadiq commented that of the eight disqualification references received by him — that included four against the prime minister, two against Imran Khan and one against Jahangir Tareen — the documentary evidence 'did not add up' in all but two references which were sent on to the ECP. Incidentally, the speaker felt that all the references filed against the prime minister did not hold water, while the ones targeting the PTI leaders apparently did. This caused an uproar in opposition ranks and led to accusations of partisanship.

It is, of course, not unknown for lawmakers in Pakistan to raise frivolous issues or contravene parliamentary procedure. This is where the role of the National Assembly speaker comes in — to ensure the smooth running of the house and that only genuine parliamentary business is taken up. Appearing to give the ruling party — to which Mr Sadiq belongs — a clean slate where the disqualification references are concerned does not reflect well. Mr Sadiq should have sent all the references to the ECP without commentary, to allow it to decide on their merit. And not giving the opposition a patient hearing only inflamed matters. Unfortunately, this is not the first time the speaker has been accused of partisanship. The ugly episode involving Defence Minister Khawaja Asif's use of unparliamentary language against PTI's Shireen Mazari comes to mind. Even some government allies have commented on the lack of discipline in the lower house. While he was indeed elected on a PML-N ticket, the nature of his job requires Mr Sadiq to shun all political bias and run the house with equanimity and fairness whenever he dons the speaker's robes. Evidence of bias in rulings and pronouncements by the speaker sets a bad precedent and is unhealthy for parliamentary politics.

Discriminatory law

THE pretext of 'security' is often a catch-all for legalised discrimination. So it is with some aspects of this country's citizenship law. The fact was highlighted at a protest outside the Peshawar Press Club where scores of women, all Pakistani nationals married to Afghan men, appealed to authorities that their spouses be given Pakistani nationality. Earlier, with border authorities taking a lenient view of cross-border movement of citizens from both countries, this was not much of a problem for those with Afghan spouses. Until now that is, when Pakistani authorities have begun to deport Afghans illegally settled here back to their home country, which has left many families divided.

Although in the aforementioned case, the particulars of the men's residency status in Pakistan are relevant, the women's protest once again calls attention to an important issue of fundamental rights. The Pakistan Citizenship Act 1951 entitles a Pakistani man to obtain Pakistani citizenship for his foreign wife, but it does not provide for the same where a Pakistani woman is married to a foreign man. This inconsistency has long been a bone of contention between rights activists and the state. The legislation has also been subjected to judicial review and found wanting. In 2007, the Federal Shariat Court declared it to be discriminatory to women, in violation of the constitutional right to equality before the law and "repugnant to the Holy Quran and Sunnah", and ordered that it be amended within six months. Nearly a decade on, the government, which at the time argued that any amendment to make the law gender-blind would enable countries to plant their agents in Pakistan and also give a boost to illegal immigration, is yet to comply with the court's directive. This foot dragging is unacceptable. The state cannot cherry-pick elements of gender equality it wants to apply while jettisoning those it deems create a 'security risk'. Instead of a blanket policy, case-by-case decisions could address the equality conundrum as well as the state's concerns.

Chasing tax defaulters

WHEN Finance Minister Ishaq Dar told the Senate on Tuesday that this year alone, the FBR, using third-party data, had detected over 36,000 tax defaulters he was seemingly pointing towards what he considers a robust effort mounted by his government to pursue tax defaulters. Admittedly, the number is high, and if his projection is to be believed, then an amount of almost Rs88bn can be collected through such people and entities. But few are holding their breath. Past experience shows that a tremendous amount of political will is required to actually pursue such cases, and to translate the

effort into revenue. The number of tax filers has not risen very much in the last three years, despite similar efforts being made year after year, and the incremental revenue yield from such exercises is even less appreciable. In fact, collections under direct tax have actually declined as a percentage of total revenue collections, as per the testimony of the FBR chairman before the Senate in August. This year when we hear that the government has made strenuous efforts to locate tax defaulters, we may applaud but without a sense of optimism that the matter will go much beyond that.

Using third-party databases to locate tax evasion and default is a promising idea that had its beginnings back in 2009. A list of 3.2m potential taxpayers was developed, using material from Nadra databases amongst others, of people who travel a lot, own big houses, have large utility bills and possess big cars but who still don't have a national taxpayer number. In the league of big numbers, that list was truly impressive. Another promising idea was the release of a national taxpayer database, and a similar one for parliamentarians only. Pakistan shocked the world when it turned out that almost two-thirds of the members of the National Assembly don't even file their tax returns. Yet after all this, by how much has the number of tax filers increased? And how much incremental tax have parliamentarians paid since their information began to be made public?

The effort to locate tax defaulters must continue, but it is important that it be augmented beyond simple raids and third-party verifications. What happened to the original list of 3.2m potential taxpayers? The finance minister claimed that many of the entries on it were not actionable. But in that case, why has the same exercise not been run again using smarter search terms to generate a new, more actionable list? The revenue effort of this government has relied excessively on further squeezing those who already pay their taxes, as well as taking recourse to withholding taxes. It is crucial to remedy this drift in the revenue effort to bring more flexibility as well as greater equity in sharing the burden of the state's revenue requirements.

Saudi-Iran Haj spat

THE most difficult relationship in the Muslim world — between Saudi Arabia and Iran — is heating up once again, this time just days before Haj. In fact, the annual pilgrimage is at the centre of the storm. As reported the other day, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei issued a scathing statement critical of Saudi Arabia's handling of Haj. In reply, the Saudi grand mufti declared Iranians to be out of the fold of Islam and the Iranian leadership "enemies of Islam". There is, of course, plenty of background behind

this inflammatory rhetoric. Iran's concerns arise from last year's massive stampede in Mina; Tehran lost the most pilgrims in the tragedy — nearly 500 individuals — while independent observers estimate the total number of victims at 2,000. The Saudis, however, claimed that, in all, 769 pilgrims were killed. In the aftermath of the Mina tragedy, Iran and Saudi Arabia were unable to reach an agreement regarding Haj management, which meant that Iranian pilgrims would be unable to visit the holy sites this year. Also, following the storming of Saudi missions in Iran after the controversial execution of Saudi Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr in January, the kingdom snapped diplomatic links with the Islamic republic. This made it additionally difficult for Iranians to get Haj visas. Aside from these ugly exchanges, Iran and Saudi Arabia are currently locked in proxy combat in places such as Syria and Yemen for geopolitical supremacy in the Middle East.

Haj is a time of unity; it is a great equaliser where the distinctions of class, clan and national allegiance are supposed to melt away. But in a troubled, divided world, politics has seemingly taken the upper hand over spiritual pursuits. Both Tehran and Riyadh should work to bring down the temperature. While the Iranians have genuine concerns about the safety of pilgrims, the issue should not be used for political point-scoring. The Saudis must also refrain from turning a political spat into a sectarian one; the grand mufti's apparent endorsement of takfir is totally unacceptable, especially coming from such a senior cleric. Haj should be open to all nationalities, regardless of the state of bilateral relations between any country and Saudi Arabia, as all Muslims have equal claim to the holy places within the kingdom. Moreover, clerics in positions of power and influence should work to bring together different Muslim schools of thought, instead of stoking the flames of sectarianism.

Contaminated water

WHEN the very basic needs of a population are not met, official claims that the country is on the cusp of a glorious future ring hollow. On Tuesday, the Senate was informed by the minister for science and technology, Rana Tanveer, that more than 80pc Pakistanis consume contaminated and unsafe water. According to the minister, the result was based on research conducted by the Pakistan Council for Research in Water Resources, which collected water samples from 2,807 villages in 24 districts across the country. The PCRWR found that the major contaminants included bacteria, which was as high as 69pc, toxic chemicals — mainly arsenic (24pc) — and turbidity (14pc). Other primary sources of contamination were total dissolved solids and nitrate and fluoride pollution.

The United Nations has recognised access to water for domestic and personal use as a human right, indeed as “a prerequisite for the realisation of other human rights”. That is as it should be, for deprivation on this front translates into multiple long-term handicaps. Lack of potable water — mainly an outcome of groundwater becoming contaminated from industrial effluents and hazardous waste being discharged into water sources — has an immediate impact on Pakistan’s under-resourced health delivery system. Bacterial contamination is the cause of many preventable diseases, including dysentery, hepatitis, typhoid, etc. The annual diarrhoea-related mortality rate in the country hovers around 125,000, with Pakistan among four countries in the world where over half of under-five deaths annually are caused by pneumonia and diarrhoea. Lancet, the international health journal, in its global report on youth health released this year, said that intestinal problems were the leading cause of death among Pakistani children aged 10 to 14. Meanwhile, water contaminated with total dissolved solids can cause conditions such as kidney stones, gallstones, joint stiffness, etc. All this has a bearing on the number of work days lost, a loss in earnings and the perpetuation of a cycle of poverty — not the requisite framework for a nation marching ahead.

Divisions in women’s caucus

WHEN women unite, they can be a formidable force for change. In countries like Pakistan, divisions among them only work to the advantage of those who want to maintain a patriarchal status quo. On Wednesday, acrimony between the founder and current head of the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus brought to the fore some recent concerns about this primary forum for women parliamentarians. In an impassioned speech in the National Assembly, WPC Patron and PPP MNA Dr Fehmida Mirza expressed her dismay over the sidelining of the body in recent months. She also appeared to imply that its currently moribund status was a result of personal rivalries among its members. The WPC secretary, PML-N MNA Shaista Pervaiz, responded by acknowledging the WPC’s achievements but added that women in the opposition did not reciprocate the support that was extended to them.

The previously united front presented by women legislators under the WPC over the past several years appears to be taking an unfortunate and self-defeating trajectory which threatens to diminish its enormous, and proven, potential. Arguably among the most promising developments in Pakistan’s parliamentary history, the caucus was established in November 2008 under Dr Mirza following her election as speaker of the National Assembly. The impact of women legislators working across the aisle under the WPC’s umbrella can be gauged by the unprecedented amount of pro-women legislation

enacted and bills introduced over the next few years. These included the anti-harassment act in 2010, which was the first instance where women legislators worked very closely with women's civil society organisations from the initial drafting stage through to the passage of the law. Among other women-friendly pieces of legislation during this period were amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code dealing with acid crimes and regressive cultural practices. Last but not least, the National Commission on the Status of Women was established through an act of parliament in 2012 as an empowered, autonomous body — a significant step towards institutionalising gender equality in the government's policies and programmes as well as the laws that affect women. This flurry of lawmaking was driven by women legislators who set aside their political differences and worked across party lines to lobby their male counterparts and push through legislation that will have a salutary effect on the lives of generations of Pakistani women.

However, as reports of egregious violence against women continue to surface, it is clear that a great deal remains to be done. For one, the long-pending anti-rape and anti-honour killing bills need to be passed by a joint sitting of parliament. The current WPC should carry the baton forward and set the tone for the provinces instead of allowing political considerations to stall momentum. They must give Pakistani women a voice in the corridors of power.

‘Voluntary return’

FOR a number of years now, we have been hearing about how NAB lets people accused of amassing fortunes through corrupt practices off the hook by negotiating the return of a portion of the funds they have been accused of acquiring illegally. When the matter was raised in newspaper commentaries, NAB wrote an angry letter to all media houses accusing them of not knowing their facts, and making the argument that ‘plea bargains’ are a normal part of any judicial system. But now, an authority no less than the Supreme Court has said that the practice is “in conflict with provisions of the Constitution, where such power can only be exercised by a judicial forum”. The matter is significant because it opens a loophole through which the corrupt can negotiate their way out of justice and get their reputation scrubbed clean, even be eligible to hold elected office or serve in government. On the flip side, the same provision can also be abused by charging innocent people with corruption then demanding a sum as ‘voluntary return’ if they want to avoid legal action. Either way, it is a deeply problematic practice and the Supreme Court's promise to look into its legality is a welcome development.

The follow-up actions ordered by the court should make for interesting reading. NAB has been asked to furnish a list of all individuals who have agreed to the voluntary return of funds in order to avoid investigation and possible prosecution. It has also ordered that all these people “cannot hold any public office in federal or provincial government or state-owned organisation”. It is true that a plea bargain, which is different from voluntary return in that it takes place after the commencement of investigations, is a normal part of all judicial systems. But voluntary return is not, and common sense tells us that something is wrong when someone accused of appropriating public money agrees to return a portion of it, and then goes back to work in government. The court observed that NAB has been using this provision far too much in recent years. This warps justice and is an incentive for those who are tempted with inducements while in government service. If one can rob a certain amount from the government, then return a portion of the sum and return to a respectable life, how can we ever curb the scourge of corruption? NAB’s management should reflect on this.

Smuggled coins

PAKISTAN is a historical treasure trove, with artefacts going back several centuries buried underneath its soil, or scattered around its heritage sites. Yet what is troubling is that these priceless pieces of our history continue to be smuggled out of the country, with many finding their way to galleries and private collections abroad. As reported on Thursday, the Archaeological Survey of India has declared over 500 coins that were being brought into that country from Pakistan in two separate consignments as genuine artefacts. Indian media reports say the coins date back to different historical periods, including the Indo-Greek, the Sultanate and Mughal periods. It goes without saying that this treasure should be returned to Pakistan. Unfortunately, smuggling of cultural property out of Pakistan is not uncommon; there are frequent reports of customs authorities spoiling such bids. But for each smuggler caught, there are many more that succeed. In fact, the global trade in smuggled artefacts is worth millions of dollars and involves individuals across the world. The looter, smuggler and crooked customs official in Pakistan, for example, are only nodes in a far larger international network of illicit trade; the galleries and dealers who buy and sell stolen heritage items cannot be absolved of blame.

But the fact remains that Pakistan must do more within its borders to stop the pillage of artefacts. As per Unesco, KP is the worst affected province where the theft of artefacts is concerned. Observers also point out that there is a lack of reliable data concerning historical sites. But the KP government has made an attempt to address the problem; it

has passed a refurbished provincial antiquities law which intends to improve oversight and increase punishments. We hope this law is implemented in its true spirit and serves as an example on how to crack down on the theft of cultural property. All provincial administrations must take stock of historical sites under their watch and improve efforts to prevent the looting of priceless artefacts.

Rangers in Punjab

MILITARISING counterterrorism is as undesirable as the continuing politicisation of the police. But that is precisely the unwelcome combination that Punjab too now seems destined to have. Since the APS Peshawar attack an unmistakable pattern has emerged: immediately after a major terrorist attack, the military seeks greater counterterrorism powers. This demand is all the more difficult to rebuff because the political leadership does little to suggest that it takes the fight against militancy and extremism seriously in the spells between major attacks. After APS came the National Action Plan and after the Easter bombing in Lahore came the initially botched operation against the so-called Chotoo gang in Rajanpur. Now, after the devastating Quetta attack against lawyers, has come notification of greater powers for the Rangers to operate in Punjab. The capitulation is nearly complete.

