

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of December, 2015*

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

Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)

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





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

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

**[JOIN NOW](#)**

Submit your CV/Resume and get selected

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

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

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

# DOWNLOAD

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



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

**[WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM](http://WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM)**

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

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

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

Contents

Role of television during polls..... 6

Oil trickles up ..... 7

Farooq Abdullah’s view..... 8

Nawaz-Modi interaction in Paris..... 9

Digital rights ..... 10

HIV/AIDS and stigma ..... 11

Unforeseen revenue measures..... 12

Attack on army men..... 13

Imran Farooq case ..... 14

Expansion of the Karachi operation..... 15

Wrong move by Britain ..... 16

Polio: Pakistan’s shame..... 17

Cotton collapse ..... 18

Battleground Karachi ..... 18

Deportees sent back ..... 19

Parliament’s supremacy..... 20

Exemplary work ..... 21

Reforms for Saudi women ..... 22

Electoral win for MQM ..... 23

California shootings ..... 24

Afghan Taliban crisis ..... 25

India-Pakistan progress..... 26

Election lessons..... 27

Kerry’s concerns..... 28

Privatisation considerations..... 29

Rangers in Karachi..... 30

Cricketer’s reinduction..... 31

Pakistan’s Afghan challenge..... 32

State Bank on CPEC ..... 33

Landing in fog..... 34

India-Pakistan hopes revived ..... 35

Controlling garbage..... 36

Diphtheria deaths ..... 37

New CM for Balochistan ..... 38

Water policy..... 39

Mass transit muddle ..... 40

State Bank’s annual report..... 41

Cricket diplomacy..... 42

Sindh CM on corruption..... 43

Cybercrime bill ..... 43

Riyadh meeting ..... 45

Telecom agreement ..... 46

Parachinar bombing..... 47

Debate on Rangers..... 48

Tapi gas ..... 49

APS: One year after ..... 50

Tense ties with Dhaka ..... 51

Textile woes again.....	52	Ministerial overreach.....	75
'Anti-terror' alliance.....	52	Jinnah's vision.....	76
SCO promise.....	54	Muslims & Christmas.....	77
Schools at risk.....	55	Lodhran by-election.....	78
Resolution on Rangers' powers.....	55	Modi's visit.....	79
Towards Thar coal.....	57	Gender and politics.....	80
Indian FM's resolve.....	58	Islamabad-Dhaka ties.....	81
Shedding light on urbanisation.....	59	Traders and taxes.....	82
Education crisis.....	60	Treading carefully in Afghanistan.....	83
Glory lost.....	61	Defective justice system.....	84
National crises and missing facts.....	62	Rouhani's call.....	85
Displaced by conflict.....	63	Pilgrimage operators.....	86
Phone service suspension.....	63	Former CJ's party.....	86
Owning the fight against militancy.....	64	Suicide attack in Mardan.....	87
Return of IDPs.....	65	PM visits Karachi.....	88
National health insurance.....	66	A welcome deal.....	89
Ex-cricketer turned back.....	67	Extremism threat.....	90
Fighting in Helmand.....	68	CII brawl.....	91
Imran Khan's remarks.....	69	Keenjhar Lake.....	91
Senate as an institution.....	70		
Malnutrition remedies.....	71		
Poll culture.....	72		
Crisis over Rangers' powers.....	73		
Musharraf's emergency.....	74		

## Role of television during polls

TELEVISION can be a great democratic enabler, but it can also be an electoral impediment — at least if good sense and the rules are ignored. With local government elections across the country entering the last phase, the polling day coverage of much of the broadcast media so far has fallen woefully short of the required, lawful standard.

Consider much of the TV coverage of the recent elections in Sindh, Punjab and Islamabad. Speeches by national political leaders were broadcast live — speeches which were unambiguously political and drifted far from the ostensible purpose of thanking party workers for their efforts.

Candidates were interviewed and asked partisan and leading questions. News anchors queried political analysts about who were the likely winners and why. In some cases, there have even been predictions about specific results. It has made for some rather grim viewing — though perhaps a great deal of it remains uninformed by the ethics of election coverage and the specific requirements of polling day itself.

There is a compelling reason why polling day coverage by the media needs to remain neutral and even-handed: it is not out of respect for the political parties and the candidates, but the duty that is owed to the voter, the public itself.

Skewed, partisan and leading coverage can potentially impact on how a voter chooses to vote — or if he/she chooses to vote at all. For example, speculation and commentary during polling

hours about voter turnout can affect whether a voter chooses to make the trip to the polling station.

Furthermore, claims of a dominant victory for one side or another could conceivably dampen turnout for the reportedly losing side.

The very first point in the ECP’s code of conduct for the media issued in August for coverage of LG elections in Punjab states: “Neither any Radio or Television Channel shall broadcast/telecast nor any Print Media shall publish anything that adversely affects the public opinion against a particular party or candidate.”

The coverage of few news channels would pass that basic test on polling day.

The problem here is clearly one of regulation — but by an impartial, independent and empowered media regulator.

Pemra’s selective enthusiasm and intervention — often at the behest of the political government or the military establishment — creates more problems than it resolves.

Perhaps now with a full-time chairman, Pemra can try and establish its independence and simultaneously reach out to the broadcast media to engage it in a meaningful dialogue. Where egregious violations of sensible media conduct are found, Pemra has the power to act within the existing legal framework.

The most obvious and immediate test would be local government elections in Karachi.

The massive media presence in the city and the many controversies surrounding the principal political party in the city, the MQM, could lead to many on-air blunders on polling day.

*Published in Dawn, December 1st, 2015*

## Oil trickles up

THE finance minister may have bridged his revenue shortfall — at least for now — on the back of revenue measures he describes as taxes on “luxury items”, but his remarks about oil prices failed to mention a key point.

Raising taxes on hi-octane fuel is fine, since it is largely used by luxury vehicles. But what needs to be explained is why Pakistan’s fuel prices at the pump have not moved appreciably since June, whereas oil rates in the international market have come down by almost 50pc in some categories during the same period.

Arab light sweet crude, the oil that Pakistan imports, has fallen from just over \$60 to a barrel on June 1 to below \$40 as of Nov 27.

The International Monetary Fund has congratulated Pakistan for being restrained when it comes to sharing the benefits of falling oil prices with the consumers, basically with an eye on

the fiscal framework, but the government must tell us where this benefit is going.

Latest data on imports shows that Pakistan has saved \$2.5bn on its oil import bill compared to the same period last year. But the prices at the pump do not seem to reflect this since they have hardly moved since June.

As an example, E10 gasoline was notified by the Oil & Gas Regulatory Authority at Rs75.29 on June 1, and remained at Rs73.76 as of Oct 31.

All other categories of fuel show similarly marginal revisions. At the start of the year, when the oil price tumble first registered its presence in the country’s balance of payments’ data, the government had made a commitment to the nation that a portion of the downward slide would be shared with the consuming public, and the remaining would be retained by the government.

That was accepted by most commentators since the declines in international prices were too steep to pass through in one go for fear that the reduced prices would destabilise the fiscal accounts. Many other countries were taking the same steps.

But today, as a new tax on luxury items is passed with the possibility that more such measures may be coming in the months ahead, the particularly stingy declines at the pump compared to the steep falls in international prices must be addressed. Perhaps the finance minister can hold a second, follow-up news conference to shed more light on the matter.

*Published in Dawn, December 1st, 2015*

## Farooq Abdullah's view

ONE of India-held Kashmir's former chief ministers had the courage to acknowledge the reality when he said the entire Indian army would not be able to defend "us against terrorists and militants" — his description for those struggling to liberate the occupied territory from India.

Sections of the Indian media went after Farooq Abdullah's skin, especially for his view that "Pakistan-occupied Kashmir" — the Indian nomenclature for Azad Kashmir — would remain with Pakistan while the territory under New Delhi's control would stay that way.

Even though the latter opinion is contrary to Pakistan's Kashmir policy, Mr Abdullah received a lot of flak for what appeared to critics as his endorsement of Islamabad's position on the disputed territory.

*Also read: [Even all Indian troops can't tackle militants, says Farooq Abdullah](#)*

Later, Mr Abdullah attempted to 'clarify' his remarks by saying his views were not new and that he had always believed in a dialogue between Islamabad and New Delhi.

Mr Abdullah believed that neither side could solve the issue militarily because Pakistan and India were both nuclear powers.

As to the statement by the territory's deputy chief minister that a 1994 parliamentary resolution had declared Azad Kashmir to

be a part of India, Mr Abdullah said there were countless UN resolutions as well, but had "any of those been implemented?"

India's refusal to talk to Pakistan merely points to a head that is buried deep in the sand. While Pakistan's position on the dispute is grounded in reality, Islamabad has still shown a remarkable degree of flexibility and floated a number of ideas to resolve the issue peacefully.

For instance, the proposals made by Pervez Musharraf seemed to break new ground — something in which Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh saw utility after he was no more in power. Instead of bashing the son of Sheikh Abdullah 'the lion of Kashmir', the Indian establishment and the right-wing media still under the BJP's victory trance should have the wisdom to grasp the essence of the former chief minister's remarks — that the will of the people of Kashmir cannot be crushed by brute force.

*Published in Dawn, December 1st, 2015*



## Nawaz-Modi interaction in Paris

It was the briefest of accidental meetings — at least according to officials from both sides — but anytime the prime ministers of Pakistan and India meet it is necessarily of great interest in the two countries and internationally as well.

The frenzied coverage of the fleeting interaction between Nawaz Sharif and Narendra Modi and intense speculation about what the very different body language of the two men said about the conversation should be viewed positively — it shows the media and public in both countries do, in fact, long for some kind of breakthrough between the seemingly eternal rivals.

Surely, it is time now for the leaderships of Pakistan and India to put the bilateral relationship back on track.

After the Ufa controversy and the NSA talks fiasco, the Pak-India relationship needed an injection of positivity.

*Also read: [Sharif meets Modi: 'exchange of courtesies' or 'good talks'?](#)*

That neither side tried to spin Monday's prime ministerial interaction in Paris in a hostile or damaging manner is a welcome sign. But it is obvious that much more needs to be done.

But will Prime Minister Modi follow up with a meaningful gesture? If there is one impediment to the resumption of talks between Pakistan and India, it is the unfortunate insistence by the Indian government that there be a one-point agenda, ie terrorism.

That has caused the Pakistani state, particularly the military establishment, to fall back on its own complaints vis-à-vis alleged Indian interference inside Pakistan.

The much-touted dossiers prepared by the Pakistani state and handed over to UN and US interlocutors are symptomatic of a familiar and mutually damaging downward spiral in the bilateral relationship.

The Modi government ought to recognise a basic truth: the insistence on a one-point agenda is preventing that very one point from being discussed meaningfully.