Futile as it may appear, at least in the present circumstances, to counsel against long-term militarisation of counterterrorism and policing in Punjab, the lesson of Sindh is one that the military itself should pay heed to. Today, the Rangers may be in the forefront of the attempt to establish a modicum of physical safety for Karachi's denizens, but the history of the last two decades suggests that creeping militarisation has affected the political set-up's will and capacity to establish law and order. It is not a black-and-white issue, but the question must be asked: how much of the need for a Karachi operation beginning in 2013 was made inevitable by the long-term presence of the paramilitary Rangers in the city and the military establishment's political choices over the past two decades? While the military leadership may believe that it does at least act to stabilise areas threatened by crime and militancy when the threat grows intolerable, long-term peace and stability across the country must be tied to the right policies, not just a willingness to act with force when a threat grows menacing. Punjab is simply too vast, its population too big and its communities too diverse for a paramilitary force to stamp out terrorism and militancy.

If the only answer lies in strengthening civilian law enforcement and the intelligence apparatus, then the Punjab government and PML-N have a question to answer of their own. Are they truly willing to allow an autonomous, disciplined and lawful police force to

operate in the province? Recent events have provided disturbing evidence of the opposite kind: from the violence against police in Rawalpindi by the PML-N's Hanif Abbasi to the draconian pre-emptive measures against anti-government protests by the PTI and Tahirul Qadri, the Punjab police appears to be more politicised than ever. It is improbable that a police force so controlled by its political masters can ever become a truly effective, lawful counterterrorism instrument. The military and government should think more carefully about their respective strategies.

Karachi by-election

THOUGH the PPP appears jubilant after unofficial results indicated that its candidate had emerged victorious in Thursday's by-election in Karachi's PS-127 constituency, it would be too early to comment on the metropolis's future electoral trends based on this result. After all, it is only one Sindh Assembly seat and there are too many variables currently at work where Karachi's electoral politics are concerned. What it does indicate, however, is that the MQM's internal and external problems have affected the party's performance in the constituency; the Muttahida candidate was runner-up in the race. The seat felt vacant after its representative jumped ship and joined Mustafa Kamal's PSP. The area is ethnically mixed and covers both rural and urban localities; both PPP and MQM candidates have, in past elections, clinched this seat. Turnout was abysmally low, estimated at 20pc. In a constituency with over 200,000 registered voters, the votes cast in a number of polling stations this paper's reporters visited struggled to go beyond two digits. It is likely that violence had a role to play in keeping voters away, as Muttahida and MQM-Haqiqi workers clashed on polling day. Vehicles had also been set alight in different parts of Karachi in the run-up to the by-election.

It would be premature to term the election loss the beginning of the end of MQM's dominance over Karachi's electoral politics. Even without the use of violence and questionable electoral practices — which the Muttahida has employed in past elections — the party has fared well at the ballot box, as the results of a few recent by-elections, as well as the Sindh local bodies' polls, show. But in the aftermath of Altaf Hussain's Aug 22 speech, it is difficult to say how much electoral clout the MQM will retain in urban Sindh under Farooq Sattar's stewardship. After all, much of the MQM's militant wing is either on the run or in custody, which has paved the way for fairer electoral contests. Moreover, the Muttahida faces challenges of varying degrees from the PSP and a resurgent Haqiqi. But most importantly, where the Muttahida's electoral fortunes are concerned, it remains to be seen how successful Farooq Sattar will be in marshalling the political wing and retaining the vote bank. Between now and 2018,

much will depend on the MQM's internal dynamics, especially if the militant wing — still seemingly loyal to Altaf Hussain — decides to mount a challenge to Mr Sattar's leadership.

Blood transfusion law

EFFORTS to streamline procedures that will reduce the burden on the country's health delivery system must be commended. On the anvil in KP is a law to ensure safe blood transfusion at hospitals in the province. The proposed legislation, to be called the KP Blood Transfusion Safety Authority Act 2016, envisages the establishment of an authority to oversee this vital medical procedure that can have deadly consequences if undertaken in a slipshod or negligent manner. The blood transfusion safety authority will regulate collection, testing, processing, storage, distribution and provision of blood and its products at public and private hospitals. A draft law is in the process of being vetted by the provincial law department. When enacted, it will require medical professionals and relevant personnel to certify the safety of each transfusion that takes place on their watch. It will also bind hospitals to document transfusions and ensure they are carried out according to the stipulated procedure.

The KP government is taking a sensible approach to addressing a systemic problem that has a bearing on the high prevalence of blood-borne diseases in Pakistan. For instance, the incidence of hepatitis B and C — spread through contact with infected blood, aside from other means of transmission — is truly alarming. According to government statistics, it is estimated that every 13th Pakistani is infected with either the hepatitis B or C virus, adding up to about 15 million people carrying the potentially deadly pathogens. Unsafe blood transfusions also put at risk individuals who require the procedure frequently, such as patients of thalassaemia, a genetic blood disorder not uncommon in Pakistan. Two years ago, 10 thalassaemic children were infected with HIV after receiving infected blood, highlighting the perils of shoddy procedures in this aspect of the health sector. While there has been of late some progress in the country to ensure safe blood transfusions, regulatory systems need further strengthening, particularly outside major urban centres. Coordination among the provinces would also be useful. After all, viruses do not respect provincial boundaries.

Taxing parliament

THE latest tax directory of parliamentarians still has the same question marks hanging over it. Given the lavish lifestyles they lead, how do so many of our legislators justify their miserly taxes? For example, the combined taxes paid by Nawaz Sharif, Shahbaz Sharif and Hamza Shahbaz Sharif are less than half the tax paid by Jehangir Tareen. Meanwhile, Imran Khan, who has made it his single-minded obsession to accuse all his political opponents of corruption and of accumulating ill-gotten wealth, paid a paltry Rs76,244 in taxes for last year. This would mean his total taxable income last year was just over Rs100,000 per month. One is left wondering how he manages on his income to pay the costs of running his palatial Bani Gala residence.

There is something seriously wrong when an individual's declared tax liability is less than his or her utility bill. It adds insult to injury when the person in question happens to be a holder of elected office. What makes the situation even more unjust is the fact that these declarations have come at the end of a year in which the government said direct tax collections had declined as a proportion of total revenue, and there has been growing recourse to withholding tax and indirect taxes. This was also the year the government launched what it called a massive documentation drive, angrily denouncing those whom it accused of taking advantage of the architecture of the formal economy, like the financial system, without making any contribution for the maintenance of the system. No wonder successive governments have had such a hard time broadening the tax base and persuading more segments of the population to help share the revenue burden of the state. When the rulers at the top refuse to carry this burden, how can they credibly ask others to do so?

Given the fabulous lifestyles that so many of our legislators lead, and the luxurious vehicles they drive to parliament, their declared incomes are pathetic, to put it mildly. In some cases, they take refuge in the argument that they pay an agriculture income tax to the provincial government, but even with these numbers included many of them land up with taxable incomes less than that of a mid-level salaried individual. Many of them live off incomes that are ascribed to others, or claim large gifts. Fact is our tax code is riddled with too many holes, and there is a manifest lack of will at the top to live by the rules that they make for others. A few years ago, this same group brought untold shame to the country when it was revealed that almost two-thirds of parliamentarians did not even file tax returns. At least that has been rectified now. The next step for the state is to get actual revenue.

‘Ordinance factory’

PRESIDENTIAL ordinances are a parliamentary bugbear and rightly so. While a constitutional device, presidential ordinances are in many ways antithetical to parliamentary democracy — especially when they are deployed as a way to bypass parliament. This week, the opposition in the National Assembly staged a symbolic walkout to protest what it termed the government’s attempt to convert parliament into an ordinance factory. The constitutional scheme is clear. According to Article 89 (1), “The President may, except when the Senate or National Assembly is in session, if satisfied that circumstances exist which render it necessary to take immediate action, make and promulgate an Ordinance, as the circumstances may require.” Further, following the 18th Amendment, the life of an ordinance cannot exceed 120 days, unless parliament gives a one-time-only extension of a further 120 days. For any ordinance to become permanent legislation, it must be passed as an Act of Parliament. The constitutional scheme, then, regards ordinances as the exception, to be used only in special circumstances, and requires all legislation to be laid before parliament. That is how it should be; but the PML-N is continuing a woeful tradition of legislative short cuts.

Therein lies part of the problem: all governments have to some extent resorted to presidential ordinances to avoid the more complicated, sometimes messy, process of guiding legislation through both houses of parliament. And even though presenting an ordinance to parliament is now inevitable, the 120 days of existence an ordinance enjoys tends to create its own pressure for its extension and then conversion into an Act of Parliament. Once something becomes law and the executive begins to implement it, parliament can be seen as disruptive if it acts to reverse the measure. There is no easy solution other than deepening democratic norms. While other parties have had their own flawed approaches to parliament, the PML-N is particularly egregious when it comes to parliamentary practice. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself sets a tone of disdain by his rare appearances in parliament and his virtual refusal to submit to parliamentary questioning. But the problem is not limited to him: other than the interior minister and, on rare occasions, the finance minister, no senior PML-N minister has shown much interest in parliament. Presidential ordinances can be a bad thing, but much worse is the PML-N’s attitude towards parliament.

Eidul Azha hygiene

WHILE maintaining cleanliness during Eidul Azha is a yearly challenge, this year authorities must make an extra effort for a countrywide clean-up after the sacrifice due to the prevailing threat of Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever. As reported, at least 28 people have died of the ailment in the country so far. While we have been arguing in these columns over the past few weeks for better management of livestock markets and the inflow of beasts into thickly populated areas, now, with Eid just two days away, the focus of both the municipal authorities and general public must shift to the post-sacrifice clean-up effort. While experts have suggested that animals be sacrificed in designated areas, it is highly unlikely that most people — being creatures of habit — will heed this advice; they will probably continue to conduct the sacrifice on the streets and in backyards. Therefore, the authorities must focus their efforts on the removal of offal as soon as possible to prevent the spread of Congo fever and other ailments. It is also recommended the public — especially those handling animals and meat — wear protective gear.

Maintaining hygiene during Eid is particularly problematic in large urban centres such as Karachi and Lahore. In the latter, observers say during the past few years the solid waste management system's performance has dipped with trash piling up in parts of the city. To prevent the spread of disease, municipal authorities in Lahore must ensure that offal is removed quickly. Karachi's garbage problem is on a wholly different plane, though matters have improved slightly under Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah's watch. Yet a brewing pay dispute between KMC employees and city managers threatens to sabotage the clean-up operation during Eid. This issue must be resolved forthwith and the workers must be paid so that the city does not reek with the stench of rotting offal. The health of millions of people depends on the timely removal of leftovers from the sacrifice.

Transit trade spat

THE contrast between tense Pak-Afghan ties and deteriorating Pak-India relations on one side and the fresh impetus in the Indo-Afghan relationship on the other make it extremely unlikely that reason will prevail in the ongoing Pak-Afghan transit trade tug of war. But the pragmatic, sensible and mutually beneficial case for opening up trade routes across Pakistan and Afghanistan needs to be restated — because, perhaps even more so than the north-south trade envisaged under CPEC, the east-west trade across Pakistan and Afghanistan has vast economic potential. First, however, the conflicting

positions of Pakistan and Afghanistan need to be understood. The decision by Afghanistan to bar Pakistani cargo from entering Afghanistan en route to Central Asia, as per the terms of the 2010 Afghan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, will have minimal immediate impact because little, if any, Pakistani trade with Central Asia is conducted overland through Afghanistan. What has been dented, though, is bilateral Pak-Afghan trade in recent months, a development that can be directly linked to tensions in Chaman and Torkham and bickering over security and foreign policy between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the core of the Afghan demand is relatively straightforward: access to Indian imports into Afghanistan via Wagah rather than the Karachi port. The land route is quite obviously cheaper and quicker, but Pakistan only permitted Afghan exports to India to be trucked overland to Wagah — Afghan imports from India are not allowed via Wagah. Pakistan's official reasons for denying the Afghan demand (one that India is keen on too) are varied and some of them do have merit. Topmost is the concern that Indian goods under Afghan transit trade will either be sold in Pakistan before reaching Afghanistan or re-exported back to Pakistan once they arrive in Afghanistan, thereby hurting domestic businesses. But that is a concern that can be addressed by requirements such as sealed containerised cargo, biometric devices and stricter trade oversight along Pak-Afghan border. In truth, with Pakistan unwilling to normalise trade with India, the acceptability of large-scale Indo-Afghan trade across Pakistan is necessarily low in security-centric policymaking circles. While the costs and benefits of trade must always be carefully evaluated and the interests of local producers and consumers need to be balanced, Indian goods are loaded with political baggage in a way that perhaps Chinese goods, which have long flooded the Pakistani market, are not.

Given the circumstances, however, perhaps the first steps towards a rational trade policy across West and Central Asia, with Pakistan embracing not just north-south trade with China but east-west too with India, Afghanistan and Central Asia, is to try and nudge Pak-Afghan and Pak-India ties on a path to stability. The failure of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group and the stillborn Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue has rendered relations with both Afghanistan and India juvenile shouting matches, though with potentially very dangerous consequences. Afghanistan demanding closer ties with India is Afghanistan's right, but overland trade between those two countries is unlikely to go anywhere if Kabul's approach remains accusatory and rancorous.

PSEs in a shambles

OF late, there have been a number of reminders of the state of drift in the management of large public-sector enterprises in the country. The two behemoths that remain on the active privatisation list are not going anywhere anytime soon — PIA and Pakistan Steel Mills. The management of PIA informed the Senate that it had missed its revenue target for the first seven months of the year by more than 20pc. The effort to privatise the airline, or at least seek out a ‘strategic partner’ who would take management control with minority shareholding, has floundered and little vision remains about any strategic redirection of the ailing national carrier, beyond inducting a few more aircraft and introducing a premier service. These may not be bad ideas but it is quite clear that they are hardly adequate for the job at hand. Whatever attempt at strategic redirection — whether privatisation or through divestment and passing over management control — it appears that PIA is now left to fly rudderless till the next government comes in and makes a fresh attempt at changing its course.

Pakistan Steel, meanwhile, saw the rather ignominious departure of its CEO who had taken a Rs18bn bailout when he got the job promising that he would turn the entity around; however, he ended up squandering the money without any results. Now the mill is being run on a day-to-day basis, with a cabinet committee approving salary disbursements from time to time. Its state of affairs is far more dismal than that of PIA, and it too is sitting idle, waiting for a new government to take the initiative and find a path to turn its fortunes around. And we are still waiting to find out whether the Sindh government is interested in acquiring the mill or not. The present government appears to have run its course in its dealings with state-owned enterprises. It was only two years ago that senior government ministers were blaming the dharnas of the PTI for the setback to the privatisation agenda, while the cabinet committee on privatisation was approving bold plans to raise \$4bn in one year from the sell-off of state-owned enterprises. Today that whole effort bears a deserted look. Now we tread water till 2018, and wait to see if there is anybody else out there with any other ideas on what to do with these huge entities and their losses.

Transgenders' travails

A WORLD run on common sense would be so much more convenient for all of us — men, women and thousands upon thousands of those whose efforts continue to be frustrated by a biased system. Instead, we have to constantly go to court for arbitration on matters that by now officialdom should have found a solution to. A group of transgenders has now moved the Peshawar High Court to take note of the absence of a column in the national identity card and census form that acknowledges them as they are and recognises their presence — in fact, existence — as Pakistani citizens. The group held a news conference in Peshawar last week where its members managed to show that they had some support from civil society. In general, however, this fight for recognition is likely to be a long one.

It has been pointed out how the case of transgenders is more easily and more frequently highlighted in the media than was the case some years ago. Almost every other day there is a news feature about transgenders in one of the newspapers or on television, reminding those who care to note of how these Pakistanis cannot be wished away no matter how distant from them those who operate the system may want to be. Not least disturbing have been news items about the violence that transgenders are routinely subjected to on one pretext or another. Signals that governments in Pakistan were preparing to take some pioneering decisions for relief for the transgenders have so far proved false. The recognition and redressal of the problems that transgenders have long been demanding are nowhere in sight and this fact could further embolden elements who think that the transgender community is an easy target because it has no one to protect it. These Pakistani citizens who are pressing for their representation — and justifiably so — continue to pay a heavy price for a system that is so very reluctant to correct itself.

Muslim world in flux

KARACHI: As Muslims worldwide have just performed another Haj and are now celebrating Eidul Azha, it is perhaps an opportune moment to reflect on the current state of that abstract construct — the 'Muslim world'.

While, indeed, the world as a whole is facing myriad challenges to the global order — political, financial, security etc — these problems are magnified manifold in most Muslim-majority states, Pakistan included.

While external players have had a role in destabilising Muslim states and regions, arguably, the greatest challenge is internal, most notably from decrepit and repressive political systems that stifle dissent, as well as from militant movements that thrive in suffocating environments and use Islamic imagery to promote a thoroughly savage agenda.

On the external front, it is impossible to defend the utter devastation that has been unleashed on Muslim states in the name of 'liberation', 'democracy' and the 'responsibility to protect' by external actors.

The invasion of Afghanistan to oust the hard-line Afghan Taliban has failed to produce a working state 15 years after the event.

Meanwhile, functional but autocratic regimes were ousted in Iraq and Libya, only to be replaced by a void thereafter filled by chaos and disorder.

Syria is another tragedy, where an internal movement to dislodge a strongman was seized upon by external players to fight a grinding proxy war; the result has been nearly 300,000 dead and the rise of barbaric groups such as the militant Islamic State group.

Palestine and India-held Kashmir continue to be lightning rods; in the former, Israel continues to suffocate Palestine's people, while New Delhi has responded to calls of 'azadi' emanating from the valley with pellet guns and jackboots.

Indeed, all these scenarios engender a sense of victimhood in Muslim societies, and help extremists exploit people's sentiments.

But the biggest threats Muslim societies face are internal.

The Iraqi and Syrian conflicts have exacerbated sectarian divisions within Islam, while the Saudi-Iranian relationship is at its lowest point in decades.

Moreover, we must ask how many genuine democracies can the Muslim world boast of? Princes, potentates and presidents-for-life continue to lord it over the people in many countries, while in others the generals are reluctant to share power with civilians.

Poverty and illiteracy continue to be major challenges in Muslim societies — while some statelets wallow in petrodollars, millions in poorer states struggle to put food on the table.

It is these inequities, together with the monsters of extremism and sectarianism, that are today tearing into the vitals of the Muslim world.

There is no magic formula to transform things. However, some essential ingredients — such as democracy, moderation, tolerance, social justice — are critical for there to be any positive transformation.

There may be many miles to go, but Muslim societies must themselves take the initiative to change their destiny by addressing these internal weaknesses, and give their citizens a better standard of life.

Electoral reforms

A BILL winding its way through parliament, nudged along by PPP senators, seeks to address the problem of women being denied their right to vote in certain constituencies. A widely publicised issue in recent years, there remain some black electoral spots where all candidates agree to prevent women from voting — all in the name of conservative cultural practices that have no place in a modern, constitutional democracy. To the extent that the Senate may find a way to pass a bill that not only protects women's right to vote, but simultaneously ensures that the new rules do not become grounds for yet more electoral confusion, the draft bill may well be worth the effort. Yet, in the very attempt to push through specific, though much-needed, electoral reforms lies an indication of a far bigger problem: comprehensive electoral reform has stalled and the much-touted parliamentary committee on electoral reforms continues with its desultory ways.

More than three years from the last general election and after a number of by-elections, the flaws in the current electoral system are all too clear to experts and laymen alike. Ultimately, however, reforms will have to match capabilities, particularly when it comes to the long-term quest to grant the right of vote to overseas Pakistanis. Some changes will also depend on institution-building and cultural change, especially when it comes to the intrusive, unwarranted and illegal questions asked of candidates in the initial scrutiny of their qualifications. But being an administrative process guided by specific rules and instructions, elections are fundamentally about better processes — and who better than elected representatives themselves to know how to make elections fair and transparent? There is, however, an obvious conflict of interest: a clean and transparent system could see many elected representatives lose their jobs at the next election. But an unfair electoral system imperils more than just a few elected representatives; it casts a cloud over the democratic system itself. There are now roughly two years left before

the next scheduled general election. Delaying reforms much longer could mean that the time to implement them before 2018, and especially for the Election Commission to strengthen its capacities, will no longer exist.

Red-faced in the Senate

IT seems that our lawmakers had already hit snooze mode in the run-up to the Eid holidays. Last week, the government had to retreat red-faced in the Senate when Minister of State for Interior Baleeghur Rahman tried to move a bill seeking amendments to certain laws. The problem, as Senator Farhatullah Babar pointed out, was that these laws included the Protection of Pakistan Act 2014 which expired in July. However, Mr Rahman need not have been too embarrassed, for he is in good company. The bill, including the amendment to a non-existing law, has already been passed by the National Assembly in a state of blissful ignorance. The government's studied silence when PoPA was nearing expiry at the end of its sunset clause apparently allowed the law to slip into history without notice even by those who had enacted it.

Notwithstanding the levity that the incident on Friday arouses, there is a sombre aspect to be considered here. Being elected to parliament is a matter of much prestige, but it also brings with it great responsibility. Parliament is one of the most visible representations of a democratic set-up, the forum where the people's representatives come together to legislate and oversee the business of government. Yet many parliamentarians do not accord it due importance, or recognise their duty to attend its sessions. As we pointed out in a recent editorial, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, for one, is virtually an unknown quantity in the National Assembly. So is Imran Khan — albeit one must add the same certainly cannot be said of Khursheed Shah, leader of the opposition. When a debate on the Aug 8 terrorist attack in Quetta was being held in the Senate a few days ago, several treasury members did not bother to show up, an inexcusable absence given the topic under discussion. There is also the matter of important bills, such as those pertaining to rape and 'honour' killing, long pending before the National Assembly. The public hopes that the lower house can rouse itself to pass them soon.

Islamic banking

THE growth of Islamic banking in Pakistan is hitting its stride, and this is the right time to focus the sector's energies on where they belong: opening up new avenues in lending and promoting financial inclusion of the unbanked. In December 2003, the total deposits under Islamic mode were a meagre 0.4pc of the total deposits in the banking system. Today, that percentage has risen to 13.2, making it one of the fastest-growing segments within the banking system. To some extent, the growth is explained by a growing preference by depositors for Islamic deposits. The State Bank has, over the years, helped in the sector's growth by issuing new regulations and bringing new instruments that help in managing surplus cash, fulfilling statutory requirements and opening up new avenues for investing like Sukuk bonds.

The bottlenecks faced by the sector in its early years are being removed at an accelerating pace. From 2002 onwards, when the sector received its second fillip by the then government, Islamic banks found they could raise deposits faster than they could lend the money due to a paucity of Sharia-compliant instruments to invest in and parties to lend to. Their day-to-day cash management was similarly complicated by the absence of Sharia-compliant overnight lending instruments in the money markets. These problems were dealt with over successive years, and today, Islamic banks are competing with conventional banks for big-ticket lending and in mobilising deposits.

But this debottlenecking carries mixed implications for the banking system. If Islamic banks are going to mobilise a corps of potential depositors who were shy of the formal banking system due to its interest-based nature, then they can be a positive force promoting financial inclusion. Likewise, if they can expand lending to agriculture and small- and medium-size enterprises, they can also play a positive role by bringing the benefits of modern credit systems to sectors of the economy long excluded by conventional banking. But if they set their sights only on the secure returns of government lending and low-cost deposit mobilisation because they are exempted from any obligation on minimum returns, then this growth could have pernicious consequences. It is imperative that as the debottlenecking of the financial system for Islamic finance continues, core obligations to maintain systemic stability are not lost sight of by loosening the regulatory architecture of the banking system to promote one sector. At present, a complicated situation is being created as Islamic instruments circulate alongside conventional ones in the same money market. As the sector grows, this complex situation will present unique challenges regarding pricing and regulation. The State Bank needs to show a little more foresight in fleshing out how it sees these challenges and intends to meet them without compromising on the regulatory framework that safeguards the depositors' interests.

New Syria truce

THIS year's Eidul Azha brought additional joy for the war-weary and battered people of Syria as an internationally negotiated truce came into effect on Monday. Despite rhetoric from both the government of Bashar al-Assad and its nemeses, the foreign-backed opposition groups, the ceasefire is holding. The fragility of the matter can be gauged from the fact that the truce — hammered out by the US and Russia — will be renewed every 48 hours. While it is easy to be wary — several ceasefires have come into effect only to crumble soon after — since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, any cessation in hostilities in this ravaged nation must be welcomed. With hundreds of thousands dead and millions uprooted, this brutal war ranks amongst the modern Middle East's bloodiest conflicts.

The truce raises hopes, however slim, that this long-running conflict can be permanently wound down. According to reports, if the ceasefire holds for a week, it will pave the way for the US and Russia to take joint military action against extremists groups active in Syria. This development — if it occurs — could be a real game changer because until now, Washington and Moscow had worked at cross purposes in Syria, supporting opposite sides, which has given plenty of room to terrorist outfits like the Islamic State group and the rebranded Al Nusra to expand their violent activities. From now on, the foreign powers that have intervened in Syria should pursue two separate but interlinked plans of action. Firstly, they must build on the relative success of the ceasefire and urge their respective Syrian allies — Moscow should convince Mr Assad, while Washington must engage with the various moderate rebel groups it backs — to reach a political settlement. Secondly, with the Syrian government on board, Russia and the US should coordinate the fight against jihadist groups. In fact, this effort could take a larger shape and involve regional players — especially Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia — which support different sides in Syria and are heavily involved in the conflict. Reconciling such varying agendas will be difficult, but it must be attempted in order to end the Syrian nightmare. Admittedly, Syria is a mess and the jihadist menace will not be neutralised easily. But with international consensus and, more importantly, all Syrian actors — government and opposition — on board, the mission to uproot the extremists and rebuild Syria can begin in earnest.

Motorway incident

THE images and video are disturbing, as are the first-hand eyewitness accounts and second-hand reports. Indeed, everything about the assault on Motorway police personnel by armed and mostly uniformed army personnel is outrageous — far more serious than the euphemistic “sad incident” and “scuffle” that has been described by the ISPR in its brief official statement. In fact, given the widespread indignation over the assault, though noticeably outside the otherwise rambunctious mainstream electronic media, and the military’s attempt to downplay it, a case could be made for a civilian-led inquiry into the matter and for the civilian courts to be allowed to take their course. Military law does allow for its personnel to be investigated and tried by civilian institutions where the alleged crime committed occurs outside the line of duty. That would not only set a welcome example, it would send a signal that all are equal before the law and that any violence against officers of the law by anyone will be dealt with firmly.

To be sure, when it comes to violence against police personnel, it is not merely military personnel who have been guilty in the past. While assaults by military personnel have occurred before, so have powerful civilians attacked police personnel on numerous occasions. Just last month, Hanif Abbasi of the PML-N led a mob attack against a police station in Rawalpindi after local police had the temerity to detain some PML-N youth leaders for recklessly riding motorcycles, a practice that the Punjab government itself has sought to clamp down on. Meanwhile, across the country, powerful citizens flout the law and arrogantly challenge helpless traffic policemen who may have the audacity to try and sanction them. Yet, when the highly disciplined and ultra-powerful military’s own officers violently attack and even unlawfully whisk away civilian law-enforcement personnel, there is a special, and disturbing, resonance. It sends a message that as a class, the military is above civilians. Surely, that is a message that the military leadership must act to curb.

Flawed approach to Pakistan

THERE are several choices that Pakistan has made over the decades that have contributed to regional problems and there continue to be areas where official rhetoric and policies on the ground do not quite match. But increasingly apparent is the sense that regional dynamics are once again converging against Pakistan and its interests. And once again, terrorism and Afghanistan are the sources of growing regional differences. Testifying before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Special

Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Olson resorted to what has long been a cornerstone, and a flawed one at that, of US policy towards Pakistan: seeing this country through the prism of Afghanistan. With the centrality of US demands of Pakistan concerning in some way or the other the need for stabilising Afghanistan, is it really surprising that so much suspicion still remains here about America's true goals and intentions?

It is not so much that America's demands are wrong — a terror-free neighbourhood is in the fundamental interest of all — than the seemingly lopsided focus of demands. For a decade and a half now, the US has directly and indirectly tried to defeat the Afghan Taliban insurgency without quite acknowledging that much of that victory depends on Kabul providing a viable and reliable governance alternative. First, the Hamid Karzai era was propped up regardless of the obviously and massively damaging choices that dispensation made for political stability and governance. Now, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani is also being insulated from domestic pressures by a virtual American guarantee that the National Unity Government will complete its term no matter if it delivers on constitutional and governance reforms. Freed from having to bear the weight of querulous domestic politics alone thanks to US support, Mr Ghani is turning to external issues, which, in this case, means essentially blaming Pakistan for all of Afghanistan's internal problems and seeking closer ties with India as a counterweight to Pakistan.

Therein lies a major flaw of all three countries when it comes to the Pak-Afghan equation: if Pakistan is seen as the key to ending the insurgency in Afghanistan and helping realise political reconciliation in that country, how is the ganging up of a superpower, an inveterate rival and an always prickly neighbour supposed to encourage Pakistan to align its interests with their demands? While there were many factors at work, it remains the case that the Murree dialogue was scuttled by foreign revelations of Mullah Omar's death and the QCG's efforts were devastated by the US decision to drone Akhtar Mansour. It is impossible to suggest that Pakistan has clean hands when it comes to regional militancy and Afghanistan's struggles. But the current approach of the US, Afghanistan and India portends more danger for the region, not less.

Railways' safety

TWO separate train accidents on Thursday highlight the problems of infrastructure and safety that continue to plague Pakistan Railways. Some seven deaths have resulted from the two incidents — one occurring near Multan, the other in Fateh Jang. In the first incident, the Karachi-bound Awam Express crashed into a freight train. Though the Railways' chief has blamed the driver for the tragedy, the driver claims the signal was

green and that the freight train had no tail light. There should be no rush to pin the blame as only a thorough probe can establish exactly what led to the accident. In the second mishap, lives were lost when a car collided with a train in Fateh Jang as the vehicle attempted to cross an unmanned railway crossing.