There are clearly very serious terrorism-related discussions to be had between Pakistan and India — on both sides — so why not adjust to reality and find a way to make that conversation happen?

On the Pakistani side, there is a change in approach needed too. The communal tensions inside India have been seized upon inside Pakistan as proof of the pointlessness of engaging a right-wing Indian government in substantive talks. But this too is self-defeating.

The tensions inside India may be real, but so too are the tensions in the bilateral relationship. Unstable ties with India can have all manner of damaging consequences for Pakistan,

including inside Afghanistan where the Pakistani state is trying to find a stable outcome over the long term.

There is a strange impulse in Pakistan to fight fire with fire when it comes to Indian flame-throwing. Be it cricketing ties or prime ministerial body language, there are sections in the media and among policymakers that seem to prize notions of honour over real world concerns.

If ties with India are to improve, Pakistan needs to demonstrate less schadenfreude and more concern.

*Published in Dawn, December 2nd, 2015*

## Digital rights

The announcement by Blackberry that they would rather leave Pakistan than provide “backdoor” access to the government to its communications has illustrated the kind of attention that is required on the subject of digital rights in Pakistan.

In the name of fighting terrorism, vast powers to tap the private communications of citizens have been handed over to various law-enforcement agencies over the years, to the point where nothing is private anymore.

In fact, given the widespread misuse of these powers, whether for pursuing goals other than fighting terrorism, or, in some

cases, for personal or whimsical uses, is commonplace in the country.

There are examples where powers in the digital domain, such as the power to block websites if their content is found to be objectionable, are perceived as being used in an entirely capricious manner, with no known procedure being applied. One cannot say how far the power to monitor communications is being employed, but it is a known fact that the private calls of many citizens, whether politicians, journalists or from other walks of life, are routinely monitored by numerous agencies for reasons that have nothing to do with the war against terrorism.

The case with Blackberry might be the first time the government has been roundly refused its demand for backdoor access to the company’s system. In other countries, the same company has made compromises on similar requests, but Pakistan does not appear to be a large enough market for it to do so here.

It is true that other countries follow similar patterns and pry into private communications for intelligence purposes, but in many cases the exercise is either resisted furiously by civil society or is governed by the law.

That is what Pakistan needs as well. Greater transparency in what powers are being devolved upon which agency, and regular reporting by each agency into how those powers are being used, is badly needed.

It is somewhat futile to argue in this day and age that such powers of surveillance should not belong to any government agency. But given the weakness of the institutions here, and the

December 2015

history of misuse of such powers, it is important to create some mechanisms for accountability and transparency into their utilisation.

So long as such powers are demonstrably used only for the purpose of combating militancy, there should be no opposition. The trick lies in establishing that that is indeed the case.

*Published in Dawn, December 2nd, 2015*

## HIV/AIDS and stigma

THE disease has so far claimed 34 million lives worldwide and remains a major global health concern. However, aside from being spotlighted to some extent every year on Dec 1, World AIDS Day, HIV/AIDS barely registers a blip on the radar in Pakistan.

This newspaper yesterday carried a notice placed by the Sindh government's health department about its Enhanced HIV/AIDS Control Programme which was fairly informative and mercifully devoid of the overt political self-aggrandisement that such communiqués are wont to display.

The facts contained therein indicate that some progress is being made in the province where HIV/AIDS is concerned.

Facilities for care and treatment are available in five major hospitals, four in Karachi and one in Larkana; nearly 25,000

jail inmates — a high-risk group — have been screened for the disease, out of whom 235 were found to be HIV positive; and steps to control mother-child transmission of the virus are bearing fruit.

However, it is in the fine print that one finds cause for concern. For while the notice puts the total number of HIV/AIDS cases in the province at 9,107 — including 235 AIDS cases — it also says that the total is “approximated” to be 42,000 cases “as many go unreported”.

One can only imagine what actual figures for the entire country could be. Such underreporting is not surprising: HIV/AIDS is not only a battle against a deadly virus but also against social stigma, because its transmission is entirely — and incorrectly — associated with sexual mores that are frowned upon in this conservative society.

Such ignorance and lack of compassion can only be fought through a sustained awareness-raising campaign in the mass media.

According to WHO's guiding principles, HIV testing must be voluntary, and that can only take place in an environment where the disease does not evoke revulsion and lead to social ostracism of those infected.

With Pakistan categorised as a low-prevalence but high-risk country for the spread of HIV/AIDS, time is not a luxury we can afford.

*Published in Dawn, December 2nd, 2015*

## Unforeseen revenue measures

IN just about the span of one week, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar has already offered us two different reasons why the new revenue measures just approved by the government are necessary.

Last week, while speaking before the National Assembly Standing Committee on Finance, he said the government was concerned about the trend of rising imports of luxury items and wanted to dissuade these.

He added that the State Bank of Pakistan had also expressed concern at the rising import bill. Rising imports of non-essential luxury items was, in his opinion, a damaging trend and needed to be brought under control.

Then on Tuesday, speaking to reporters after inaugurating a language and computer lab at an educational facility, he added another reason. The new revenue measures were required, he said, because of additional costs from Operation Zarb-i-Azb and the rehabilitation of internally displaced persons due to military operations.

The costs of the military operation have been an issue in the fiscal accounts for one year now, at least. Mr Dar has been speaking about extra budgetary expenditures for Operation Zarb-i-Azb since at least January, and in a handout issued in May, as well as a presentation before a Senate Standing Committee, the finance ministry had said that Rs136bn will be required in the new fiscal year to begin on July 1, 2015, for the military operation and the rehabilitation of displaced persons.

The breakdown given at the time did not fully add up. The handout had said that Rs45bn will be required for operational expenses, and Rs33bn for rehabilitation and reconstruction, which adds up to Rs78bn. It was not clear at the time where the Rs136bn figure came from.

In any case, the IMF granted a raise in the fiscal deficit target equal to 0.3pc of GDP to meet what it called “security related expenditures”.

Those numbers were programmed into the budget. Then in the eighth review of the Fund facility, the report for which was released in September, the government reported overshooting its fiscal deficit target by Rs102bn for the quarter under review, adding that the federal government took measures to contain its expenditures “despite unforeseen expenditures of PRs 53 billion on account of Zarb-i-Azb military operations, hosting of Temporarily Displaced People (TDPs)” and flood-related costs.

This is a very large amount, especially given that it is “unforeseen”. In the same letter of intent the government also says “[w]e stand ready to take additional revenue measures to attain our budget deficit target of 4.3 percent of GDP (excluding grants) in FY2015/16 (including an adjustor of 0.3 percent of GDP for critical one-off spending)”.

Given that we now have two different explanations in the public domain about what necessitated these extra revenue measures, perhaps the finance minister can do something to help us agree on which one reflects the true picture.

*Published in Dawn, December 3rd, 2015*

## Attack on army men

NEUTRALISING violent elements in Karachi was never going to be an easy task, given the fact that for years, the state has looked away as such elements entrenched themselves within the bustling metropolis.

Hence while the operation launched just over two years ago to rid Karachi of militants, terrorists and criminal gangs has witnessed some successes, it'll be some time before the state can proclaim 'mission accomplished'.

The fact that law enforcers and military personnel are particularly vulnerable to retaliatory action was reinforced on Tuesday when two army men were killed on the arterial M.A. Jinnah Road in broad daylight.

For those unfamiliar with Karachi's geography, this is perhaps the city's busiest and most congested thoroughfare, which points to the audacity and confidence with which the attackers carried out the act.

Police officials have said it is a planned attack, though only a full investigation will reveal whether this was the case, or if the soldiers — who were in uniform and travelling in a military vehicle — were victims of an opportunistic hit.

What is clear is that the murdered men were travelling without back-up, even though military personnel are supposed to move with support.

Men in uniform have been targeted in other attacks as well; most recently four Rangers' troopers were killed in an armed attack while over 75 policemen have been killed in the city this year.

While the space for terrorists and criminals has certainly been "considerably constrained" in the words of the city police chief, it is apparent that violent elements still have just enough space to hit back at the state.

The truth is that in Karachi, there is a complex mixture of political, sectarian and ethnic militants, along with active criminal syndicates.

*Also read: [Two Military Police officials shot dead in Karachi](#)*

Clearly there is no shortage of guns — and those more than willing to use them — which means that only a sustained and systematic law-enforcement operation can end bloodshed in the city in the long run.

The recent violence means that the authorities must particularly be on guard today on the occasion of Chehllum — when thousands of people will be participating in processions and religious rituals across the city — as well as on Saturday, when local government polls are scheduled to be held in the metropolis.

Looking ahead, the operation against militants of all stripe must continue until those responsible for violence in the city are brought to justice.

*Published in Dawn, December 3rd, 2015*

## Imran Farooq case

THE absurdity of the notion is only heightened, perhaps, by the fact that not just does it come from Pakistan — the justice system of which is characterised by inefficiency and sluggishness — but also comes from amongst the highest tiers of government and concerns a high-profile murder case that is potentially politically explosive.

On Tuesday, Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan said that an FIR regarding the killing of MQM leader Dr Imran Farooq in 2010 would be registered here, and that the task had been assigned to the Islamabad chapter of the Federal Investigation Agency.

*Also read: [Imran Farooq case to be registered in Pakistan, says Nisar](#)*

The issue of jurisdiction seems to not have concerned him; after all, Dr Farooq was met with fatal violence near his residence in Edgware, the UK, and had been a long-time citizen of and resident in that country. While his political association with Pakistan may have been significant, this country's legal system has little to do with a crime not committed within its own borders.

Further, the crime is already under investigation of the London Metropolitan Police, headquartered at Scotland Yard.

At the heart of the issue, it appears, is three men who are under custody in Pakistan. They are suspected of having been involved in the murder of Dr Farooq, and were interviewed by

London Met police investigators during the summer upon being given access by the local authorities.

Mr Nisar told the press conference that the suspects' remand had expired, leaving the government with making the choice between releasing them or registering a formal case against them. "British authorities did not make any request for the extradition of these suspects," the minister said.

Whatever one might think of this statement, his comments implying that the London Met police were pursuing the case inefficiently must provoke only astonishment.

Only recently, Mr Nisar raised the issue that countries which suspected a Pakistani of having committed a crime were responsible for conducting investigations against them. Curious that he should hold such a different view of jurisdiction now.

*Published in Dawn, December 3rd, 2015*



## Expansion of the Karachi operation

THE seemingly stop-start Karachi operation is to be expedited and its scope expanded to include the rest of Sindh as well.

This was, broadly speaking, the outcome of the Sindh Apex Committee meeting on Wednesday which was called by the chief minister in the wake of the murder of two military police personnel the day before in Karachi. In a briefing to the media after the meeting, a number of practical measures to that end were spelled out.