The state of the Railways' infrastructure is far from satisfactory. Critics say the state has made no major investments in infrastructure, when simple common sense dictates that the Railways' large network be constantly upgraded and maintained. Critical infrastructure — especially tracks and the signalling system — cannot be left unattended and must be constantly monitored and maintained. As observers point out, some of the infrastructure damaged in Sindh in the aftermath of Benazir Bhutto's 2007 assassination still awaits repair. Work has started on improving the signalling system in part of the Railways' network, but the upgrades are taking an abnormally long time to complete. Another area of concern is that of crossings — both manned and unmanned. While there are quite a few manned crossings in Punjab, in the province's southern half and in Sindh many crossings remain unmanned. Most accidents occur at unmanned crossings, some of which have been constructed illegally. In areas where heavy road traffic intersects with the railway line, the authorities need to place personnel at the crossings to monitor and manage both road and rail traffic. We can learn from India with whom we share a common colonial Railways' heritage. The authorities there have managed to instal an automated signalling system on most of the main lines. Considering the commonalities, perhaps our Railways' authorities can study our eastern neighbour's model. Perhaps the Railways is neglected because the elite have long ago abandoned this mode of transport. However, unless the state concentrates on making the Railways a viable and safe entity, our dreams of economic glory ushered in by greater connectivity will be difficult to fulfil.

Another 'honour' killing

AFTER the outrage over the rapid succession of brutal incidents targeting women, it is unfathomable why the government continues to drag its feet on the anti-rape and anti-'honour' killing bills. With so many women murdered by husbands, brothers and fathers, it is imperative that female legislators across party lines lobby their male colleagues to push through pro-women legislation. In Thursday's incident in Multan, Khalida Bibi, a young mother of three, and a man, were tortured and hanged apparently by the male members of her family as punishment for an alleged liaison. The increasing number of women killed by close relatives denotes not only a disturbing pattern in which perpetrators strike with impunity knowing they will be pardoned, it is also an urgent call

to the state to protect women. Data documented by Aurat Foundation reveals that 724 women were murdered in Punjab last year; 190 were killed by their husbands, 50 by their brothers and 24 by their fathers. These figures expose the state's weak record in tackling the factors behind this continuing cycle of violence. Why has there been no movement on the proposed amendments — removing the forgiveness loophole — in the anti-honour killing law? It is inexcusable that Pakistan should forget its commitment to women, especially when it is a signatory to international obligations calling for institutionalising gender equality.

Meanwhile, those who kill for 'honour' are almost never punished, allowing the family of a victim to forgive the killer — almost always family. Not only are they forgiven, they are even supported by regressive patriarchies thus increasing the impunity factor — reason enough for removing punishment waivers and compoundability provisions from the law. Where crimes against women are declared crimes against the state, perpetrators have been penalised. As Pakistani women continue to challenge misogyny, their efforts should be supported by holding this government to its pledge to call a joint parliamentary session to pass the anti-honour killing and anti-rape bills so that women are protected against violence.

Policing Sindh

THE spectacle involving Khawaja Izhar-ul-Hasan, leader of the opposition in the Sindh Assembly, and SSP Rao Anwar, which played out on TV screens on Friday, is indicative of the deep malaise affecting law enforcement in Sindh. It shows that policing in this province is not an open-and-shut affair where officers make their calls by the book; instead, policing Sindh is an incredibly politicised matter, where many of the men in uniform tend to act in a maverick fashion. Rao Anwar, who led the raid on the MQM lawmaker's Karachi residence, accused Khawaja Izhar of serious crimes, including extortion and killings. However, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, who quickly sprang into action, was critical of the police's conduct, saying the lawmaker had been arrested without the Sindh Assembly speaker's permission. The prime minister also expressed displeasure over the police's actions. But the tough-talking Rao Anwar, whose reputation precedes him, was unrepentant, even though he was later suspended. Talking to the media, he said he was "not among the officers who bow to their masters".

While the police's independence from political pressure is an essential ingredient for better law enforcement in Sindh, it should be noted that Friday's incident — and the police's conduct generally — is hardly free from political bias. The fact is that the MQM

has fallen foul of the establishment; its reputation for violence has little to do with that. Moreover, Rao Anwar is known for his politicised policing. The officer has been suspended — and been reinstated — on numerous occasions, and has been accused of excesses, including using extrajudicial methods. And the act of dragging a lawmaker with his hands tied in front of the media glare was extremely unsavoury. But the problem is beyond just one controversial police officer: it involves a decrepit policing system where actions are clearly dictated by political motives and vendettas. Instead of such antics, and the spectacles put on by rule-bending policemen in Sindh, what is needed is a professional police force that serves the people according to the law, instead of the various centres of power that hold the reins in this country.

Chief Minister Shah has himself indicated his desire to revamp the force. On the day of the Khawaja Izhar incident, Mr Shah approved an allocation for buying updated weapons for the police, as well as gave the green light for improved training of the force. Along with this, inducting morally upright personnel on the basis of merit must top the chief minister's list of priorities where police reforms are concerned. Granted, reforming Sindh's police is a gargantuan task, given the myriad deficiencies of the force. But Mr Shah can take the first steps that can result in lasting change. Sindh, especially the metropolis of Karachi, needs a professional police force — and not the legally ambiguous, politically driven theatrics of men in uniform.

Mohmand bombing

A FRIDAY prayer-time bombing of a mosque in Mohmand Agency has underscored once more the national threat posed by the Jamaatul Ahrar faction of the banned TTP. From Quetta to Mohmand and Lahore to Mardan, the JuA has struck with a viciousness that sets it apart from many other militant groups. The TTP faction, though it mostly appears to operate independently of the umbrella organisation, seems to particularly relish attacking civilian targets, making it all the more dangerous and unpredictable. The Mohmand bombing may be a continuation of a recent disturbing trend, but it does raise at least two questions. First, why is the state still dabbling in the creation of so-called peace lashkars, essentially armed militias comprising locals? As the JuA spokesperson himself has claimed, the bombing was in retaliation for locals attacking and capturing TTP militants, a tactic that has long drawn the ire of militants and should have been abandoned by the state. In tribal areas, where collective responsibility and ancient customs are still deeply rooted, the locals do volunteer to protect their villages and neighbourhoods — but surely that is a practice that should not be encouraged in a place where the military has been fighting for nearly a decade now. The courage and valour of

ordinary citizens should not be a substitute for the security forces doing their job of protecting the populace.

Second, what is the state doing in terms of trying to shut down the JuA's operations inside Pakistan and across the border in eastern Afghanistan? The elimination of Umar Mansour, mastermind of the APS Peshawar attack, in a drone strike in July in Afghanistan and the designation by the US of the group as a global terrorist organisation in August means that the Americans are likely hunting JuA leader Abdul Wali aka Omar Khalid Khorasani, but the group and its leadership appear to be both elusive and tenacious. Elimination of the JuA leader may be important, but it will not immediately end the threat from the group. For that, Pakistan will need to urgently and resolutely take up the matter with Kabul. Yet, given the poor state of Pak-Afghan relations and perhaps the apprehension that the Afghan government will demand reciprocal action against the Haqqani network, the presence of the JuA in Afghanistan is not yet the topmost priority of the security establishment here. How much more blood will be shed before a forthright conversation can be had with the Afghan government?

Banks' performance

THE latest review of the banking system released by the State Bank shows that a stubborn risk aversion still prevails in the sector. Whereas there is some increase in risk-based lending to the private sector in the quarter ending June, government securities continue to dominate bank-lending preferences even in an environment of declining interest rates. Even though the State Bank has tried to put a positive gloss on the numbers, the review clearly shows that net investments in June grew by almost 26pc in 2016 compared to the same month last year, whereas net advances increased by less than 14pc. Interest margins have shrunk, leading to a shrinking of profitability by 5.4pc, and deposit growth has also slowed, leading banks to rely more on financial borrowings to generate liquidity. Yet the most profitable route out of this state of affairs, offering up innovative products to private-sector borrowers, remains one that the banks are reluctant to take.

To be sure, the details do show some evidence of movement. The power sector is developing a healthy appetite for bank credit, a potentially encouraging sign of activity. And individual borrowers have also doubled their appetite from last year, borrowing almost Rs63bn in June this year, a potentially mixed sign. But 90pc of all investments are in government securities and deposit growth is slowing down. These are not healthy signs at all and the State Bank should elaborate on the reasons behind them, particularly when it comes to deposits. Declining interest rates are not a convincing

reason for a slowdown in deposit growth. Perhaps the withholding tax on bank transactions has played a role, and if that is the case it deserves closer scrutiny. Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that the numbers contained in the review actually paint a very mixed picture, and the attempts of the State Bank to assert that they indicate a revival of economic activity could easily be seen as misplaced optimism.

Attack on Indian army

A DEADLY attack against the Indian army in India-held Kashmir has left at least 17 soldiers dead and, because of the Indian authorities' immediate accusations against Pakistan, has plunged Pak-India relations into a dangerous and unstable new phase. The pre-dawn raid on an army camp in Uri, Baramulla district, is believed to have been carried out by four attackers, individuals that Indian authorities have suggested came from across the LoC or are aligned with Pakistan-based anti-India militant groups. In a highly volatile environment – Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh, who had a fractious visit to Islamabad in early August, has publicly called Pakistan a “terrorist state” — the ISPR has announced that the DGMO hotline was activated and the Pakistan DGMO asked his Indian counterpart to share so-called actionable intelligence with Pakistan. In a characterisation that will not go unnoticed, the ISPR statement referred to ‘terrorists’ attacking Uri and asserted that “no infiltration is allowed from the Pakistani soil” — a position that would be bolstered by a crackdown on all non-state actors allegedly involved in cross-border/LoC terrorism. With the UN General Assembly session scheduled to bring together world leaders in New York this week and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to address the UNGA on Wednesday, the Uri attack could catapult the Kashmir dispute to the forefront of global issues that will be discussed in New York. While Mr Sharif was in any case expected to strongly reiterate the Pakistani position on Kashmir, the decision by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to skip the session means a potential high-level clash has been averted. Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj may well be hard-hitting in her own speech, but that will come towards the end of the gathering and several days after Mr Sharif would have spoken. Surely, though, the war of words, at least from the Indian side, will not abate in the days ahead. India's automatic blaming of Pakistan for major violence in that country is very much a part of the problem.

Meanwhile, the death of 11-year-old Nasir Shafi, whose body was found riddled with pellets used by Indian security forces, has deepened the anger and instigated fresh protests in IHK over the weekend. The vicious and unending clampdown by Indian security forces in IHK ought to have pricked the world's conscience, but the outside world has prioritised good relations with India over compassion for the oppressed

people of Kashmir. Perhaps conscientious voices in India can help point out a fundamental truth about the Kashmir conflict: irrespective of what the Indian government thinks Pakistan has done or is doing, the Kashmir dispute is rooted in a people's genuine rejection of control by the state of India. Denying that is a hallmark of generations of Indian leaders, but it is a truth that has not changed.

Tax convention

THE finance minister's signature on the OECD Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters may look like a step in the right direction, but it will be nothing more than just a photo op if the political will to curb tax evasion does not exist. Similar international conventions designed to curb money laundering, for instance, have not been very effective in obtaining convictions thus far, for the simple reason that those who have been netted under the revamped laws have the means to buy their way out of their difficulties. Tax evasion is an even more intractable issue. The government has had a hard time chasing tax evaders at home, where ample laws exist to assist in the exercise should they be needed, and it is unlikely that accession to an international convention will make much of a difference. Considering some of the most high-profile tax evaders are sitting in parliament, there are grounds for believing that the signature on the convention is little more than an exercise in public relations.

If the government wants people to take its commitment to netting tax evaders seriously, it can start at home rather than flying off to Paris. This does not mean that international conventions that open doors to cross-border cooperation should not be pursued. This particular convention is rightly described by the OECD as the "most powerful instrument for international tax cooperation" to date, allowing not only for exchange of information, but tax examinations and collections as well. But if the political will to go after tax evaders is absent, which the track record demonstrates is indeed the case, then the additional tools that the government will get from the convention will be meaningless. Nevertheless, now that a signature has been put on the convention, ratification from the cabinet should be quick. Then comes the hard part of negotiating the scope of the cooperation that Pakistan will be willing to extend, and what it will ask for in return. Will the government agree to grant the automatic exchange of financial account information to tax authorities from other countries? If not, it is unlikely to get the same cooperation in return. Given the scepticism that surrounds this exercise, the government needs to send a signal that it is serious. There are still a number of years before the convention becomes active, and the time in between should be used to build a robust framework for mutual cooperation.

Cinema revival

THERE has been much talk of late about the ‘revival’ of Pakistani cinema. Indeed, the last few years have seen an increasing number of locally produced films being released. Several have met with acclaim for tackling unconventional themes. However, unlike before, this new cinema is not entertainment for the masses. A report in this paper last week described how the once thriving cinema culture in Hyderabad, Sindh, has seen a decline despite the number of cineplexes coming up — or even because of them. Until the mid-1990s, there were 21 cinemas in the city where films from Hollywood and Bollywood were screened and the very reasonably priced tickets were affordable for even the lower-income segment of society.

Those days, however, are long gone. And not only in Hyderabad, but in other urban centres as well. Some old-style cinema houses, with their retro interiors and single screens, fell into disrepair as the Pakistani film industry, for a number of reasons — including lack of official patronage — stuttered to a virtual halt. Several, particularly in Karachi, were destroyed in public disturbances as the political climate grew more turbulent. At times, in a telling — if inadvertent — commentary on the priorities of our governing authorities, many closed cinema houses were razed and the spaces they occupied given over to shopping plazas. In the post-celluloid era, spanking new multiplexes with the capacity to screen four or more films simultaneously sprang up. But the glitz comes with pricey tickets that exclude the average citizen from this form of entertainment that was traditionally much more egalitarian in terms of who could partake of it. How far can a revival of cinema truly be so when it caters only to the privileged few? Surely the state and society must find creative ways to expand the reach of the latest brand of films so they can be accessed by a wide spectrum of the populace. Going to the movies need not be an elite activity.

Dar’s dominance

THE stark centralisation of power within the PML-N government is most clearly visible in how economic decisions are made, and particularly in the pain with which the government is viewing the Supreme Court’s order to get all decisions made by the Economic Coordination Committee ratified by the full cabinet. On the face of it, the order is a rather humdrum affair. After all, it is part of the law to get this ratification. But the government appears to be chafing at the directive and is said to be in the process of challenging the order. If so, this raises an obvious question: why is it so difficult to get

cabinet ratification of ECC decisions when the cabinet consists of the government's own handpicked ministers?

The answer is not so obvious when one considers the facts. Every government for the last quarter of a century has struggled to fill the slot of finance minister. Since the crucial 2008 election, for example, we have had two governments but five finance ministers. Even the Musharraf regime had to import its finance minister, Shaukat Aziz, who was the last empowered individual to hold the post before Mr Dar. In the meantime, we've seen Naveed Qamar wash his hands of the position, Shaukat Tarin try to run a tight ship and be shown the door, and Hafeez Shaikh spend his years in the post trying to find his feet. Why has Pakistan had such a hard time finding a sound finance minister, considering it is one of the most important of all portfolios?

If Mr Dar is the next empowered finance minister after Shaukat Aziz, then it is clear his position derives from the vast discretionary powers delegated unto him by the prime minister. Bypassing parliament is part of this, but bypassing his own cabinet, it turns out, is an equally important ingredient. In the past, this formula has given us economic decisions with short-lived results, since such a configuration of power excludes the most basic elements of success in policymaking: consensus building. Mr Dar is certainly an empowered finance minister, and one is needed in the country. But building one's influence on the basis of discretionary powers that are designed to bypass the normal channels of decision-making in government is a recipe for bad policy. The resort to unilateral tactics, such as using the ECC to make policy decisions, or reliance on presidential ordinances, leaves very little room for the substantive policy measures required to build resilient growth. No wonder then, that the PML-N, which prided itself on its economic credentials, has had a difficult time tackling the more intractable problems of the economy such as structural reform, negotiating a new NFC award, handling a deteriorating external sector and broadening the tax base. Instead, the party is left to build its legacy on its firefighting tactics alone.

PTI's Raiwind plan

IMRAN Khan is going to Raiwind and the political rivalry between the PML-N and PTI is about to get its latest twist. On Sunday, the PTI supremo announced his decision to his party, which seems equally apprehensive and enthused about its leader's quest. The PTI's internal tensions, with senior leaders squabbling and party polls indefinitely delayed, appear to be at least part of Mr Khan's purpose — he hopes that mobilising the party for high-profile street protests will paper over the cracks. True, protesting within

the confines of the law is a democratic right, and Mr Khan is doing nothing wrong. Neither, as he has rightly suggested, is there something intrinsically wrong about culminating the protests in Raiwind, often associated with the Sharif family residence. Yet, there is unmistakable provocation in Mr Khan's intended actions, one that has made other opposition parties uneasy.

Given the personal nature of control over their respective parties, it is inevitable that the country's senior-most political leaders will attack each other when contesting politics. But there is a line between politics and the personal, a line that was crossed repeatedly in the 1990s to the great detriment of all involved and democracy itself. If Mr Khan contends that converging on Raiwind is not a provocation, then the reverse question ought to be asked: what will he achieve by making the Sept 30 rally in Raiwind the focal point of his latest campaign? Apart from his personal reputation — inspiring his supporters in the hope they will respond in significant numbers — there is little positive here. Will the PML-N really feel the pressure to compromise on a Panama Papers inquiry after a week of PTI protests? Therein lies the other half of the problem: the PML-N leadership gets ruffled by Mr Khan and appears to want to respond in kind to his provocations rather than behaving as the national government. For that reason, PTI protests take on an extra edge. Will the PML-N do something reckless, causing tensions to soar is a constant question. True, the PTI has established itself as the PML-N's principal electoral rival, but the party with governments at the centre and in Punjab is hardly in an unenviable position. The PML-N, especially in Punjab, has sought to distinguish itself as a party that delivers on its promises. Why, then, allow itself to be consumed by the PTI's manoeuvrings when there is governance to focus on?

Malaria resurgence

WITH 15,000 cases recently reported in Sindh, malaria has made a post-monsoon resurgence. This figure is set to increase unless a preventive approach is adopted to defeat malaria, especially in districts with suboptimal healthcare services and poor sanitation facilities. In fact, addressing the factors responsible for its spread, including poverty, inadequate sewerage systems, large population movements and lack of access to quality healthcare, is the only way to roll back this disease. Concentrating on multiple prevention measures (eg insecticide-treated bed-nets; precautionary fogging; removal of stagnant water etc) is pivotal to burden reduction in high-endemic regions including Fata, Balochistan and Sindh. With peak transmission months running from August to November, provincial authorities must start work immediately. Over the years, the absence of political will and poor resource planning have led to the rapid spread of infectious diseases impacting economic development. Women are four times more

likely to suffer malaria during pregnancy resulting in low-birthweight infants and stillbirths. Lessons should have been learnt after the 2011 dengue fever outbreak and the Punjab government's response — areas where the Aedes mosquitoes bred were fumigated, for example. So, why aren't such practices emulated during the annual mosquito-breeding season? It is unfortunate that while Sri Lanka has been declared malaria-free by WHO, malaria in Pakistan remains the fourth largest cause of death among communicable diseases.

With 1.6m cases annually, Pakistan is categorised by WHO as sharing 95pc of the total Eastern Mediterranean regional malaria burden. Therefore, eradicating mosquito-breeding sites is essential. And with 177m susceptible to the illness, revisiting the Roll Back Malaria initiative — part of the 2001 National Health Policy — to examine why it failed to reduce the disease burden by 50pc is essential in order to not repeat mistakes. Despite the argument that mosquito eradication is costly and unsustainable, prevention through sustained intervention, early diagnosis and awareness drives are doable.

Regional tensions

IT is sensible advice at a time when common sense is in short supply in many parts of the region. Three former foreign secretaries and a former national security adviser have jointly framed a foreign policy and national security road map that ought to put this country and the region itself on a path towards stability and security. Their advice, as published in this newspaper yesterday: Pakistan must, for its own sake and for the sake of the region, act to end the international perception that it shields the Afghan Taliban and anti-India militants on its soil. Clearly, there is no panacea to the region's security troubles, no single action that can cure its ills. Just as clearly, much will depend on sensible policies being adopted by Afghanistan and India, not least their penchant for externalising blame for many problems of their own making. Yet, Pakistan's distancing itself from all non-state actors and insurgents — a comprehensive, obvious and irreversible distancing — is a sine qua non for domestic and regional stability.

"We must reflect why is it that Pakistan has ended up always siding with the most regressive elements in Afghanistan, some of whom we falsely regarded as assets, why most educated Afghans have become alienated from us and why we allowed our policy to fall in the insidious Afghan ethnic divide," the former foreign secretaries and national security adviser have written. In recent times, even asking the right question tends to attract criticism from certain nationalistic quarters of seditious intent and aiding the perceived enemy. The US and Afghanistan have erred in many areas and in many of their policies over the last decade and a half and, most egregiously from a Pakistani

perspective, have often blamed Pakistan for their own failings in Afghanistan. Yet, what did not make sense in the 1990s cannot be good policy today; policymakers here have helped to craft an environment in Afghanistan where radical Islamists among that country's Pakhtuns are the only semi-allies that this country has. What future for Afghanistan can that possibly envisage that will redound to Pakistan's interest?

On India, the equation can appear murky because of a bellicose government in New Delhi. But the terrorism problem between India and Pakistan existed long before Narendra Modi became prime minister. More to the point, Islamabad's sensible and rightful diplomatic position on the Kashmir dispute has been internationally diminished by the perception that Pakistan nurtures anti-India militants on its soil. Where, after all, is the promised action against those involved in 2008 Mumbai attacks? Contrast also the negligible attention that India's recent atrocities in held Kashmir have received internationally versus the grim coverage of the Uri attack. If India will not budge and the world will not listen, how does it help Pakistan to give them reason for continuing to do so?

Militancy nexus

CHIEF Justice Anwar Zaheer Jamali's comments on Monday about a "nexus" between certain political and religious parties, and terrorists is not only a bold assertion of the truth, it also vindicates what many — including this paper — have been saying for long: until political and religious parties distance themselves from violent elements under their wing, the war against militancy will not be won. Several examples spring to mind that confirm Chief Justice Jamali's concerns. For example in Karachi, the existence of a militant wing of the MQM has been an open secret for decades. Until the Muttahida got on the wrong side of the security establishment recently, it held Karachi in a vice-like grip, enforced by its dreaded militant faction. The PPP also patronised elements from Karachi's underworld — specifically in Lyari — in the shape of the so-called Peoples Amn Committee. But beyond the metropolis, mainstream parties have also consorted with militant elements in unambiguous ways. PML-N stalwart Rana Sanaullah had hobnobbed with the leaders of banned sectarian outfits during election time, while suspects linked to Al Qaeda have been recovered from Lahore and other Punjab cities, reportedly provided shelter by Jamaat-i-Islami cadres, and those of Jamiat, the JI's student wing. Meanwhile, religious parties, especially the JUI-F, have launched vitriolic campaigns against attempts by the state to register and regulate madressahs. While not all seminaries are involved in violence, militants have been known to use madressahs affiliated with hard-line outfits to find sanctuary.

As these observations indicate, very few of Pakistan's political and religious parties can claim to have a clean record where supporting violent elements is concerned. This should not be used as a brush to tar all political groups; after all, other power centres, such as the establishment, have also patronised hard-line groups. However, the chief justice's remarks should encourage internal reflection within political parties and religious groups. As he said, breaking the nexus is imperative. The fact is, a legal counterterrorism battle is just as important to defeat militancy, as is action in the field. This requires prosecutors and the judiciary to proceed against those involved in terrorism without fear. Therefore, all political and religious groups must transparently and permanently distance themselves from elements that are involved in violence. Unless this is done, they will be seen as providing cover for terrorists and other criminal elements, and should be prepared to face the law for doing so.

Executing the mentally ill

AS we have always maintained in these columns, the death penalty is an inhumane and degrading form of punishment. And when applied to mentally ill prisoners, it makes no sense at all. Take the case of 50-year old Imdad Ali, a mentally ill death-row prisoner in Punjab who was given a weeklong reprieve by the Supreme Court on Monday. On death row for over 14 years, he was sentenced in 2002 despite being diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. In solitary confinement for three years, his manic episodes are said to have worsened — Ali has no understanding of his own condition, and is incapable of comprehending the harrowing punishment. Irrespective of jail medical reports, dating back to 2008 and verifying classic schizophrenic symptoms, the court was never provided with any evidence until recently. This is because the system is rigged against the poorer mentally ill prisoners who are languishing on death row; their cases hinge on inept state prosecutors and jail authorities.

In November 2015, a last-minute decision saved Abdul Basit, a paraplegic, from the gallows. His reprieve came after rights groups raised concerns about how a man in a wheelchair would mount the scaffold. It is strongly recommended that mentally unfit prisoners suffering due to medical neglect be shifted to facilities to be treated. Since the death penalty was resumed in December 2014 after an unofficial moratorium under the PPP government, Pakistan has executed nearly 400 people — only a fraction hanged on terror charges. Retaliation may be approved by the law, but it is a severe travesty of justice when those with mental conditions are put to death. Certain provisions in prison rules also forbid executing mentally ill prisoners. To add, Pakistan is a signatory to conventions, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, prohibiting

the 'arbitrary' taking of life which makes it obligatory to abolish executions. Pardoning Imdad Ali and other mentally ill and disabled death-row prisoners would be in line with the principles of human rights.

Pak-India media war

AS the initial frenzy subsides, it appears that at least the official Indian response to the Uri terrorist attack is taking on a more measured tone. After Pakistan's high commissioner to India was called in by the Indian foreign secretary, the Indian foreign affairs ministry issued a statement yesterday that ended with: "If the Government of Pakistan wishes to investigate these cross-border attacks, India is ready to provide fingerprints and DNA samples of terrorists killed in the Uri and Poonch incidents. We now expect a response from the Government of Pakistan." Given that the ISPR has already called for "actionable intelligence" from India in after the Uri attack, the offer ought to be taken up. It is in this country's interests to thoroughly investigate any claims of incidents of terrorism allegedly traced back to Pakistani soil, be it Uri, Pathankot or Mumbai. The obvious concern is that investigations are piling up without any successful conclusions; each side blames the other for the impasse.

Curiously, while the official responses by India and Pakistan have been relatively measured and purposeful, the media's role, especially in India, is increasingly that of unhinged warmongering. Even before an attack ends, a war of words erupts on live television and social media, and carries over to print and online publications. The thrust of the confused and ignorant babble is revenge or the need to 'teach a lesson' to Pakistan. When those demands are first made, virtually nothing is known of the nature of the attack or of the attackers themselves. Whether the initial allegations are subsequently proved true or not is almost beside the point: there is visible, in sections of the Indian media, an almost inveterate hostility to the very idea of Pakistan. Yet, what the Indian media can do, Pakistan can match unfortunately. The automatic denial of any possibility of Pakistani citizens' involvement in an attack and recourse to the so-called false-flag operation as an explanation for an attack means that a great deal of the media here is simply mirroring what their Indian counterparts do: whipping up nationalist sentiment and portraying the other country as villainous.

With an increasingly provocative media in both countries that the political establishments cannot ignore, and with hawks still in existence in the security establishments of India and Pakistan, there is every reason for the international

community to stay vigilant and support sensible approaches by both sides. Stalled as the Mumbai and Pathankot investigations may be, there is no other obvious route to establishing the truth and creating the necessary environment for action to be taken against terrorists. The Uri attack has already overshadowed the ongoing violence by Indian security forces in India-held Kashmir; it is in this country's interests to try and get the focus back on the plight of the people of IHK as quickly as possible.

Chasing bad money

THE Public Accounts Committee has demonstrated to the country that the government appears to be deliberately stalling all questions regarding the Panama Papers. What else can one conclude when half a dozen bureaucratic departments give a parliamentary committee old and typically evasive answers that are often the bureaucratic response to straightforward questions? The FBR told the committee that more than 200 notices had been issued to individuals named in the Panama Papers, but that responses were still awaited. How long does the FBR typically wait for responses to tax notices in other cases? There are many examples of people who have been pursued far more aggressively by the FBR for allegations far milder than those implied by the Panama Papers. Similarly, the FBR and the State Bank have tried to wash their hands of the exercise, saying they have no powers to initiate investigations — while examples exist of both organisations acting aggressively when political stars are more positively aligned. The SECP too tried to create an impression that it was busy with investigations, by compiling addresses and cross-checking information regarding a number of people. However, it said that its efforts stalled when it had to approach the State Bank for account details of the parties involved.

In short, nobody is in charge and each agency is content to just spin its wheels in an exercise in futility and report its helplessness. If this is indeed the state of affairs, what does the government expect the opposition to do? If working within the system leads nowhere, and the only results to show after months of activity are bureaucratic excuses, then how is the opposition not justified in going beyond parliament to seek answers? To jaded minds, the Panama leaks are a non-story because 'we all know this sort of thing goes on' and besides, 'much of it is probably legal anyway'. But such reasoning breeds dangerous complacency. Fact of the matter is, the Panama Papers did indeed reveal an important reality regarding Pakistan's many dysfunctions. They gave us a glimpse into a world where power and privilege are tucked away neatly and anonymously, beyond the reach of any accountability exercise and law. There should be no doubt that, ultimately, this dark world of bad money will meet its day of reckoning. The only question is whether we will be around when that time comes.

Bugti's asylum request

THE problems that Balochistan faces will not go away by involving hostile foreign countries in what is essentially a domestic political issue that has been militarised and mishandled. If anything, this will further complicate the issue. Hence, the announcement by Baloch separatist leader Brahamdagh Bugti that he intends to seek political asylum in India is regrettable, and makes it nearly impossible for him to attempt any rapprochement with Pakistan's military establishment, which largely controls this country's Balochistan policy. For all intents and purposes, Mr Bugti seems to have permanently slammed the door on reconciliation. His unfortunate decision follows on the heels of Narendra Modi's provocative speech on India's Independence Day last month, in which the Indian leader made a pointed reference to Balochistan. Such moves only strengthen the views of conservative quarters in Pakistan that India is fomenting trouble in Balochistan. This is indeed partially true. But while New Delhi is involved in stoking matters in the troubled province, it is the Pakistani establishment's policy of stifling political dissent in Balochistan that has allowed a hostile neighbour to expose a domestic sore spot.