These include setting up 30 more Anti Terrorism Courts, appointing 200 prosecutors and an equal number of investigators to ensure that over 7,000 cases of terrorism could be effectively processed.

*Also read: [Operation to be extended to interior of Sindh](#)*

The committee also decided that 8,000 police personnel would be recruited to meet the demands of an expanded operation.

Notwithstanding the fact that the operation, now in its third year, has appreciably brought down the level of violence that had become endemic to Karachi, the manner in which it has been conducted is far from transparent.

Some of the measures taken have not only raised troubling questions about its real objectives, vis-à-vis the civilian political establishment in particular, but have pushed the limits

of what is legally permissible — even if one must concede that terrorism in a sprawling city like Karachi is a complex, multidimensional issue.

The recent murders of six law-enforcement personnel indicate there are criminal hideouts in this urban jungle that remain to be flushed out. The statement about expanding the operation elsewhere in Sindh therefore appears all the more incomprehensible at this point, and the public is owed a more substantial rationale for it than the vague assertion that criminals and terrorists are on the run from Karachi.

Casting the dragnet wider against out-of-favour politicians/political parties may tamp down violence for now but it is not a viable long-term strategy.

The apex committee has spoken with more clarity where proposals to strengthen the mechanism for processing terrorism cases are concerned.

Over the last two years, the operation has led to a 50pc increase in the city's prison population, and the 11 ATCs in Karachi are clearly not sufficient to address the consequently heavier workload.

The argument constantly made in favour of the highly opaque and hence deeply problematic military courts is that the ATCs have proved unequal to the task. But it is not only a problem of overburdened courts or a prosecution service spread too thin.

Two lawyers engaged by the government to prosecute the Safoora Goth bus carnage case resigned in October because

December 2015

they were given neither the requisite security nor adequate compensation for fighting a case of this nature.

The provincial government, even in its presently compromised state, must demonstrate that it is an equal partner in the war against terrorism. That is the only way to take back some of the space it has ceded to non-civilian forces.

*Published in Dawn, December 4th, 2015*

## Wrong move by Britain

IT seems David Cameron hasn't learnt any lessons from the past, especially from the flawed policies of one of his predecessors, Tony Blair, who was prime minister during the crucial 1997-2007 decade.

While winning the vote on Syria bombing was easy because his Conservatives have a majority; what was shocking was Mr Cameron's speech before the Commons voted 397 to 223 to give him the go-ahead.

In a speech which Labour chief Jeremy Corbyn said "demean[ed]" the office of the prime minister, Mr Cameron claimed that those opposed to the bombing were "terrorist sympathisers" — a remark that harkens back to George Bush junior's assertion after 9/11 that those who were not with him in his 'war on terror' were with the enemy. That 9/11 was a horrendous crime, as was 7/7, goes without saying.

*Take a look: [Britain launches airstrikes against IS in Syria](#)*

Men evil to the core perpetrated those crimes and aroused the world's conscience. If, therefore, Mr Bush chose to attack Taliban-ruled Afghanistan the world could understand the wound America had suffered.

But the way he perpetrated his 'war on terror' and the consequences this philosophy produced did everything except to kill the monster of global terrorism.

Mr Cameron, too, seems blind to the grey and sees what he calls an "incredibly complex" situation in black and white, forgetting that those whom he labelled "terrorist sympathisers" seem now to have become wiser under Mr Corbyn's leadership and have seen the consequences of their blind support for American policies.

Mr Blair was Mr Bush's sidekick in invading an Iraq which, the UN confirmed, never had weapons of mass destruction. And yet the two launched a war whose consequences have produced the kingdom of evil that is the militant Islamic State group.

Who is the target of RAF bombing now? Do all interested powers have a commonality of goals? For Russia, it is the anti-Assad forces that need to be destroyed; the Turkish priority is regime change in Damascus; oil powers Iran and Saudi Arabia are working at cross purposes, and a mysterious lull characterises the ground war, because American and French strikes have not had much effect on the IS's fighting capability nor led to a shrinkage of the territory the militant group controls.



Unless all powers first agree on the target, merely pouring fire from the skies will mean not only misery for the Syrian people, nearly 300,000 of whom are already dead, but also the birth of more IS-like hordes of butchers elsewhere in the world.

*Published in Dawn, December 4th, 2015*

## Polio: Pakistan's shame

THIS year's likely tally of new polio cases reported across the country may be lower than corresponding periods before, but Pakistan has no reason to be sanguine.

The ugly reality of this crippling illness here is thrown into even starker relief when it is considered that globally, the number of cases reported over the course of 2015 is at its lowest in history, according to a report released earlier last month by the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.

Sadly enough, the two countries still considered polio-endemic that stand in the path of success are Pakistan and Afghanistan; Nigeria, until recently the third country thus classified, was taken off the list in September.

*Also read: [Vaccine refusal: another polio case surfaces in Quetta](#)*

On Wednesday, came further bad news. Two children in Karachi were confirmed as having contracted the poliovirus,

bringing the number of new cases to four in just three days in the city. Significantly, both these children are said to have been administered the OPV. This is not for the first time that such failure of the vaccine has been reported.

The difficulty in reaching every child is well known, as are the problems of misconceptions about the vaccination, refusals and the ever-present security threat. More focus is needed, though, on the apparent failure of the vaccine to immunise a child.

One reason is the interruptions in the cold-chain storage process, which render the vaccine ineffective. On a few instances, vials have also been found to be past their expiry date.

An official of the emergency operations centre for polio in Sindh threw up another possibility about the two most recent Karachi cases: that the children may have compromised immune systems, which may have "assist[ed] the vaccine". It is true that vaccine-associated paralytic polio is a reality, though the incidence is fractional.

This possibility can be put to test in a lab. Yet addressing these issues still leaves the big question unanswered: how will Pakistan find the commitment to take meaningful strides towards tackling polio effectively and eliminating it?

*Published in Dawn, December 4th, 2015*

## Cotton collapse

THE harvest of the country's most important crop, and the raw material for its largest industry, has just dropped by an alarming quantity. The cotton crop this year was expected to come in just under 15 million bales, whereas the Cotton Ginners Association has confirmed that less than nine million bales have been produced whereas in the same period last year, the figure was 12.6m bales. The drop is a steep one, and although the harvest is still under way and the figure is expected to rise to 10m bales by the time the harvest is complete, the drop will still be amongst the largest in recent years. The bulk of the declines have occurred in southern Punjab, the cotton belt of the country, which has seen output plummet by 39pc, with Sindh only marginally affected.

Given the importance of the crop for our economy, it is imperative to understand the reasons behind this steep fall. The agriculture sector has been hit hard by a variety of factors in recent years, including climate change, collapsing commodity prices and rising input costs. Undoubtedly, this drop is due to a mix of factors, but it is important to determine whether it is a one-off event attributed to the floods or if it represents a consistent degradation in our cotton-producing capacity as market forces turn adverse for the farmer. It is difficult to imagine that floods alone could account for such a steep decline since none of the major deluges of the past five years, including the super flood of 2010, resulted in such large destruction of the cotton crop. Industry is compensating by importing cotton to meet their requirements, but if the declines are the result of a sustained degradation in our cotton crop, Pakistan's textile industry will also be adversely affected. Fears

to this effect are already being felt in industry circles, and the government would be well advised to immediately come up with a credible snapshot of what lies behind the declines.

*Published in Dawn, December 5th, 2015*

## Battleground Karachi

After years of wrangling, the city of Karachi is finally scheduled to get what every serious analyst of the city's problems has always argued it needs the most: local government.

The elections being held today have the potential to be a turning point in the recent history of the city, but of course much depends on the outcome, and how well the framework established by the Sindh Local Government Act of 2013 works. Much also depends on how the members of the provincial assembly view the new set-up and how much cooperation is extended to the nascent democratic institutions about to be created.

The long journey towards a complete democracy will remain unfinished if the experiment begun today is suffocated tomorrow due to rivalries and suspicions. The city of Karachi has long suffered from dismal governance because it is run by the provincial assembly directly, and most of the members there appear to have neither roots nor stakes in the city.

Today, the first step will be taken to rectify this great mismatch in expectations and incentives that has underlain the city's descent into an ungovernable mess, but much hinges on how things go from here.

The first challenge facing the new institutions about to be born will be in the electoral outcome. These are the first party-based local government elections held under a democratic dispensation, and how various parties emerge from the exercise will be a closely watched event.

The city's politics has long been dominated by a single fault line. There is the MQM with its secure vote bank, and there is everybody else. The non-MQM vote is considerable, but it is fragmented and has historically been impossible to pull together under a single banner. This is what explains the MQM's dominance in the city's electoral outcomes more than anything else. This election will, therefore, be closely watched to see how well the MQM fares in the context of the Karachi operation, which the party claims has targeted its workers disproportionately.

Equally important will be the functioning of the elected officials, and how far the provincial government extends its cooperation by allowing them to operate and by releasing the funds they need to do their work.

The experiment in local government under way in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has already been marred by allegations of favouritism in the release of funds, and it is worth noting that the SLGA 2013, amended further this year, grants the provincial government extensive powers to intervene in the

affairs of the various councils, as well as control the release of funds.

If that power is misused to retain the provincial government's power over the city, the experiment begun today could well be stillborn. The fact that a local government election is being held today is of far-reaching consequence for the city, but the real test still lies ahead.

*Published in Dawn, December 5th, 2015*

## Deportees sent back

THE tug of war between the EU and the interior ministry here over the status of individuals allegedly holding Pakistani nationality and who the EU wants to deport broke out into the open with Pakistan refusing to allow some 30 individuals to disembark from a special flight that had arrived from Greece on Thursday morning. While the issue can appear to be murky, at stake is a great deal — far more than just principle or the rights of a few individuals. Essentially, the Pakistani concern is this: the EU is repatriating non-Pakistanis — mostly Afghans — to Pakistan on the pretext that those individuals hold Pakistani nationality. While the problem itself is an old one, it has been infused with fresh intensity because of the EU's recent struggles on the migrant front. Pakistani officials are rightly worried that the anti-migrant sentiment is causing European governments and EU officials to try and deport as many people as possible under whatever pretext they can find.

Additionally, there is unspoken fear that any violence or acts of terror perpetrated in Europe by individuals trying illegally to claim Pakistani nationality would further damage the country's reputation internationally and cause problems for legitimate and legal workers and immigrants of Pakistani descent in the EU. The interior ministry is therefore doing the right thing in demanding that the EU tighten its procedures in cooperation with Pakistan to ensure only genuine Pakistanis are sent back to Pakistan.