However, Mr Bugti's embrace of India should not be used by the government and security establishment to further crack down on all political dissent in Balochistan. For there to be any movement towards normalisation in the province, Baloch nationalist leaders, particularly those in mainstream politics, should clearly enunciate their views on Mr Bugti's move. And it would reinforce their credibility if they state at this point that their campaign for rights is a political and democratic one, and purely indigenous. Becoming pawns in a convoluted geopolitical game won't alleviate Balochistan's grievances. While secession is out of the question, the province's concerns regarding autonomy must be addressed and the door to reconciliation kept open. The military must realise that Balochistan's problems are primarily political, and it is the political route — not the military one — that can help establish long-lasting peace in the province, and hopefully usher in an era of harmony and stability in the troubled area.

PM's speech at UN

PRIME MINISTER Nawaz Sharif has made his case at the UN for the world to pay attention to the Kashmir dispute and for India to engage Pakistan in a sustained dialogue. In a speech that was neither compelling nor entirely forgettable, Mr Sharif struck a different note to the incessant warmongering in both India and Pakistan in recent times. Specifically on the Kashmir dispute, however, Pakistan faces a

complicated task in trying to get the world to pay attention to the issue in a fair manner that puts the plight of the people of India-held Kashmir at the centre of international concern. Part of the problem is rooted in India's long-held insistence that the Kashmir dispute, to the extent that India even acknowledges it as one, be addressed bilaterally and without global mediation. In addition, with the rise of India as an economic power, much of the outside world is more keen to engage India economically than probe its dark underbelly.

Yet, a frank evaluation of the relative positions of India and Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute would suggest that Pakistan has consistently failed to press home its advantages and has, in fact, harmed the Kashmir cause by entangling it, in the eyes of much of the world, in a global terrorism problem. Contrast the global reaction to the Uri attack — from anger at Pakistan to expressions of concern even before the identity of the attackers has been established — to the widespread indifference to the months-long crackdown and curfew in parts of IJK. Where Pakistan wants to talk about the plight of the people of Kashmir and the genuine dispute over the territory, much of the outside world seems to sympathise with India's claims that it is a victim of cross-border terrorism. Unfair as that may be, it is the context in which Pakistan must conduct its international diplomacy.

Even if the terrorism problem did not exist, however, there is a flaw in how the Pakistani state approaches the Kashmir challenge. First, there is an undeniable difference between how much of the mainstream political class would prefer to address relations with India — essentially, seek broad-based dialogue that does not make progress in other areas conditional on progress on resolving the Kashmir dispute — and the security establishment's insistence that this issue must be at the centre of any and all dialogue with India. Second, Pakistan tends to be reactive in its diplomacy: each time there are other tensions with India, the Pakistani state tries to amp up the Kashmir issue. When the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi insisted that bilateral dialogue focus on terrorism, Pakistan began to move towards highlighting Indian interference in Balochistan and Karachi and went back to insisting that Kashmir must be at the centre of any dialogue. Pakistan does have a strong case on Kashmir; perhaps policymakers here ought to address why it gains so little support internationally.

‘Remittances’ to India

EVER so often an absurd piece of information tends to go viral and sparks theory construction on an epic scale. Most recently there is the example of a report, hosted on the World Bank website, which uses a model based on the stock of migrants in each country and their income levels to try and generate a guess about how much they would send back in remittances to their country of origin. The model mistakenly included all migrants from India who settled in Pakistan after Independence in its calculation and came up with the figure of \$4.9bn as an estimate of the remittances they would be sending back to India. Since the report was hosted on the World Bank website, people took the number seriously. One television anchor even floated a conspiracy theory around this figure, fuelling all manner of lurid speculation about the reality behind this number. The research presenting this data was released in December 2015, and has lived on in the media, rumour mills and social media space ever since, periodically popping up couched in astonishing claims.

Unfortunately for those who were partaking of this spectacle, the only reality behind this number is that it does not exist. It is a flawed guess because those who migrated from India and became Pakistani citizens after 1947 do not send back remittances. This absurd saga reached such proportions that the State Bank has just had to issue a formal denial of the figure and present the real remittance flows that go from Pakistan to India. Last year, this figure was \$116,000. The speed with which such ungrounded information can spread says something about the willingness, or desire, of people to believe it. For years, another absurd number circulated suggesting that \$200bn of Pakistani money was parked in Swiss Bank accounts, when the real figure was actually one-hundredth of that. These sorts of myths get sucked up very fast in our political culture which is saturated with disinformation and conspiracy theories as it is. Even when the absurdity of the figure is revealed, many people continue to argue in favour of its veracity because they have internalised it deeply and built large castles in their minds with its imagined implications. It is important that such disinformation not be allowed to circulate for very long, because its effects can go beyond humour and become pernicious the longer they survive unchallenged.

Questionable scholarship

ACADEMIC dishonesty has long plagued higher education in Pakistan. While attempts have been made to reform the sector, there is much ground to cover before Pakistan can develop a higher education system in line with international academic standards. The Higher Education Commission is primarily involved in overseeing the tertiary sector; while the body does take action against academic malpractice, as its chairman said at a news conference on Wednesday, critics feel the HEC must do more to crack down on scholastic dishonesty, including plagiarism, and universities' tendency to hide evidence of academic wrongdoing by erring members of their faculty. The HEC announced it had closed 31 PhD and 26 MPhil programmes in public and private universities countrywide over the last 18 months as these programmes were not meeting minimum standards. Over 60 programmes for these research degrees were also prevented from inducting new students for the same reason. While it is welcome that programmes not meeting quality standards have been suspended, we must ask why these varsities were allowed to conduct the courses and admit students if they did not meet the criteria. And, what will be the academic future of the affected students?

Unfortunately, much like the state of primary and secondary education, higher education here has become a business, with many set-ups operating out of bungalows and offering advanced 'degrees'. Even many established universities cannot claim to be producing scholars of international standing, who have a firm grip on their specialisation. Perhaps the key issue is quantity over quality, where numbers are given preference over substance. We are comfortable with churning out MPhil and PhD 'scholars' without much concern about the quality of their scholarship. For example, publishing in journals of questionable repute is common, while in some cases even highly placed academics, such as the VC of the Federal Urdu University, are alleged to have been involved in plagiarism. Our universities must focus on genuine research and upholding standards of academic excellence, or risk being labelled diploma mills that mass-produce 'scholars'.

Stunted development

TO many it will appear as nothing more than another low rank achieved in an index measuring how dismal life can be for the poor in Pakistan. But behind the number is a story so big it holds the destiny of this country in its orbit. Start with the simplest point: Pakistan ranked 149 out of 188 countries in a study released at the UN General Assembly in New York and with the rather bland title of Measuring the Health-Related

Sustainable Development Goals in 188 Countries. But dig a little deeper into what the study is trying to tell us, and we discover something that upends the foundations of our entire policy framework, which is built around the pursuit of growth in output and the development of infrastructure, with outcomes like health and education left as byproducts.

There is one statistic that hauntingly sums up the dismal state of our population's health. More than 44pc of Pakistan's children under the age of five years are stunted. Compare that to the global average of 25pc in 2011. Here is how Unicef put this number into perspective: "This is the third highest percentage of stunted children in the world and means that more than 9.6 million Pakistani children have experienced chronic nutrition deprivation in utero and/or during early childhood." This has to be amongst the saddest realities prevailing in our society today. Stunting is an illustrative aspect to focus on because it is linked to so many other indicators: sanitation, literacy, nutrition and political will. If we see any improvement in early childhood stunting, we can assume that it is accompanied by improvements in many other areas too.

The sad part is that we have seen no improvements in this area since the 1960s, when figures first began to be kept. The simple reason is that improving the state of education and health has never been a priority for us, the results of which can be seen in a wide array of social indicators that place us nearly at the bottom of most rankings. We found our place down there once again at the UN General Assembly recently, a fact that passed us by while all attention was focused on the prime minister's speech. Our priorities have been focused on visible infrastructure and growth in output all along. What good is growth and infrastructure if they cannot provide proper nutrition to our children when they most need it? When we have one of the world's highest proportions of out-of-school children? Clearly, growth is not trickling down because our social indicators show little movement upwards. And even more importantly, what good is this growth and infrastructure if their pursuit means a generation of stunted children growing up with damaged cognitive abilities, reduced immunity and elevated susceptibility to diseases?

Peace pact in Kabul

IF one lives long enough in Afghanistan, it is possible to have been everything: mujahideen commander, war criminal, political leader, aging military commander — and peacemaker too. Gulbadin Hekmatyar inspires passionate debate about what he has meant to Afghanistan and, indeed, about his relevance in that country today. But Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has judged that Mr Hekmatyar and the faction of the Hizb-i-

Islami (HiG) he leads are worth making a peace deal with, a plan hatched early in the present government's tenure and that took on more urgency as peace talks with the Afghan Taliban foundered. By all accounts, the peace deal with the HiG, which must be signed by President Ghani and Mr Hekmatyar for it to formally come into effect, will have little direct impact on the security situation in Afghanistan. The HiG is largely non-functional as an insurgent group and its footprint in Afghanistan is considered to be small. The value of the deal for the Afghan government, however, lies in the politics and optics of it. A peace deal with Mr Hekmatyar could help unite the various factions of the HiG, many of which are already in the government fold in Kabul, and give President Ghani another Pakhtun ally in the capital at a time when he is struggling to assert his authority. Moreover, a successful peace deal may help temporarily deflect criticism of the government for failing to either militarily curb the Taliban insurgency or make progress in a peace deal with the Taliban.

Yet, too much should not be read into the deal between the government and the HiG. It could well be the template for future peace deals and help attract some Taliban factions to the possibility of a peace deal of their own, but the majority of the Taliban are unlikely to be swayed by what the Hizb does or, indeed, the government can offer at the moment. The debilitating stalemate in Afghanistan looks set to continue unless Kabul works out how to make its security forces more effective or can use diplomacy and political negotiations to dampen the intensity of the Taliban insurgency. But Kabul appears to be doing the opposite of what it needs to: pulling India into a tighter embrace and working with the US to build pressure on Pakistan is hardly a positive approach in a region where tensions are rising on all fronts. Work with Pakistan, it is the only sensible option for Afghanistan and other interested powers.

Prison conditions

PAKISTAN'S jails are overflowing, yet there seems to be little evidence that the state has a comprehensive plan to address the issue of prison reform. Prisons across the country have far more inmates than they can house; for example, members of a Senate committee that visited Karachi's central prison on Thursday discovered that 6,500 inmates were housed in the facility designed to accommodate 2,400. One statistic was particularly shocking: that only 1,000 of the prison's inmates were actually convicts, with the rest being undertrial prisoners. This severe overcrowding creates multiple problems — a major issue being that those incarcerated for petty crimes are often in close proximity to hardened, violent criminals. As the HRCP noted in its 2015 annual report, Pakistan's prisons have "served as potential breeding grounds for radicalisation,

criminal activity and disease”. The Supreme Court has also highlighted the poor state of prisons on numerous occasions.

As per the requirements of modern criminal justice, jails should serve as correctional facilities along with being places of punishment. While the senators observed that some efforts have gone into introducing vocational training and art classes, the problem remains that these positive interventions can do little unless the issue of overcrowding is addressed. The lawmakers have called for building more prisons; this is of course the first step. Equally important is the fact that a large number of undertrial prisoners are housed in jails, which points to ineffectiveness of the justice system. Moreover, there needs to be separation of convicts or those awaiting trial for violent crime and terrorism, and the general prison population. Radicalisation within jails is a major concern, as there have been cases where high-profile militants have reportedly conducted their operations from within the confines of the penitentiary. There is also merit in calls to relocate prisons far from population centres for security purposes. In Karachi, where militants and murderers have attempted jailbreaks, there is a definite need to build a high-security facility far from thickly populated areas.

Ties with Russia

THE timing may be incidental — or perhaps fortuitous for Pakistan — but the arrival of a 70-man Russian squad, led by the chief of the general staff of the Russian armed forces, for joint drills with elements of Pakistan’s counterterrorism units has more to it than mere symbolism. That Moscow ignored Indian pique at the very thought of the Russian — read former Soviet — military hobnobbing with its Pakistani counterpart shows Moscow’s wish to reciprocate Islamabad’s quest for a better relationship with a country with which it has had a long, egregious association. For Moscow, there are bitter memories — Pakistan was a member of the US-led military alliances; the U-2 incident occurred at the height of the Cold War when the spy plane shot down over the USSR had taken off from a US base in this country; and, finally, Pakistan played the most crucial part in the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan by serving as the conduit for America’s overt and covert aid to its pampered anti-Soviet mujahideen.

The end of the Cold War has provided Islamabad with an opportunity to forge a new level of ties with Moscow, though the process has been painfully slow. Let’s not forget that, even though President Vladimir Putin postponed his visit to Pakistan in October 2012, he had the vision to reaffirm his desire to improve relations with Pakistan and told the then president Asif Ali Zardari in a letter that the two countries should “jointly enhance our efforts” to have “mutually beneficial trade and economic projects”. Moscow

now seems to have overcome the trauma of Soviet dismemberment and feels strong enough to assert its Great Power status. It is watching the situation in Southwest and South Asia carefully and, for exactly these reasons, needs Islamabad's attention. While Pakistan must indeed diversify its defence purchase sources, it must not ignore the limitless opportunities which a closer economic and technological partnership with Moscow offers. Russia is one of the world's most scientifically developed nations and has a vast reservoir of skilled manpower. It has immense natural resources, oil and gas being only two of them. The monument to our economic cooperation with Russia is the — unfortunately, now rotting — Pakistan Steel. Reviving it with Russian help is one of the many benefits this country could reap from a renewed and robust friendship.

The Foreign Office may not feel happy about this reminder, but the bitter truth is that Pakistan is haunted by diplomatic isolation. The world's silence on the slaughter going on in India-held Kashmir is a pointer to this reality. With the focus of global economic and geopolitical power moving east, Russia — a large Eurasian landmass with nine time zones — must form an integral part of Pakistan's development strategy without this country's ties with its traditional sources of economic and military cooperation being compromised.

Altaf's call

THE internal tumult that the MQM has been experiencing ever since its supremo, Altaf Hussain, made an incendiary speech last month has been manifesting itself publicly in strange ways. The latest episode involves an audio clip, attributed to the London-based leader, floating around cyberspace in which Mr Hussain has asked the MQM's lawmakers sitting in the country's legislatures to tender mass resignations and get a fresh mandate. While, once upon a time, one call from the 'Quaid-i-Tehreek' would have energised his zealous cadres and unleashed a wave of fear and uncertainty across Karachi, today things are a little more subdued. At most, the audio clip has sparked a war of words between the London- and Karachi-based factions, with Twitter being the primary battleground, while some of the party's lawmakers have questioned the authenticity of the recording. Regardless of the logic behind the call for resignations, the clip has exposed apparently deep fissures within the Muttahida. Clearly, the loyalist faction in London is toeing a hard line and promising to stick by the 'Quaid' come hell or high water. The Farooq Sattar-led faction in Pakistan is of course playing a more pragmatic hand, knowing well that defending Altaf Hussain's outbursts will only add to their troubles with the establishment, and alienate the mainstream voter. For example, the unprecedented resolution passed by the Sindh Assembly the other day — fully

supported by the MQM's lawmakers — calling for Mr Hussain to be tried for treason, is a clear sign that the local leadership considers the man in London to be a liability.

As for the content of Mr Hussain's latest appeal, the Muttahida's lawmakers have done the right thing by ignoring calls for mass resignations. There is no need to create a vacuum and add to uncertainty and instability, which would be the natural outcome were the lawmakers to quit the legislatures. For the MQM — after the dust settles where its internal power struggles are concerned — the party must look to the 2018 elections and work towards convincing its constituents that rather than being a personality cult, it is a genuine political party with urban Sindh voters' best interests at heart. Meanwhile, the authorities should also consider releasing Karachi's imprisoned mayor, the MQM's Waseem Akhtar, as unless he is convicted of the charges he faces, it makes little sense for the city's highest elected official to be kept behind bars.

Monetary policy

It has taken them a long time, but finally the State Bank has come around to the view that the deteriorating situation on the external sector presents risks to macroeconomic stability. The latest monetary policy statement says “the current account deficit is at the risk of widening further owing to declining exports and rising imports”. This is a departure from its usually sunny pronouncements throughout last year as the stresses on the external sector mounted. In May, for example, it could talk about the “stability in the balance of payments” which owed itself to “[s]teady workers remittances and lower oil prices”. Never mind that exports and FDI were showing deteriorating numbers. As late as July 30, the State Bank could still say that “[t]rends in the external sector are likely to continue in FY17”, even though evidence of worsening was mounting.

It appears the large spike in the current account deficit during the first two months of this fiscal year tipped the balance. The deficit rose by 93pc compared to the same period last year, making it difficult to paper over it by pointing towards remittances and inflows from creditors. There may well be a continued expansion in the economy, in terms of output, from CPEC projects and development spending by the government. But the quality of this expansion needs further comment because it is accompanied by a massive slowdown in agriculture and textiles. The announcement has a short focus on monetary aggregates, and briefly mentions “ongoing stability in the market interest rates”, which have come down all through the year. But again, whether this is healthy or not depends on who you ask. Banks are scrambling to find quality lenders, but the search is taking the form of a price war to bag public-sector borrowers instead of a

ramped-up effort to introduce innovative products or venture into areas starved of credit like small and medium enterprises or agriculture. Given the mixed picture, it was prudent to keep interest rates constant.

Modi's speech

IN his first public comments since the Uri attack, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has threatened a policy of working to “isolate” Pakistan internationally — a statement that has been interpreted both as a climbdown from post-Uri war rhetoric and a veiled threat by the Indian leader. At the very least, it suggests a degree of policy confusion in India that can have a dangerously destabilising effect in the region. More than a week removed from the Uri attack, it should now be apparent to many in India that their government erred in its response. Even before the attack was over, a campaign of vilification against Pakistan began and threats of war were issued. The more sensible course was both apparent and immediately rejected: gathering evidence; presenting Pakistan with the results of a preliminary inquiry; and seeking this country’s cooperation in tamping down cross-LoC militant movement, if an increase was, in fact, discernible.

Admittedly, the sensible approach may have seemed unsatisfactory given the relatively recent history. The Mumbai attacks-related trials in Rawalpindi have stalled for years now, while the Pathankot investigation also appears to be going nowhere. In addition, nationalist forces unleashed in India, by its media generally and, more recently, by the Modi government, have probably reduced the space for sensible responses. But provocative as the Uri attack may have been, a frank assessment demands that it not be placed in the same category as the Mumbai attacks. An attack on security forces in the disputed Kashmir region that may have involved militants crossing the Line of Control at a time of great unrest in India-held Kashmir is very different from indiscriminate attacks on civilians in a major Indian city by militants who crossed the international border, whether by land or sea, to inflict pain on India at a time of ceasefire between the two countries in the disputed Kashmir region. That is also why, even now, nearly a decade after the Mumbai attacks, the inability of the state here to conclude the Mumbai attacks-related trials is a signal failure.

As Mr Modi himself alluded to on Saturday, the great challenge of India and Pakistan is to put the development agenda consistently at the centre of all that the two states do with regard to their own people and the region generally. Economic advancement is something that all power centres and institutions in the two countries agree upon, even if they disagree about the extent to which economic interconnectedness between India

and Pakistan is desirable. But where talk of policies of isolation can raise hackles, policies of concentrating on economic growth can help defuse tensions. It may not quite have amounted to an olive branch, but Pakistan should consider ways to hold Mr Modi to his word.

KP police powers

THE Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial assembly was witness to an unusual spectacle on Friday — a meeting of minds between the treasury and opposition benches. Legislators across the aisle expressed their reservations about the provincial police force that, according to them, was abusing the powers it has recently acquired under an ordinance and committing excesses against ‘innocent’ people. The heated discussion came about after the deputy speaker referred two privilege motions, one moved by a cabinet member and the other by an opposition MPA, to the relevant committee of the house. A number of legislators threatened they would not support the passage in the assembly of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Police Ordinance 2016 which has further enhanced the powers of the police.

Nothing rankles with ‘VVIPs’ in our society quite as much as being reminded they are not above the law. After all, what is power unless accompanied by the privilege to bend the rules with impunity? One suspects that is largely the sentiment that animated the outcry against the KP Police Ordinance 2016 in the assembly. However, a more impartial view indicates that this legislation is a step in the right direction. A professional police force is an independent entity that upholds the law without fear or favour and serves the public rather than functioning as a handmaiden of the powers that be. Political interference in postings, procedures, etc is the main driver of corruption and inefficiency in police across the country. The 2016 ordinance addresses this problem by setting up transparent procedures of recruitment and promotion and, crucially, by giving the powers to post/transfer senior police personnel to the IGP, rather than to the chief minister as was the case earlier. The evolution of the KP police can be seen in the fact that Sindh and Balochistan police are still functioning under the colonial era Police Act 1861, while law-enforcement in Punjab is governed by the Police Order 2002 which was in force in KP too until the new ordinance. However, every law has room for improvement. Even though the legislation stipulates enhanced punishments for police officers guilty of various offences including unlawful entry and torture, there may well be shortcomings in some aspects of oversight and accountability that will emerge with time. These can be addressed without undermining the hard-won independence of the KP police, and which should be emulated by other provinces as well.

Syria truce in tatters

THE truce that Washington D.C. and Moscow hammered out for Syria earlier this month is all but dead, and with it any hope for an end to hostilities in that forsaken land. As these lines were being written, the Syrian army was leading a brutal assault on the rebel-held parts of Aleppo. The humanitarian situation in what was once Syria's commercial capital is dire, with reportedly 250,000 civilians besieged. The truce had slim chances of success, but offered a glimmer of hope for the Syrian people. However, it appears Syria's future will be decided on the battlefield, and not the negotiating table, no matter what the cost in blood and treasure, as both the government and opposition refuse to relent. While there were ceasefire violations on both sides, the US bombing on Sept 17 — said to have been carried out 'mistakenly' — in which over 60 Syrian troops perished, helped seal the fate of the doomed truce, as Bashar al-Assad's government soon thereafter called off the ceasefire.

Unfortunately, if the primary Syrian actors — the government in Damascus and the opposition — are not interested in a peaceful solution, no well-intentioned external effort can succeed. And after over five years of war, it is clear that both sides would rather stick to their guns than cede any space for a compromise solution. Mr Assad is convinced he can retake territory lost to the rebels and militants by force, regardless of the collateral damage, while the opposition's rigidity is also problematic; more worryingly, the rebels have consorted with militant groups that have a clearly sectarian and extremist agenda. And, both sides have committed appalling atrocities in the conflict. So, when the Syrian belligerents themselves are uninterested in peace, external players will have limited impact on the conflict. Caught in between this geopolitical game and domestic strife are Syria's hapless people. Sadly, there will be no end to their miseries until the leaders of Syria's opposing factions decide to forsake bloodshed in favour of a negotiated settlement.

CPEC security force

FOR a number of weeks at least, the issue of raising the funds to pay for the creation of a special CPEC security force, as well as the powers that the force will enjoy, has been in the news in various contexts. According to a series of reports last week, the matter of funding for the two divisions to be raised for CPEC security has been discussed by the finance minister and the army chief at a special meeting; it was then taken up as an extraordinary agenda item at an ECC meeting a few days later. Then the minister of

water and power, who also holds the portfolio of defence, announced that funds to pay for the running of this force would be made part of the power tariff and recovered from all consumers countrywide. The latest reports suggest that the power regulator, Nepra, has objected to the proposal, saying it will set a bad legal precedent, and that the cost of security of private power plants is already a part of the tariff for the construction period, as well as insurance against sabotage once construction ends and commercial operations begin.

It is imperative that Nepra's objections be heeded. It has become a bit of a fad to start bundling all manner of costs into the power tariff, almost turning the billing and recovery machinery of the power sector into a surrogate revenue system. We have seen pressure to include interest costs on the circular debt, as well as construction of the Neelum-Jhelum and the Matiari-Lahore transmission line and the cost of an LNG pipeline, in the power tariffs. This is clearly unacceptable and Nepra must not allow this process to continue.

If power consumers are going to be asked to bear the maintenance cost of a CPEC security force, they have a legal right to demand that all details about the proposed force and its costs be placed before Nepra for an open hearing, which then has the right to ask whether a least-cost approach is being adopted and where room exists to reduce the component costs further. Are the authorities, whether civilian or military, willing to live up to this obligation, which is binding in all power tariff determinations? If not, they should withdraw the proposal and seek to raise the resources from tax revenues instead. Power tariffs are not a substitute for the state's revenue system. The proposal is grossly unfair to power consumers and of highly questionable legal merit. The government has done itself a disservice by hustling the proposal through an ECC meeting. It is also worth noticing that the matter of locating the resources for the proposed force is coming very late in the CPEC timeline. Should this not have been worked out at the outset?

Freezing terror funds

THE recent move to block the bank accounts of individuals suspected of involvement in terrorism-related activities may well be a positive step, but it has rightly left many people puzzled. Much more will be required to credibly start shutting down the funding lines of terrorists. And furthermore, there is justified bafflement at the timing of the affair. Since the launch of the National Action Plan, the government has struggled to meet its commitment to track down the funding lines of terrorist groups, and the track record in listing banned organisations, as well as freezing their funds is quite dismal. Only last

year, Nacta — the body that generated the list — was found to be misleading the prime minister on the amount of money that has been frozen under NAP. A large part of the difficulty in pursuing terror financing was the absence of a list of terrorist groups and individuals, which left the State Bank in the dark about whose finances it should be tracking. Now we hear that a list has been generated, with over 2,000 names, and passed on to the State Bank. So what happened to make this possible so suddenly now when the exercise had been languishing for over a year and a half?

The move will only appear credible if it is followed up with an even larger list, and if terrorist groups are also similarly identified, as well those who serve as their abettors. Eventually, whatever list is created should be in harmony with the terrorist groups named in UN Security Council Resolution 1267, which is a commitment that Pakistan has signed on to but not delivered upon thus far. Until that happens, questions will continue to be asked about the meaning and intent of the exercise, since it appears to be a highly selective one. The State Bank should be more forthcoming about all that it needs in order to play its part in tracking terror financing. It is a myth that terrorist groups never use the formal banking system and rely only on cash transactions to undertake their activities. Fact of the matter is that the banking system is widely used by them, but either under assumed names, or behind the protections afforded by an almost deliberate ambiguity in the listing of banned organisations. At the moment, there is reason to cheer the move undertaken by Nacta, but a lot depends on how much further the exercise is taken.

A polio-free Pakistan

IN recent times, Pakistan's polio eradication efforts have witnessed much improvement. From more than 300 reported polio virus cases in 2014 to 54 in 2015, and only 14 this year so far, the decrease is attributed to coordinated national immunisation programmes and the surveillance of high-risk populations. On Monday, a three-day nationwide polio vaccination campaign began. The goal: immunising 37m children under the age of five, with 41m doses of vaccines to be distributed. With more than 100,000 door-to-door vaccination teams, this network of eradicators, working in a low-transmission period, are set to vaccinate over 95pc of Pakistan's target population. If undeterred, they could essentially eradicate the virus by the end of this year.

However, while currently 16,000 in number, there must be more community volunteers to work as catalysts changing mindsets regarding vaccinations in the tribal areas. Even though health officials are confident about polio prevention and eradication, meticulous planning abilities, including vaccine distribution, augmented by multiple immunisation

drives to target endemic reservoirs, and abundant political will are all imperative to success. It must be ensured that there is watertight security as militants often target vaccination programmes — for example, an attack earlier this year in Karachi killed seven policemen guarding a polio team. High-risk migrant communities inside the country and across the border in Afghanistan must also be vaccinated through sound micro-planning. Beset with challenges, including the difficulty in reaching every child, misconceptions about vaccinations, and security threats, anti-polio drives can only report success when they are focused on comprehensive government-led, community-specific plans. Deserving of mention as the force spearheading eradication programmes on the ground, are the scores of vaccinators and their police protectors; their tenacity at conquering this wretched virus is unreservedly noble. For once on the right track, the government must demonstrate its resolve to make that final push to reach the zero mark for polio eradication — because our children deserve healthy lives.

Water wars

A day after urging a joint India-Pakistan war against poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and infant mortality, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi executed his latest about-turn by implicitly threatening to use water as a weapon against Pakistan — this in a region where great swathes of humanity eke out a subsistence living and are wholly dependent on agriculture and the agrarian chain for their livelihoods.

By suspending the biannual Indus water commissioners' meeting, ordering that India expedite its hydro projects on the three western Indus system rivers designated for the exclusive use of Pakistan under the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty and menacingly suggesting that "blood and water cannot flow together", Mr Modi seems once again to be pandering to his domestic need to appear tough on Pakistan, while in reality making the region less secure through his actions.

The IWT has survived five and a half decades and three wars between India and Pakistan. The treaty's durability, the two countries' willingness to abide by its terms and the acceptance of international arbitration time and again are successes that no leader, Indian or Pakistani, should ever tamper with, let alone jeopardise.

Indeed, until the obnoxious and thoroughly illegal demand to unilaterally scrap the treaty was made recently in certain extremist quarters in India, the IWT was the obvious framework within which the next generation of climatic and water issues ought to have been addressed to the mutual benefit of India and Pakistan.

The reckless gamble by Mr Modi to use novel means to ostensibly put pressure on Pakistan has now introduced new uncertainties, and surely suspicions, in a region that is already water-stressed and that could be facing traumatic water-scarcity problems in the decades ahead. In trying to alarm Pakistan into taking action against militants as India desires, Mr Modi has unthinkingly accelerated what could become another, equally intractable dispute between the two countries.

For Pakistan, the reaction by policymakers should be a cautious and sensible one. As experts — international, Pakistani and Indian — have already explained, India has neither the means to immediately and artificially reduce water flows to Pakistan, nor can it do so in the medium term without causing great damage to its own agrarian economy.

A panicked, emotional response by Pakistani officials would only worsen the situation.

What Pakistan must do, however, is assemble a powerful team of water experts, skilled international arbiters and experienced World Bank interlocutors to ensure that it can quickly and emphatically respond to Indian manoeuvres.