However, some confusion has been created by the EU's official response to the Pakistani refusal to accept the 30 individuals on Thursday. "The [individuals refused entry to Pakistan] are the ones labelled as 'unverified', but those persons have been provided with a travel document by the Embassy of Pakistan," according to the EU. Why then are Pakistani missions abroad issuing travel documents to individuals that the interior ministry claims are not Pakistani? Moreover, there are issues of legality here. According to the EU, Pakistani authorities relied on the existence of a CNIC to determine whether re-entry would be allowed or not. Can a Pakistani national be renounced by her own country simply if he or she does not possess a CNIC or, presumably, exist in the Nadra database? Surely, there must be a balance here. While no non-Pakistani should be accepted into Pakistan simply because the EU may find it convenient to deport them to this country, neither should any Pakistani ever be denied his or her legitimate nationality in any circumstances.

*Published in Dawn, December 5th, 2015*

## Parliament's supremacy

IT should be a settled — and democratically obvious — fact, but the frequent suggestions to the contrary indicate there is some way to go yet before constitutional and democratic norms are deeply entrenched and become irreversible. Senate chairperson Raza Rabbani was moved on Friday to remind the country that parliament must remain the supreme institution in the land — that there should be no supra-parliamentary National Security Council and that all institutions must follow the edict of parliament. The occasion for Mr Rabbani's comments was a book launch in Islamabad at which it was suggested that the country needs a powerful NSC over and above parliament. It is precisely such suggestions that make democrats in Pakistan wary of a full-fledged NSC, even though it is clear that national security decision-making needs to be structured and aided by a full-time secretariat and staff. Short of that, national security policymaking will continue to be opaque and ad hoc — with predictable consequences for the country's security.

Why though is a basic democratic notion as the institutional supremacy of parliament still resisted, actively and philosophically, by some sections of the state apparatus? Part of the reason is surely power — a supra-parliamentary body would be unaccountable to the elected leadership of the country and would be able to implement undemocratic plans and vision for the country's security. But a part of the answer lies also in the shortcomings of the civilians themselves. Consider the fate of the revamped Cabinet Committee for National Security that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif created two years ago. It was suspected then that the revamping came

at the behest of the military leadership — like the recent appointment of a retired general as national security adviser to the prime minister — and therefore was likely to suffer from disinterest by the civilian government. This has proven to be the case, with the secretariat to the CCNS yet to take off and the body itself being moribund. Perhaps not coincidentally, the so-called apex committee meetings and one-on-one meetings between the prime minister and the army chief have virtually replaced all other national security forums.

Where the civilian government has failed — even accepting that the political government has been marginalised in national security matters, and that bureaucratic resistance and civilian disinterest have helped accelerate that process — so too has parliament. There is no intelligence oversight by parliament — and none that is being considered. The Senate Standing Committee on Defence is active, but seemingly mostly to arrange field trips and inviting speakers to make speeches. There is no meaningful contribution of parliament that can be discerned. Strangely, there are voices inside parliament that occasionally demand a joint session of parliament to debate significant national security and foreign policy events as if that can be a substitute for the job of serious and sustained policy input. Yes, parliament must be the supreme institution — but it is parliament itself that must lead the way.

*Published in Dawn, December 6th, 2015*

## Exemplary work

AS the Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplantation in Karachi marks four decades of service to humanity, it is worth reflecting on the countless lives it has saved and improved. The result of the efforts of its founder, Dr Adibul Hasan Rizvi, and of the fleet of healthcare professionals who work alongside him, the institute has stayed true to its philosophy: that every person in need has the inalienable right to free healthcare of high quality. In this world, where quality is in general the domain of only those who can afford it, SIUT continues to prove that not only does it not have to be that way, but that where the provision of healthcare is involved, this is a course of highly dubious ethics. Run entirely on public donations, the facility takes no fee from the thousands that flock to its corridors, the bulk of them living in poverty. If there is a parallel to SIUT's work, it is to be found in the work of Abdul Sattar and Bilquis Edhi, and the foundation they have created, which also caters tirelessly to the needs of the poorest, most marginalised sections of society. Here, too, the vast charity network encompassing orphanages, mortuaries, shelters and a fleet of ambulances in every city that are usually the first to arrive at the scene of any accident or catastrophe, is run exclusively on donations.

While the work of these two giants is exemplary, it is nevertheless relevant to ask of the state why it has so easily abdicated its responsibilities, both in terms of the healthcare sector and protecting the vulnerable. SIUT and the Edhi Foundation exist because there was a glaring gap in the provision of services, the responsibility for which rests with the state, the government of the day and its subsidiaries. And while

it is admirable that these entities have stepped up to the plate and continue to improve thousands of lives, it is sad that state has achieved virtually nothing in terms of capacity-building. Even a cursory look provides a negative answer. Pakistan and its people can count themselves lucky that there are individuals and institutions such as these, for without them our collective lot would be far worse; but supporters of these institutions as well as their beneficiaries have the option of lobbying with the state and those who steer it in order to drastically and immediately improve healthcare and welfare services.

*Published in Dawn, December 6th, 2015*

## Reforms for Saudi women

THEY may still not be allowed to get behind the wheel, but the wheels of change have finally begun to move for Saudi women. The kingdom has announced that widows and divorced women will be issued identity cards in their own name, a measure that will enable them to take independent decisions in several important matters. These include the power to register their children in school, access records and authorise medical procedures. With family cards made in their husbands' names, women are dependent either on spousal permission or court orders to perform these tasks. Moreover, on Dec 12, for the first time, they will not only be able to vote in municipal elections in their country, there will also be women among the candidates. These women, more than 900, have been campaigning since late November, albeit under rules meant to

maintain the segregation of the sexes. These include: no holding of rallies attended by men and no meeting directly with male voters — a male spokesman will, instead, communicate with them on a woman candidate's behalf.

It must be said that any change for the better in the status of women in Saudi Arabia — suspended in amber since some time — is something to celebrate. In fact, it is no less than revolutionary that Saudi women may soon have the chance to be considered adults capable of making basic decisions in their lives, even if they have to be divorced or widowed to do so. Ironically, that could be the proverbial silver lining in what is undoubtedly an emotionally fraught situation. Participation in the electoral process, both as voter and candidate, also confers a degree of agency not hitherto granted to Saudi women. However, it is a very controlled loosening of the reins: Loujain Hathloul, who was detained for two months by Saudi authorities when she tried to drive into the kingdom from the UAE, was disqualified from standing for election. Change has begun, but there is a long road yet to travel.

*Published in Dawn, December 6th, 2015*



## Electoral win for MQM

IT may be the definition of madness, but it can also have dangerous and destabilising effects on politics.

Doing something over and over again and expecting a different result seems to be the only discernible strategy of the military establishment when it comes to the politics of Karachi.

Saturday's local government election in the provincial capital has yet again demonstrated a simple, electoral truth.

The more the security establishment targets the MQM, the more the average voter in Karachi recoils, and the further ahead the MQM pulls of all its political rivals in the city.

That was true in April when the MQM trounced the PTI in the NA-246 by-election — a constituency that is home to the MQM headquarters — despite all manner of hurdles created for the party.

The Karachi voter had spoken: the MQM vote bank is not based merely on violence and intimidation.

On Saturday, the party once again won a comfortable majority, virtually crushing the PTI-JI combined challenge and leaving the PPP in a distant second place. And once again unsavoury and unnecessary tactics against the MQM were deployed, with the FIA finding it necessary to register an FIR against the MQM chief, Altaf Hussain, and sundry other party members.

The intended signal to the voter was as clear as it was unpalatable – don't vote for the MQM, a party that murders its own. The Karachi voter roundly rejected that deplorable signal.

Yet, will lessons be learned? They should be, but it is not clear if there is a willingness to reassess strategy.

Clearly, there is a great deal of support, including among MQM supporters, for the parts of the Karachi operation that is targeting militants and criminals.

Where matters become murky is the political arena. Is there some attempt to re-engineer the politics of Karachi and Sindh itself through selective, politically motivated interventions?

There is too much circumstantial evidence to dismiss the possibility. Where there is a nexus between crime and politics, that nexus should be attacked. But surely all politics is not and must not be treated as criminal.

Much as the establishment has erred, there is a great deal of blame that must be shared by the MQM too.

The party's leadership appears to have been reduced to self-pity and anger, while the voters' repeated embrace of the party seems only to give more reason to the MQM leadership to wallow in their perceived victimhood.

Having an MQM mayor of Karachi could be an opportunity for a reset. While crime and violence dominate the headlines, the city is plagued by a depressing array of problems.

Basic public services are either wholly absent or, at best, shabbily catered for. The mayoralty and the new local government system may not be ideal, but there is an opportunity, and the MQM should try and put the needs of the public ahead of its own troubles with the state.

*Published in Dawn, December 7th, 2015*

## California shootings

THE carnage in California will be claiming its victims for a long time to come.

As investigators sift through the details of the perpetrators' lives in search of clues to explain the motivations of the couple that unleashed such unspeakable violence on a group of innocent people, the rest of us will similarly search for answers to provide a proper context and narrative to these gruesome actions.

Undoubtedly, the single-most important element of that context will be the ready availability of firearms in the United States.

The fact that the shooters, subsequently killed by police, could amass high-powered weaponry and ammunition in such huge quantities over a period of time, in a state that has the strictest gun laws in the US, pierces through the storm clouds of confusion surrounding this tragedy.

Stricter gun laws can do a lot to cut back on such incidents, but the rest of the world can only watch in stupefaction as American lawmakers stubbornly refuse to pass the required legislation time and again.

But the steady accumulation of this arsenal by the two suspects also indicates that this was not a spontaneous act. In fact, the couple may well have thought of letting loose a carnage of this sort for a long time, which in turn suggests they harboured grievances and developed justifications for the horrible act they carried out.

Where they got their inspiration from to build this frame of mind will be a big part of the search for answers to their motivation, and given that both the perpetrators had a connection with Pakistan, and were strictly practising Muslims, the search could, at some point, touch Pakistan and the virulent strands of religion circulating with growing ferocity in the Muslim world.

The tragedy clearly highlights the philosophical vacuum opening up in our midst, that pit of darkness from which grows the nihilistic inspiration of militant ideologies.

In the days to come, as the investigators' search for clues yields up results, a concomitant search for answers must also begin in the hearts and minds of thinking Muslims everywhere.

It appears we will now be adding two more names to a list that already includes the likes of Faisal Shahzad, Omar Saeed Sheikh and others of their ilk — young minds infected easily by virulent ideologies of hate, and reflecting on the sources of vulnerability that turns them into mass murderers.



## Afghan Taliban crisis

THE Afghan Taliban are making speculation about the life and death of its leader something of a habit.

Was Mullah Mansour injured in a shooting incident in Pakistan or was he killed?

An audio recording of a man claiming to be Mullah Mansour has denied that he was in the area outside Quetta where he was reported to be, that there was an argument with a rival faction, and that he was injured at all in any incident.

Given the charade that Mullah Mansour presided over for more than two years to conceal the death of Mullah Omar, few — within Taliban ranks and certainly outside — would be willing to believe an audio message alone.

More evidence will certainly be needed, particularly since the Afghan government continues to suggest that the Taliban leader is, in fact, dead.

What this latest episode cannot mask is that there are continuing and possibly growing divisions within the Taliban.

The unity that Mullah Mansour has been trying to project does not appear to exist. With the fighting season now largely over, the effect of internal Taliban discord — at least until next spring — is likely to be mostly on the fate of talks that Pakistan and the outside world are believed to be trying to restart.

If he is, in fact, dead or injured, it is difficult to imagine talks restarting anytime soon. But even if Mullah Mansour is alive and well, the ongoing internal Taliban difficulties make it implausible that the first priority will be to work towards a peace settlement with the Afghan government.

An urgent push for peace would expose the Taliban leader to yet more criticism from dissident members who would try and paint him as little more than a puppet of Pakistan and other international powers that the group has fought against for over a decade.

Perhaps it would be best to have contingency plans in place — if Mullah Mansour cannot convince all or most of the Taliban, then lines of communication need to be opened to other major factions.

*Published in Dawn, December 7th, 2015*

## India-Pakistan progress

FIRST the prime ministers exchanged a few words in Paris; then their national security advisers and foreign secretaries held a joint meeting in Bangkok; today, Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj will arrive in Islamabad for a regional security conference.

What seemed impossible just weeks ago, has turned into a remarkable, almost unprecedented round of diplomacy at the very highest levels.

The meetings must, first and foremost, be welcomed by every right-thinking Indian and Pakistani. Not talking to each other should be an unacceptable state of affairs when it comes to the two South Asian neighbours.

*Also read: [India's FM to visit Pakistan tomorrow](#)*

Unhappily, prompted by Indian intransigence and partly reinforced by Pakistani reluctance, diplomatic engagement had eluded the two countries.

Instead, dangerous brinkmanship by both sides pushed the relationship towards a new low. Now, and not a moment too soon, the relationship seems set to be revived and reinvigorated. And an old truth stands validated: without a strong and bold leadership, the India-Pakistan relationship will forever remain hostage to old suspicions and hostilities.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi appear willing to try again.

What is particularly encouraging is that both sides seem prepared to learn from the mistakes and choices of the recent past.

The Ufa agreement called for a meeting between the NSAs in New Delhi, but that became untenable after the Indian side refused to allow the Pakistani delegation to meet friendly leaders from India-held Kashmir. Choosing a neutral venue like Bangkok allowed both sides to avoid public embarrassment.

Furthermore, prior secrecy and the post-meeting public statement helped achieve several things: they prevented hawks on either side from scuttling the meeting; presumably allowed both sides to talk about substantive issues instead of indulging in rhetoric for domestic political consumption; and established a precedent for further meetings.

The inclusion of references to terrorism as well as Jammu and Kashmir will presumably have satisfied both sides. In real terms, however, the reference to “tranquillity along the LoC” in the joint statement is of perhaps more immediate relevance.

Tensions along the Working Boundary and LoC are still unacceptably high and there has to be some major movement to re-establish both sides’ commitment to upholding the January 2003 ceasefire.

Meanwhile, Ms Swaraj’s visit to Islamabad could set the stage for a rather positive quid pro quo. The Heart of Asia conference is being jointly hosted by Pakistan and Afghanistan and is just the platform for India to make some kind of an important gesture on Afghanistan — a gesture that would

December 2015

enhance the likelihood of stability and peace in Afghanistan and the region.

The gesture that India, and the world, is seeking from Pakistan? Expediting the Mumbai attack-related trials. It is a scandal that the trials in the Rawalpindi anti-terrorism court have ground to a halt. Pakistan needs to do more on that front.

*Published in Dawn, December 8th, 2015*

## Election lessons

The results of the local government elections ought to be a wake-up call for the PTI and PPP.

The resounding defeat inflicted on both parties in key battlegrounds is reason for some deep introspection. For the PTI, it is important to realise that elections are not won on the basis of television coverage alone.

More importantly, LG elections are always about local issues and the level of contact that a party's candidates and machinery have with the voter. The PTI needs to realise that while its complaints and warnings of rigging and corruption day after day might get TV ratings, it will not win votes for the party.

*Take a look: [Polling ends for third phase of LG elections in Karachi, Punjab](#)*

One large gathering in Karachi will not do the job either. To win elections, especially for local government, its candidates need to have more contact with the average voter, and campaigns must be run on issues that concern the voters directly.

Talking angrily about changing the destiny of the country is neither here nor there. The string of electoral defeats suffered by the party since 2013 is proof that it is failing to connect with the voters, and the recent LG elections have only driven that point home.

For its part, the PPP today appears to be a party in total disarray. Its leadership sits in Dubai and its affairs in the country are being apparently run by an inexperienced youth who has a hard time emerging from behind his bullet-proof confines.

Since this summer at least, we have seen the absurd spectacle of the PPP chief minister in Sindh travelling to Dubai to get his instructions on a monthly basis.

The rout of the PPP at the ballot box, even losing three union councils in its traditional stronghold of Lyari this time, is turning into a permanent phenomenon, with chances of a major comeback fading with each electoral defeat.

Its virtual disappearance from Punjab means the party has been confined to some districts in Sindh alone, and given the speed with which it is losing ground, the next election could find its politicians struggling to even retain those.

December 2015

This is not a good development to witness. Pakistan's democracy needs a national party that is able to field candidates and win elections across the land, as well as prove to be a strong and vibrant opposition. Both the PPP and PTI need to do far more to rise to that challenge.

*Published in Dawn, December 8th, 2015*

## Kerry's concerns

Though the Israeli government has never really cared much for global opinion, when even the US — considered the Jewish state's biggest international benefactor — publicly criticises Tel Aviv, it is indicative of the gravity of the situation.

While it was the mildest of rebukes, US Secretary of State John Kerry told a conference in Washington recently that should the Palestinian Authority collapse, it “would threaten the security of Israel and the Palestinian people”.

Mr Kerry also lamented that Jewish settlement activity was continuing while Palestinians were being denied construction permits.

*Also read: [Kerry warns Israel about dangers of Palestinian Authority's collapse](#)*

Quoting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, the US official said a “sense of hopelessness” prevailed amongst the

Palestinian people. Expectedly, Israel's hawkish Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has brushed aside Secretary Kerry's comments.

Over the past couple of months, violence has flared in the occupied territories, sparked by Israeli restrictions on Arab access to Al Aqsa.

There have been deaths on both sides, though Arab casualties are much higher. Of course, this violence should not be seen in isolation; it is but a part of the Palestinian people's nearly seven-decade nightmare.

Since the creation of Israel, the region's original Arab inhabitants have been subjected to humiliating and brutal treatment meted out by Tel Aviv.

So if Mr Kerry is genuinely worried about the possible collapse of the Palestinian Authority, he must explain in no uncertain terms to Israel the need to restart the peace process, keeping in mind the dignity and aspirations of the Palestinian people.

Perhaps he is right in urging the Arab side to ‘do more’ to control violence; but the same message must also be delivered to Tel Aviv, which has made a habit of unleashing state-sponsored violence upon hapless Palestinian civilians.

Already, there is talk of a ‘third Intifada’ brewing in the occupied territories. The US and the world community must realise that if a thoroughly disillusioned and brutalised Palestinian public chooses to abandon whatever is left of the peace process in favour of armed struggle, the fault will be that of Tel Aviv.

## Privatisation considerations

THE whole debate on the merits and pitfalls of privatisation is about to begin anew as the government moves to put PIA up for sale.

The start of the deal, which has been delayed at least three times already, has been marred by allegations of poor management as the government mysteriously chose to get the ball rolling with a presidential ordinance designed to convert airline corporate structure and prepare for strategic sale.

The choice of promulgating an ordinance to repeal the PIA Act of 1956 is somewhat puzzling, since ordinances are meant to be used largely in special circumstances.

*Also read: [PIAC converted into company](#)*

The privatisation of PIA has been part of the agreement with the IMF since 2013, but the government appears to be moving in haste now as the Fund has demanded a fresh commitment to advancing the process and completing it by March.

The opposition parties are right to argue that the use of the ordinance in such a large exercise is objectionable, and the government ought to explain why it is choosing to bypass parliament in making changes to a legislative act.

As the government moves the process along, the debate surrounding the entire exercise will surely grow.

Whereas the opposition parties are correct to object to bypassing parliament where required, one can only hope that the debate does not remain confined to the technicalities of the process. Important questions are at stake, and parliament must play its role to ensure that the transaction does not damage any public interest.

The airline badly needs to benefit from private-sector efficiencies and management acumen, and past experience with privatisations shows that these can sometimes come at the cost of public interest.

The banks are an example. Private management here has certainly streamlined operations and improved the balance sheet, but the central function of any bank — mediating between savers and investors — is sorely lacking as the private management of these banks prefers the easy money at minimal risk that comes from lending to government.

Likewise, K-Electric has successfully turned the city's power utility around, but largely by diverting the city's scarce electricity to its elites, leaving the rest to bear the burden of load-shedding.

As the government moves to deliver on its commitments to privatise the large behemoths that have been eating up the state's scarce budgetary resources, the ensuing debate should avoid taking potshots and ask more specifically about what the public interest is in each case of privatisation, and how the government intends to safeguard it.

In the case of PIA, maintaining flights to underserved destinations is a clear example. Will a private party agree to

December 2015

continue flight operations to Quetta and Peshawar, Sukkur and Multan, Gilgit and Skardu?

The answer must be yes, and parliament must ensure that any deal safeguards this.

*Published in Dawn, December 9th, 2015*

## Rangers in Karachi

THE argument for an extension in the Rangers' policing powers in Karachi is persuasive: terrorism-related crime in the city is down by 60pc in the two years or so that the Rangers-led operation has been under way.

A meeting in Karachi on Monday between the civil and military leaderships decided that the paramilitary force would continue with its action against criminals as well as their patrons and facilitators and resist all pressure to do otherwise.

The message between the lines, of course, was to the provincial political establishment — part of which is flush with a resounding victory in the LG polls — to desist from interfering in the Rangers' operations.

*Also read: [Govt will not compromise on Karachi's law and order: PM Nawaz](#)*

The question is whether law and order in Karachi can be effectively tackled by the seemingly indefinite deployment of a paramilitary force.