The experience of the Kishanganga and Baglihar arbitrations suggests that poor policies, indecisive leadership and weak external representation have had a discernible impact on Pakistan's ability to press for its maximum rights under the IWT.

If Mr Modi does want to wage a joint fight against poverty, Pakistan should welcome it. If he wants to threaten this country's water resources, Pakistan should be prepared to defend itself legally and diplomatically.

Police brutality

POLICE torture, unless especially egregious and captured on camera, barely registers a blip on our national consciousness — so 'accepted' has it become. However, even an open secret has the potential to shock when an unrelenting light is shone upon its multifaceted ugliness. The 102-page report by Human Rights Watch titled *This Crooked System: Police Abuse and Reform in Pakistan*, which was released on Monday, examines various aspects of the country's notorious 'thana culture' through interviews with police officials and victims of police abuse and their families. From the research, which incorporates input from policing and civil society experts, emerges a detailed picture of a repressive institution that functions as an extension of the power elite. The report examines the entire spectrum of the problem: the failure to register FIRs and

investigate crimes, registering false cases, arbitrary arrest, custodial torture and mistreatment and fake encounters. What adds further depth to the report — notwithstanding its surprising omission of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in its scope — is an exploration of the police's cavalier attitudes towards these practices, which illustrates the far-reaching institutional decay within the law-enforcement apparatus.

Power without accountability or proper training and resources is a perfect storm. Moreover, in the prevailing climate, security considerations — in which the police have taken a cue from even more unaccountable federal agencies — have been allowed to trump not only the fundamental rights of citizens with total impunity but also the country's international commitments. Pakistan ratified the United Nations Convention Against Torture in 2010, which makes it binding upon the country to enact laws in accordance with its provisions. However, both the country's penal and criminal procedure codes remain silent on the subject. Although the Police Order 2002 — under which Punjab ostensibly functions — stipulates sanctions for inflicting “torture or violence” on individuals in custody, a survey carried out in 2013 in Punjab found that nearly 55pc accused complained of torture in police custody. That is because in practice, the legislation under which the provincial police forces — with the exception of KP — function, or draw inspiration from, is the archaic, colonial-era Police Act 1861. Legislation to address these shortcomings and reduce political interference in appointments and postings of police personnel must go hand in hand with comprehensive reforms in the criminal justice system. Otherwise, coercive measures to extract confessions/information or murderous ‘encounters’ to neutralise anyone deemed inconvenient for whatever reason, will always seem the easy way out.

KP tuberculosis law

CONSIDERING the prevalence of the disease in Pakistan, the passage of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Tuberculosis Notification Bill 2016 on Monday is a welcome development. The legislation calls for declaring TB a ‘notified disease’ and ensuring patients are provided free diagnosis and treatment. Pakistan has the fifth highest incidence of TB in the world, and as per WHO, over 400,000 new cases are reported every year. As with many other diseases, the poor are most affected, mostly due to congested living conditions and lack of a nutritious diet. Yet while the disease is communicable, it is also curable provided the regimen prescribed by medical professionals is rigorously followed. Unfortunately, if patients stop taking their medicine, they only reinforce multidrug resistant, or MDR, TB, which is much more difficult to treat. The intent behind the new KP law was to address the increasing number of MDR TB cases in the province. With the new law, ‘notified’ patients will be eligible for treatment at state-run centres as

reportedly many facilities in the private sector lack the expertise to diagnose and treat TB effectively.

It is hoped that KP's passage of the bill proves to be an effective intervention against TB. There is already a functioning National TB Control Programme, and we hope both the federal and provincial programmes prove to be complementary. A few months ago, there was a reported shortage of many essential drugs, including TB medicines, apparently due to a pricing dispute. It should be remembered that TB drugs must be made available in plentiful supply as any break in treatment can lead to MDR TB. There should be increased efforts to advertise the presence of official TB control centres, particularly in areas where a high number of cases have been reported, while drugs should be available in every district countrywide. There has been progress over the years where tackling the spread of TB is concerned; these efforts must be continued and streamlined to eventually eradicate the disease in Pakistan.

Undermining Saarc

A DAY after insinuating that India may use water as a weapon against Pakistan, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made another unfortunate, though perhaps less surprising, decision: his government will boycott the Saarc summit scheduled for November in Islamabad. Disappointingly, it was followed by Bangladesh's decision to do the same. Mr Modi's participation in the head-of-government summit has long been a subject of speculation, with Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan Gautam Bambawale suggesting only weeks ago that Mr Modi may in fact visit Pakistan. Unhappily, his suggestion was immediately contradicted by the external affairs ministry in New Delhi and then the Uri attack plunged bilateral ties to a new low. Yet, Saarc by its very definition is not about bilateral ties, notwithstanding the Pak-India relationship dominating that forum since its creation in 1985. And while Saarc has not come close to realising the aspirations it represents, it is still a symbolic forum representing the shared dreams of the region and very much worth defending.

Now that the 19th Saarc summit is likely to be either postponed or cancelled, barring a last-minute change of heart by India, it is worth recalling that Pakistan and India have been here before. In 1995, the eighth Saarc summit was scheduled to be held in New Delhi at a time when Pak-India tensions were soaring and the insurgency in India-held Kashmir was at its peak. Benazir Bhutto, then the prime minister of Pakistan, opted not to attend the summit, but she did not try and sabotage it. Instead, she sent the then president Farooq Leghari to represent Pakistan and emphatically state this country's position on a range of issues. That was a sensible, statesmanlike decision. Twenty-one

years later, the Indian prime minister has rejected the statesman's path and instead opted to shut down an avenue of cooperation and dialogue.

Unhelpful as Mr Modi's decision is, Pakistan must resist the urge to respond petulantly and negatively. The Indian leader made an unexpected stopover in Lahore on Christmas Day last year, and lobbying by other countries may encourage Mr Modi, and Bangladesh, to reconsider pulling out. In the meantime, Pakistan should receive in good faith the evidence from the Uri attack that India offers and investigate the matter to the extent that the law permits. India has been wrong to immediately and without any proof accuse Pakistan, or even just citizens of this country, of involvement in the Uri attack. But Pakistan would be wrong to automatically disregard any evidence that India subsequently provides simply because India made accusations first and collected evidence later. It is in the interest of this country that Pakistani soil not be used for attacks in other countries or even IHK. If India has evidence, it should responsibly hand it over to Pakistan, and Pakistan should investigate it in a fair manner.

Women & Fata reforms

AS a significant feature of the Fata reform package, an all-male, six-member government committee has recommended that the 115-year-old FCR law be replaced with the proposed riwaj act for the tribal areas. This would include retaining the jirga system for civil and criminal matters, with the court appointing a council of elders to adjudicate in accordance with tribal customs. Such a move would deal a huge blow to women's rights given the jirga system's penchant for issuing decrees that legitimise anti-women practices under the guise of tradition. Emulating current laws under the FCR — laws that have over the decades blatantly discriminated against women — implies that the proposed act will give jirgas the licence to inflict violence on women. This makes no sense — if indeed the government is aware that according legal legitimacy to jirgas would compromise the already vulnerable status of Fata's women. Because jirgas are based on local traditions and patriarchy, of which honour is a critical component, it is imperative the government encourage mechanisms to do away with anti-women institutions. Take the 2014 jirga decision that ruled 11-year-old Amna be married to a man three times her age as compensation for her uncle having raped a girl. Amna was married off to the brother of the girl who had been raped. Disturbingly, under the proposed package, practices such as swara and ghag — a man's claim he is betrothed to a woman of his choice (without her consent) — will only gain increased immunity from punishment.

For the sake of human rights and justice, the jirga system must be replaced with a judicial process consistent with legal practices elsewhere in the country; and the Code of Criminal Procedure must be applied to the tribal areas. If such measures are implemented, they will help women seek justice. However, even so, women in Fata suffer not only from a lack of legal protection, they have also borne the brunt of militancy and security operations. Taqrha Qabaili Khwenday, a tribal sisterhood, for example, has repeatedly expressed concern regarding the legalisation of jirgas and how that will impact women's lives. Such voices must be heard. Tribal women who want to make their own choices must be given representation on reform committees. Without such participation, it will prove impossible to mainstream tribal communities, or to institute reforms in a historically neglected part of the country.

T-20 clean sweep

PAKISTAN'S T-20 win against West Indies has come as something of a surprise given the ease with which the success was achieved. It was billed as a contest between two mercurial sides that could go either way. Like Pakistan, the West Indies have had their own troubles in recent times, including their players' relationship with the Caribbean cricket board. Yet they are the T-20 world champions who, despite the omission of a few players since they won the title in April this year, were expected to give Pakistan a tough time. In the event, they proved to be just too weak and at times disinterested an outfit. Their ordinary performance will most definitely retrigger the argument about the surgery carried out by the West Indies cricket managers. The attempts at corrections, including the sacking of World Cup-winning skipper Darren Sammy, have drastically weakened the team.

Sarfraz Ahmed as captain, on the other hand, brought quick dividends — a clean sweep — for Pakistan. There was clearly positivity and greater energy in the manner in which the national team conducted itself, the freshness of approach most strikingly reflected in the much-improved fielding effort by the team. The series was yet another reminder of just how much Pakistan relies on its bowling. Imad Wasim stood out. His confidence was obviously high after his good showing in the recent Caribbean T-20 league; he once again demonstrated that all the Pakistan players needed was international competition to achieve the efficacy and skill seen in cricketers from other countries. Since the national side's batting was not fully tried in this T-20 series, it was not clear whether or how much it had benefited from the new policy which encourages players to display their skills with fewer inhibitions. In this rebuilding phase, that aspect of the game will most likely come under scrutiny in the forthcoming One-Day Internationals

against the West Indies. Needless to say, Pakistan must take the Sarfraz initiative into the ODIs as well.

US-Saudi relations

THE Saudi-American relationship has endured many jolts over the decades. But there are signs that some within the US establishment are rethinking their approach towards the Saudis. The clearest of these signs is the recent override by both chambers of the US Congress of President Barack Obama's veto of the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act; this is the law that allows families of 9/11 victims to sue Riyadh for alleged Saudi support of the hijackers. Startling details had emerged of alleged complicity between Saudi intelligence operatives and militants in the US in the declassified 28 pages of the joint congressional report on 9/11, made public in July. While there were no 'smoking guns' in the document linking the Saudi state to 9/11, the suspicions expressed by American officials during testimony give strength to the belief that some within the Saudi establishment could have been in league with the hijackers.

The question, naturally, arises that if there were such strong suspicions of Saudi complicity, why were these leads not investigated? This is something the US administration must tell the 9/11 families and the world. The Saudis, on their part, have rubbished the allegations. But beyond the tragic events of September 2001, Congress's move is largely symbolic, sending a strong message to Riyadh that times are changing. At one time, Saudi Arabia was one of the 'twin pillars' of US policy in the Gulf, along with Pahlavi-ruled Iran. That equation changed post-1979, when Iran's Islamist revolutionaries took a hard line against the US. Yet the Saudis and Americans remained strategic allies, cooperating on a number of regional projects, for example, supporting Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, along with arming and bankrolling the mujahideen against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Even today, US policy on Syria and Yemen, for example, is largely in tandem with the Saudi stance, with some nuances. However, despite the decades-old cosy relationship, it is also true that Saudi Arabia has exported an extremist interpretation of Islam that has provided the ideological firepower for militant movements worldwide. Perhaps it is this incongruity in Riyadh's foreign policy that influenced Congress's vote.

But even before the 9/11 bill and controversy over the 28 pages emerged, there were signs of cracks within the relationship. For example, while both Riyadh and Washington want regime change in Syria, the Saudis were frustrated that President Obama refused to give the green signal for a fully fledged American invasion. The landmark Iranian nuclear deal last year also did not go down well with Riyadh. A complete unravelling of

the US-Saudi strategic alliance in the near future is unlikely. But the Saudis should remember that golden maxim of international relations: that there are no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests. In a rapidly changing Middle East, US interests may no longer lie in unconditional support for Riyadh.

Farmers' protest

FOR a number of years now, small farmers from Punjab have been descending upon Lahore and protesting in the streets to draw attention to the plight of the agriculture sector. Every year the government starts by responding with force, then negotiates with them to clear the streets. This year too, according to representatives of the movement, some 3,000 of them have been picked up by police, while their comrades carry on their protest on Lahore's major roads. This is a peaceful movement which consists of small farmers, those who are most vulnerable to the vagaries of this sector. Small farmers are hemmed in by the power of the big landlord, the patwari, the moneylender or middle man and the power of the state machinery that controls procurement and has some control over distribution of vital inputs. They are most vulnerable to the vagaries of weather and calamities such as floods, as well as wild swings in the price of their commodity. For more than three years now, they have endured floods, drought, pest attacks and steeply falling commodity prices, to the point where many are getting pushed into penury.

The sad part of the episode is that neither the government nor the opposition parties that are in Lahore in a theatrical show of solidarity can really help them. The government lacks the will and the resources, while the opposition parties are only there for show. The agriculture sector, which is one of the largest employers of the country's unskilled labour force, is far too permeated by informality. Banks are shy to lend to this sector, subsidy mechanisms end up benefiting the big landowner or the fertiliser manufacturers more than the small farmer, and endless power subsidies for tube wells as well as support prices for major crops beyond wheat require far more resources than are available to the state. Until the state can give the agriculture sector its fair share of attention through reforms that formalise much of the activity here, it will be next to impossible to devise the kinds of interventions that these farmers need. Getting proper targeting of subsidies and allocation of formal credit for small farmers requires greater documentation of their cash flows. The opposition's politics and palliative announcements such as last year's Kissan Package will not do much. The voice of the small farmer needs to be heard with far more seriousness than is currently the case.

Women's sport

THE people of Pakistan will be — or they ought to be — delighted to know that this country has been able to put together a women's national hockey team after a gap of more than three years. After preparatory sessions in Lahore, the team is off to Thailand to take part in the Asian Hockey Federation Cup. A place amongst the top two in this tournament will guarantee participation in the Asia Cup, but so dormant has been women's hockey in the country that to a vast majority here the mere appearance of this national side would be a surprise. In a land where investing in sports is a low priority, the quality of competition and talent has gone down drastically over time. Women's sport in particular has long been pushed from the fringes to complete oblivion, with a flash-in-the-pan event here and there reminding the keener enthusiasts that Pakistani sportswomen were still around. Some of our resources are wasted on mindless spending, and it is alleged a portion is lost through corruption. Of whatever little is spent on sporting activity and on cultivating and nurturing sportspersons, the bulk is spent on 'fashionable' games, with cricket hogging all attention. A game like hockey which had brought the nation laurels in the past suffers from sheer neglect that then causes disinterest in the game in general.

This is a cruel formula according to which the obscure women players get only a nominal sum to survive on. However, this virtual isolation of women's sports does lead to some pertinent questions. If the area is so segregated from where Pakistani men play the game, would it not be feasible to separate women's sports in organisational terms as well? The idea of having an exclusive women's sports board sounds appealing since it will be a forum where women will be the priority. Under a competent system such a board could end up establishing an order that is able to truly encourage Pakistani women to take up sports.



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