Policing Karachi is certainly no straightforward task. The various fault lines in the 20-million strong metropolis have been exploited for years by competing political interests and their militant wings; waves of inward migration in recent years triggered by security operations up north have added another layer of complexity.

Meanwhile, politicisation of the police allowed the situation to drift further into anarchy. Much of this has happened on the Rangers' watch: they have, after all, been 'reinforcing' the local police since the early 1990s.

However, it was in late 2013 that the Rangers acquired policing powers whereby they could detain suspects in their custody for three months and even take lethal action to prevent an imminent crime from being committed.

The federal paramilitary force thus has some justification to claim it has only recently been given the tools to circumvent local political interference. At the same time, not only has there been a sharp uptick in 'encounter' killings, but the expanded powers have been employed by the Rangers to widen the ambit of the operations at will; in the process, there have been some obvious transgressions involving questionable arrests and detentions.

While there may be reason enough to continue with the present arrangement at least for now, an open-ended Rangers' presence in the city would be tantamount to treating the symptoms and

December 2015

not the malaise — a compromised police force that serves not the needs of the citizens but that of powerful vested interests.

Rather than the Rangers shoring up the police, the latter should be strengthened so that they can take ownership of the city and do their duty by it.

*Published in Dawn, December 9th, 2015*

## Cricketer's reinduction

It may have been just another limited-overs game in the Bangladesh league, but it did feature an incident open to various interpretations in and about Pakistan.

It was Mohammad Hafeez versus Mohammad Amir — for many, it was the so-called professor standing up to one who had strayed early in life, the 'moral custodian' to someone who had served a prison sentence.

It raised some very basic questions about punishment and rehabilitation, a question which this country is repeatedly faced with.

'Co-option' and 'rehabilitation', in all spheres of life here, are key words in discussions about who is allowed by which powers to assert his presence at a particular time.

Likewise, maybe more than bound by any standards of fairness, the PCB is compelled by its own needs to try and fast-track Amir's return to the national side.

*Also read: [Amir trumps Hafeez in BPL showdown](#)*

The national team has not been doing all that well. It is weak and vulnerable in the batting department; in the bowling section Amir is an exciting and promising option that the cricket board cannot quite afford to ignore at the moment.

Already, there are reports of how keen the PCB and the national coach are to include the fast bowler as an instant boost to the side and it is said that an effort is soon going to be undertaken to convince those who disagree, such as Mohammad Hafeez and others who have assigned sinister reasons to whatever the left-armer does.

There is little doubt that if they want him badly enough, the cricket bosses will succeed in having their man back.

The tricky part for some observers of the game is that this reinduction will also open the door for the return of Mohammad Asif, a swing bowler of some repute around the cricket grounds, and also batsman and the then-captain Salman Butt.

However, the PCB has taken a strong line on the two cricketers, due to their obstinacy in denying all charges. At the moment, the PCB is, rightly, not inclined to welcome them back.

*Published in Dawn, December 9th, 2015*



## Pakistan's Afghan challenge

IT was unimaginable just a couple of years ago — Pakistan hosting an international conference with high-level political delegations from across the region.

That alone is worth acknowledging and welcoming. Pakistan is surely moving on from the devastating security crisis that had crippled this country for nearly a decade.

That the conference is jointly hosted with Afghanistan and is part of the Istanbul Process that seeks to achieve peace and stability inside Afghanistan through regional cooperation was an even more positive sign.

For too long Pakistan stood on the diplomatic sidelines while other countries tried to encourage dialogue with Afghanistan.

*Also read: [Afghanistan, Pakistan and US agree on resumption of peace process](#)*

Given all that Pakistan has at stake, it is surely right that it lead regional efforts on peace and stability in Afghanistan rather than simply react to others' attempts. Brightening the picture further was the unprecedented gesture made by the Pakistani political and military leadership in personally receiving Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at the Nur Khan Air Base.

That show of unity sent a positive signal on two fronts: internally, that the political and military leadership is working together on Afghanistan; externally, that Pakistan wants to sustain and improve ties with Mr Ghani's government.

For all the diplomatic show and pomp, however, there remain some fundamental challenges. Rather than being effusive, the Afghan president was direct in his comments when it came to Pakistan.

Not only did he refer to historical Afghan suspicions regarding Pakistani intentions, he also spoke of Afghanistan hosting "350,000 to 500,000 Pakistan refugees" in a nod to the civilian populations displaced by military operations in Fata.

The reference to Pakistan refugees will be interpreted as a rebuke to Pakistan, where there have been persistent demands for the forced repatriation of Afghan refugees.

It also shows how far apart the two countries can be on fundamental issues: few Pakistanis calling for the repatriation of Afghan refugees seem to be aware of Afghan sentiments on that issue or indeed of Afghan views generally.

But that challenge runs both ways. Some of the rhetoric emanating from Afghanistan on Pakistan in recent times has been unfortunate and needs to be reined in. As the Hamid Karzai era proved, harsh rhetoric from the Afghan side can cause all manner of unintended consequences.

On its part, Pakistan needs to go beyond a show of goodwill and graciousness as hosts.

Mr Ghani continues to take political risks at home in order to keep the door open to dialogue with Pakistan. Perhaps this is because the Afghan president realises he has no other option, if peace and stability are to be really pursued. But it is a very real



opportunity for Pakistan. What remains confusing is the situation with the Afghan Taliban.

Has internal discord made pushing for peace talks immediately more difficult? If so, perhaps other confidence-building measures can be considered, for example, addressing Afghan complaints of Pakistan-based violence inside Afghanistan.

*Published in Dawn, December 10th, 2015*

## State Bank on CPEC

SOME important remarks made by the State Bank governor, Ashraf Mahmood Wathra, about transparency in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects deserve careful consideration.

In an interview given to Reuters, Mr Wathra said that “CPEC needs to be made more transparent”, going on to indicate that many crucial details of the various projects to be executed under the CPEC umbrella remain hidden even from him.

For example, he said that out of \$46bn, he does not know “how much is debt, how much is equity and how much is in kind”. Details of this sort are important to know because they can help us understand the potential economic impact that CPEC will have in the future, given the many hopes attached to this project.

The State Bank has also repeatedly invoked the CPEC projects as the best hope for reviving growth in the country, but whether this is merely wishful thinking or a realistic expectation can only be determined if crucial financial details of the projects are known.

In a later clarification, the State Bank asserted that it remains positive about CPEC, but it stood by its transparency concerns.

*Also read: [Pakistan should be more transparent on \\$46bn China deal, SBP head says](#)*

The governor’s remarks are notable for a number of reasons. This is the first time that the need for greater transparency in CPEC has been mentioned from such an important platform as the State Bank.

Since the economy is faced with dwindling inflows of foreign investment and exports, it is crucial to know how its foreign exchange-earning capacity is going to shape up in the years to come, especially in light of the rising external debt burden that the government has been taking on.

Even though the government tells us that its plans to build industrial estates along the route of the road link from Gwadar to Khunjerab will help boost exports, Mr Wathra is entirely correct when he acknowledges this vision but adds that “we need to see this plan with more clarity”.

The CPEC project may indeed have tremendous potential for the country but only if it is implemented properly. By steadfastly refusing to share any of the crucial details of the various projects that make up the CPEC bouquet — even with

December 2015

stakeholders as important and central to its execution and impact as the State Bank — the government is not shoring up confidence in its capacity to oversee the implementation of such a large vision.

*Published in Dawn, December 10th, 2015*

## Landing in fog

SURELY, it was not what those stranded on either side of the Lahore airport had hoped for after the recent announcements of the installation of an up-to-date landing system.

The system that was turned on with some fanfare in November was supposed to rid the Punjab capital of an old, nagging problem — flight delays caused by winter fog, or smog, that has made landing by aircraft here extremely difficult.

Many had expected that the problem would be solved after the arrival of the \$25m technology — a pioneering project of its kind in Pakistan. The word going around now is that there is a lot more to a vision than the hurried installing of fancy gadgetry, however exciting it may appear.

*Also read: [\\$25m anti-fog technology at airport: Passengers land in trouble as system fails to take off](#)*

There is an element of speed attached to any development work in Lahore today. However, this is not always positive as a hurried pace is often blamed for oversight here and there.

Some of these problems are of a ‘minor’ kind and wherever these cannot be ignored, they can at least be ironed out with extra corrective work by the contractor and overtime put in by the labour. But then, there are also more serious issues; unfortunately, the much-heralded ‘anti-fog’ technology, which subsequently proved such a disappointment, falls into the latter category.

One of the explanations offered as to why the system has so far failed to live up to its billing is that the pilots are not trained to use it and that the aircraft are not equipped to benefit from it.

If the issue is as simple as this, then a basic question arises: why did the aviation authorities stop short of ensuring a simultaneous upgrade in the crew’s knowledge and equipping planes with the requisite technology?

If that entailed costs which were difficult to meet then there was little use of putting on show the ‘anti-fog’ system which, given the many sighs of exasperation it has generated, has only added to the grimness of the situation.

*Published in Dawn, December 10th, 2015*

## India-Pakistan hopes revived

It is as unexpected as it is compelling — and official: Pakistan and India are to resume dialogue across a range of agreed subjects under the umbrella of what has now been labelled the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue.

As ever, the India-Pakistan relationship has not failed to surprise — though for once in the most welcoming of ways.

A rush of meetings over the past 10 days has achieved a most remarkable of breakthroughs, credit for which must first and foremost go to the governments of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

*Also read: [Pakistan, India agree to restart 'comprehensive' dialogue process](#)*

When politicians lead, positive change is often achievable. Mr Modi in particular appears to have recognised the failure of his high-risk strategy of not talking to Pakistan while trying to isolate this country internationally on terrorism-related issues.

Meanwhile, Mr Sharif stood firm in the face of fierce domestic opposition, particularly after the Ufa debacle, and kept open the door to dialogue with India.

The Paris meeting on the sidelines of the climate conference proved to be more of a catalyst than perhaps anyone other than the two prime ministers themselves could have hoped or known.

Now, the hope will be that by the time Mr Modi visits Pakistan next September for the Saarc conference, the two governments will have achieved a meaningful breakthrough in some of the areas to be discussed under the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue.

It will not be easy. The earlier Composite Dialogue appeared to progress smoothly, but agreement on the so-called low-hanging fruit proved elusive.

On the Indian side, the challenge will be to withstand the opposition to the resumption of dialogue with Pakistan. While Mr Modi's supporters have appeared to be at the vanguard of the anti-Pakistan sentiment in India in recent months, there are a range of other populist and establishment forces in India that will try and scuttle or slow down the dialogue process.

Mr Modi and his government will have to demonstrate a great deal of resolve domestically. For Pakistan, the immediate challenge is the same as it has been for a number of years now: there must be some movement on the trials here related to the 2008 Mumbai attacks. That would automatically create the space and goodwill for the comprehensive dialogue to move forward.

The question is, can Pakistan and India break out of the historical cycle of hope and despair when it comes to the possibility of genuine normalisation of ties?

Turbulent spells in the relationship in the past have sometimes been followed by unexpected bilateral peace endeavours. Unhappily, those endeavours have always failed because the

December 2015

leadership of the two countries found statesmanship difficult or, sometimes, populism easy.

Today, on the Indian side, Mr Modi can surely deliver — if he wants to. On the Pakistani side, Mr Sharif has worked out a coexistence with the military — and so could conceivably deliver. There is reason to hope again.

*Published in Dawn, December 11th, 2015*

## Controlling garbage

THE Sindh government seems determined to hold on to its garbage. Only days after the local government election in the province saw the ruling PPP put in a poor showing, the Sindh government is already moving to bring all solid waste management operations across the province under its control.

In fact, the Sindh Local Government Act, 2013 was rather stingy in the powers it passed to the local governments, while being generous in granting oversight powers to the provincial government, particularly the chief minister, to oversee and penalise LG officials and representatives.

The move by the provincial government to centralise all solid waste management of Sindh, starting with the city of Karachi, and bring it under the control of the Sindh Solid Waste Management Board, may be in consonance with the SLGA 2013, but it runs totally contrary to the spirit of the LG law.

*Also read: [Sindh govt takes away key municipal function from local bodies](#)*

The hopes that were kindled with the holding of the LG elections were that Karachi might now be controlled by elected representatives who actually have roots in the city itself.

Those hopes were dimmed by the contours of the SLGA 2013, and the expeditious move to centralise further powers dashes them even further.

Local governments will now be expected to operate with very limited powers over any of the issues that affect the city — water distribution, law and order, growing piles of uncollected garbage to name a few — and their budgets will be entirely controlled by the provincial government and their performance monitored strictly by the Provincial Local Government Commission which can recommend penal action to the chief minister.

Given this fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that members of the provincial assembly will resist the local governments as far as possible. It would still be easier to accept this reality if the Sindh government had done a better job managing municipal functions under its control.

But the large and growing piles of garbage accumulating across the city, the use of contractors for waste removal who burn trash in locations close to residential areas, and the large number of stray dogs and scavenger birds that fill up Karachi's streets and its skies due to the garbage all testify to a colossal failure of the provincial government to properly discharge its obligations.

Now we learn that they are determined to hold on to these functions nevertheless, and it makes for a rather dismaying thought.

*Published in Dawn, December 11th, 2015*

## Diphtheria deaths

THE problems of the child healthcare sector in Pakistan are extensive and, in the main, well known.

Apart from the high infant and under-five mortality rates, perhaps the most talked about globally and of greatest concern domestically is the fact that this is one of the world's last two polio-endemic countries.

All the focus on polio, however, has perhaps shifted attention away from the even more grave threats to health, especially in terms of numbers, faced by the country's children: diarrhoea, typhoid, pneumonia, and many others, which kill often because of either the unavailability of medical attention, or the child's unvaccinated status.

Depressingly, in recent days, a new illness has been added to this list, which has shockingly killed on the premises of a medical facility and despite there being a remedy.

*Know more: [Missed doses, drug import delay behind diphtheria deaths in Lahore](#)*

A probe into several diphtheria-related deaths at the Children's Hospital, Lahore, has found two glaring causes: one, the number of boosters of the diphtheria vaccine administered to children under the Expanded Programme on Immunisation may not be enough to provide full coverage, and, two, delays in the procurement of the diphtheria antitoxin (DAT) and its delivery to hospitals.

This was concluded by the inquiry committee constituted on the Punjab chief minister's direction, which was presided over by the King Edward Medical University vice chancellor.

These factors were behind the deaths of 14 children at the Children's Hospital alone, with the figure going up to perhaps 20 over the last two months when hospitals did not receive DAT. To say that the situation is unacceptable would be a gross understatement.

The responsibility rests solely on the shoulders of the state and its subsidiaries, and rectification has to be undertaken on an urgent basis. This must include large-scale immunisation and timely treatment of this bacterial disease which involves the proper use of antibiotics.

There can be no more striking example of an uncaring government than when a country's most vulnerable segment — its children — contract illnesses that are preventable.

*Published in Dawn, December 11th, 2015*

## New CM for Balochistan

IT was only with the greatest of reluctance that Sanaullah Zehri, provincial PML-N leader, ceded the chief minister's office to Abdul Malik Baloch of the National Party in 2013.

It took the personal intervention of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and, as emerged a year later, a written pledge that Mr Zehri would in fact ascend to the chief minister's office at the halfway point of the present Balochistan Assembly for the provincial PML-N chief to accept Dr Baloch as chief minister first.

In the turbulent world of Balochistan politics, two and a half years is a political lifetime — and Dr Baloch used his time well to seemingly make himself indispensable to both the political government in Islamabad and the military establishment, which effectively still controls and sets national Balochistan policy.

*Take a look: [Sanaullah Zehri nominated next chief minister of Balochistan](#)*

Yet, Mr Zehri would not be denied and Mr Sharif has not gone back on his word. Balochistan is to have a new chief minister — Sanaullah Zehri.

Balochistan now has the unwanted distinction of, in this era of democratic transition, not having a chief minister in successive assemblies complete his term.

Aslam Raisani almost completed his term, but chronic mismanagement ultimately cost him and his cabinet dearly

following the devastating Quetta bombings targeting Shia Hazaras in early 2013.

Dr Baloch has certainly been an improvement on his predecessor, reaching out to disaffected Baloch and separatist leaders in a bid to solve the province's festering security problems.

But the outgoing chief minister was unable to achieve any public breakthrough and now the baton has been passed on to another tribal leader, Mr Zehri.

Clearly, the incoming chief minister considered the post one he absolutely must have, no matter the price. But does Mr Zehri have a plan?

The most obvious question is whether a senior tribal leader will be able to continue the outreach to non-tribal separatists.

Even with fellow tribal leaders in exile, the politics can be byzantine and personal relations complex, leaving it uncertain if the replacement of the dynamic Dr Baloch will be a net loss or a net gain.

The new chief minister will also have to prove that he can deliver on Balochistan's chronic governance deficit. It remains to be seen if Mr Zehri is up to the task.

Ultimately, however, the success or failure of Balochistan's new chief minister will depend on the role the military establishment plays. Having made known its preference for Dr Baloch staying on, it is a political triumph of a kind, for Mr



December 2015

Zehri at least, for the army leadership to have accepted the change.

Yet, it has long been obvious that who has the chief minister's seat and who calls the shots in the province are not necessarily the same thing. Balochistan deserves better. The opportunities that Abdul Malik Baloch helped create need to be sustained and seen through to completion.

*Published in Dawn, December 12th, 2015*

## Water policy

THE most recent round of discussions on a national water policy has produced a mix of views old and new.

The old part came from the provincial government representatives, such as the one from Punjab that believed there is no need to build a consensus around the construction of mega dams, particularly Kalabagh, and the government should move ahead regardless of what the other provinces think.

This sort of mindset would be best avoided when finalising the water policy before submission to the prime minister. The new part came from the Ministry of Water and Power, which wants to make water pricing a central pillar of the new policy.

The argument here is that water is a scarce resource, and its utilisation will move towards efficiency only when its

consumers see the true cost of their water requirements being met.

*Take a look: [Govt planning to introduce National Water Policy](#)*

The suggestion is aimed only at irrigation water, as the idea is that drinking water is a fundamental right and cannot be left to market principles.

This is truly new thinking, going where previous water policies have failed to tread, and it ought to be encouraged and should become a central pillar of the policy before it is submitted to the prime minister.

Ever since the first national water policy of 2006, the emphasis in the water sector has been on mega construction projects, with some words thrown in about area water.

But the magnitude of financial requirements of future water-sector investments presents us with a stark choice: who should pay for these investments, which can run into tens of billions of dollars?

Part of the answer is donor agencies since Pakistan does not have the resources. But the remainder must be mobilised domestically, and here the choice is between asking taxpayers or users of the water resources to foot the bill.

The new policy, it seems, is trying to give users a greater role in carrying the burden of water-sector investments, in return for a downward devolution of distribution-related entitlements.



This vision deserves to be written into policy and implemented. The water sector is notorious for its resistance to reform, far behind other sectors like power and telecoms, due to the powerful vested interest of large landlords.

It is high time that pricing reform came to the water sector, and the water and power ministry has done the right thing to make it a central plank of the new policy.

*Published in Dawn, December 12th, 2015*

## Mass transit muddle

THE fact that the megacity of Karachi does not have a viable public transport system is nothing short of criminal.

It reflects the disinterest of both the federal and provincial governments — as well as the political forces that claim to speak for Karachi — in the affairs of the common man and his needs in the metropolis.

Over the past 15 years or so, a number of projects have been floated for the Sindh capital; nearly all have failed due to bad planning or lack of political will.

The Karachi Mass Transit Master Plan 2030 is the latest effort, but it appears the plan is also being handled in a questionable manner by the administration.

As reported recently, the Orange and Green Line Bus Rapid Transit System projects will now take off by the middle of this month, whereas they were supposed to have been launched in November. Apparently, none of the bids received were suitable.

As per the plan, the initial phase of the new public transport system was supposed to be operational within a year, but if the state's track record is anything to go by, this deadline seems difficult to meet.

Though there has been criticism of the new metro bus and train projects inaugurated in Rawalpindi-Islamabad and Lahore — and much of it has been justified — at least the respective administrations of these cities have shown some initiative.

Karachi, for decades, has either been ignored where the provision of efficient public transport is concerned, or half-baked ideas have been considered.

This has left millions of commuters in the metropolis at the mercy of a mediaeval transport system. Independent voices have raised many issues and offered numerous suggestions to address the transport problem in Karachi.

But most of this advice has fallen on deaf ears. It is hoped that with an elected city administration soon to be in place, Karachi's transport problems — amongst its many other outstanding civic issues — will finally be dealt with in a planned, practical and commuter-friendly manner.

*Published in Dawn, December 12th, 2015*

## State Bank's annual report

THE latest annual report of the State Bank makes for informative reading, after getting off to a slow start. The accompanying press release, and the overview of the economy both hew a line close to what the government would want to hear, but the detailed chapters that follow present a sophisticated analysis of the economy and its mixed track record in the previous year. The year 2015 is important for a variety of reasons. This is the year inflation hit its lowest point in over a decade, when the windfall from falling oil prices came, reserves hit record highs and growth showed a modest revival after years of sluggishness. The report comes at a good time, when a serious analysis of the economic situation is needed, and members of parliament, for whose benefit it has been drawn up, should read its contents carefully.

On the external side, the report acknowledges the rise in the reserves, but warns that this is insufficient for the purposes of reviving growth. “[E]conomic activity in Pakistan depends heavily on imports, therefore, any measure to boost growth would increase our FX needs,” says the State Bank. Thus far, remittances from workers have largely shouldered the burden of incremental foreign exchange requirements, but the State Bank sees potential dangers ahead as oil prices remain low, exports continue to decline, and FDI refuses to pick up. Foreign borrowing is, therefore, “the only possible factor that may support higher growth in Pakistan”, but the repayment burden will serve as a constraint. The story behind the rising reserves is positive only up to a point. Eventually, Pakistan has to find ways of attracting foreign exchange other than

borrowing if a revival in growth is to be brought about, the authors of the report warn.

On the fiscal side too, the report presents a clear picture of the challenges facing the state. Revenues have been hit by falling oil prices and a rigid tax system as well as sluggish manufacturing activity. The budget for fiscal year 2015 envisaged revenues growing by 30pc, whereas actual growth came in around 17.7pc. Development expenditures took the brunt of the cuts required to keep the fiscal balance. Structural factors accounted for the poor revenue performance, notably a growing informal economy, low cost of tax evasion, and “administrative issues in tax collecting authority”. For both the external side and the fiscal, the State Bank argues for a national effort to overcome the deep-rooted structural rigidities that are eroding the state’s revenue base, as well as its competitiveness abroad. “These issues cannot be addressed by makeshift measures to increase revenues,” warns the report. In fact, one could add that the same would hold true for the external side. The advice contained in the report needs to be given careful consideration by those in the corridors of power.

*Published in Dawn, December 13th, 2015*

## Cricket diplomacy

FRENZIED in his politics at home, Imran Khan is a quiet figure in international politics and diplomacy. His meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi was a reminder of how infrequent such publicised meetings are for the PTI chief. Indeed, where the PTI chief does wade into foreign affairs, it is mostly to excoriate Western powers for allegedly stoking extremism inside Pakistan. But when he chooses to make a positive contribution, Mr Khan can be fairly effective. In New Delhi for a speaking event with India's most famous all-rounder Kapil Dev, Mr Khan's meeting with the Indian prime minister was highly symbolic. Coming as it did days after the Indian and Pakistani governments announced the resumption of wide-ranging negotiations, dubbed in this new phase as the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue, the Delhi meeting has sent a positive signal of bipartisan support for talks with India. Given the resistance to normalisation of ties with India in certain, and some powerful, quarters inside Pakistan, the unanimity of the major political parties when it comes to seeking better relations with India is both welcome and necessary.

There was symbolism too for India. The Indian prime minister meeting an iconic Pakistani cricketer at a time when some hardline Indian government allies are trying to thwart cricketing ties between the two countries could be interpreted as a rejection of these allies' stance. But when later asked whether Mr Modi had indicated if cricketing ties would be resumed, Mr Khan simply said that the prime minister had given an enigmatic smile in response. Surely, if the two countries can agree to a Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue,

they can agree to some cricket diplomacy. The feel-good factor and intense interest when the two nations face each other on the cricket field, even if in a third country, is undeniable. The cricketing goodwill thus generated could complement the political process too. The scheduled bilateral series is only days away and the schedule for the T20 World Cup next March has kept Pakistan away from Mumbai, where the Shiv Sena is violently opposed to any Pakistani sportsperson playing or artist performing. If Shiv Sena and like-minded extremists in India are allowed to dictate ties, cricketing or otherwise, between the two countries, it will be a darker future for both nations. The Pakistani government, Mr Khan and all right-thinking Pakistanis are in favour of better ties with India. What better way for India to reciprocate that enthusiasm than with some hard Pak-India cricket?

*Published in Dawn, December 13th, 2015*

## Sindh CM on corruption

A LOT depends on where one chooses to begin the discussion on corruption. If we begin with the role of the Rangers in Karachi, almost inevitably, the argument will favour the civilian set-up empowered by the rules, as it is pointed out that an organisation allowed to work outside its original domain under extraordinary circumstances is vulnerable to overreach. But the debate can also be seen from another, equally important angle. When Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah spoke at a seminar organised by the Anti Corruption Establishment in Karachi on Friday, eyebrows were raised and ears strained uneasily to receive his now plausible, now over-the-top remarks. Quite seriously for the chief minister, many of the objections he raised sounded antiquated and completely out of sync with the realities of our time. He appeared still stuck in the 1980s or the 1990s when the debate about corruption was a favourite of the democrats. They claimed that corruption was not an issue at all but that coup-makers used it as an excuse to justify their actions against elected governments. Over time, corruption has been recognised as an issue the world over, with financial corruption attracting condemnation and penalties from those in whose name the whole political system has been created: the people.

Chief Minister Shah has been the target of the most vicious and unkindest of attacks by many people, as reflected in the media. As he complained about the media at the seminar, he gave his own example and said he was living in the same house his ancestors had built and had cultivated the same land that he had inherited. The onus on him, however, was to answer the long-worrying question of whether his government was doing

enough to address a problem that has been identified as the biggest in the land by many people, if not everyone. It was an occasion that could have been used to dispel the impression that some parties and individuals prefer living in the past.

*Published in Dawn, December 13th, 2015*

## Cybercrime bill

THE government needs reminding that the only thing worse than the lack of a legislative framework covering an area of operations is a set of bad laws.

This seems to be the case regarding the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Bill 2015, finalised by the Senate's Standing Committee on Information Technology and Telecommunications, a report on which was laid before parliament on Friday.

With the digital footprint expanding fast in Pakistan and the rapidly increasing use of information technology and the Internet by those who have access, certainly there is a need to develop laws to curb these tools being used in problematic fashions.

*Take a look: [New cybercrime bill tough on individuals' rights, soft on crime](#)*

These include a range of activities, from support provided by technology and the online world to heinous crimes such as militancy and terrorism, to practices more pedestrian but almost equally devastating on the level of the individual such as cyber-stalking, fraud and data theft. But is the PECB in its current iteration the best way forward?

Amongst industry representatives and stakeholders, there seems to be near unanimous consensus that it is not. Legislators need to pay heed.

The problems with this bill in its current form appear to be numerous, some of which were articulated by PPP MNA Shazia Marri who submitted a dissenting note when the report was tabled in parliament.

Raising objections to certain definitions and asking for amendments, she added that some of the penalties for minor infringements are too harsh, such as imprisonment for up to two years for cyberstalking.

She also argued against Section 34 on the power to manage information systems, which she said gives the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority the power to block any website it deems is carrying 'objectionable' or 'offensive' content.

This is a serious concern, and readers will be all too aware of how in the past such loose definitions have been used to stifle dissent against the government of the day and to curb the freedom of expression. IT industry experts have also alleged that the draft bill is distorted in focus with a security-related mindset underpinning it.

Further, concern has been expressed that the proposed law fails to provide adequate security to Internet users while at the same time creating heavy penalties for crimes that can be committed unintentionally, such as sending a text message without the receiver's consent or criticising the actions of the government on the social media.

In short, there is enough to raise very serious doubts about the efficacy of this bill in its current form.

More attention needs to be paid to the critiques against it, with a view to carrying out further modification on the recommendations of experts.

This is a task for the legislators who must resist any attempt to rush it through into law. Right now, Pakistan is getting ready to formulate cybercrime laws; there is a dire need to get them right.

*Published in Dawn, December 14th, 2015*

## Riyadh meeting

WHERE bringing the bloody Syrian civil war to a close is concerned, there have been a number of false starts. However, the news coming from Riyadh indicates that something of a breakthrough may have been achieved.

At the conclusion of a meeting of Syrian political and opposition factions in the Saudi capital on Thursday, it was announced that the opposition was willing to negotiate with the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Considering the opposition's refusal in the past to talk to the Syrian strongman, it appears as if the opponents of the Baathist regime have relaxed their position, if only slightly. Also, putting to rest ambitions of regime change — for the moment perhaps — an opposition figure said overthrowing the government in Damascus by force “is not on the table”.

Though Mr Assad has said he is willing to negotiate, he has refused to talk to “terrorists” — a blanket term for all armed opposition groups. While both sides have said they are ready to come to the table, they are also clinging to certain maximalist positions: the rebels say Mr Assad must leave before any political transition, while the Syrian president appears to be selective in who he talks to.

Considering the immense gulf between the two sides such positions are to be expected at this stage, though the rhetoric may give way to compromise in the days ahead.

The Syrian government and opposition should work towards confidence-building measures in the run-up to scheduled peace talks in January.

The most effective CBM could be an immediate ceasefire, with all sides putting down their guns. Additionally, the opposition must clearly state that it will not tolerate any extremist militant group within its ranks, while it should sever links with factions not willing to forego the use of terrorist tactics.

Mr Assad, on the other hand, must realise he cannot rule Syria forever. The transition should be peaceful and democratic, and most importantly, it should be the Syrian people who choose their new government, free from the pressure of all external actors. The civil war has taken a heavy toll on the civilian population, while also creating the space for the rise of the militant Islamic State group.

For the sake of the Syrian people and in order for all those moderate forces inside the country to put up a common front against IS, the government and opposition must work overtime to make the peace process succeed.

*Published in Dawn, December 14th, 2015*



## Telecom agreement

THE permission just given by the government to communication providers — telecommunication and Internet — to sign agreements with neighbouring countries is a very positive step and should be expanded further.

At the outset, the impact of the permission will be limited as private operators begin developing relationships across the borders, and growth will be constrained by the limited number of people travelling to neighbouring countries, except China.

For example, the permission could extend to providing roaming services to Pakistani cellular users in India or Iran, but the small number of people who use this facility, particularly for travel to neighbouring countries, can only mean little growth.

*Also read: [Govt allows cross-border communication links](#)*

However, the agreement is an important measure to build further contacts across borders. In the days to come, it would be an excellent step to see the permission extended to allow Indian and Pakistani nationals to transit through each other's airports without a visa.

Expanding ties such as these build durable grounds for greater economic cooperation, which ought to be a shared goal towards which both countries can once again aspire given the thaw in the relations between them ever since that fleeting interaction between the prime ministers of both countries in Paris recently.

Better telecommunication links between Pakistani and Indian providers can also hopefully grow towards greater sharing of each other's networks for faster speed.

Pakistan's relative isolation from its own neighbours is a crucial constraint to its growth, and overcoming this is a long-haul process that will be marked by steps of this sort. It will take far more than road links to profitably benefit from an expansion in ties.

Allowing new business models to flourish as the nature of cooperation and connectivity deepens among all neighbouring countries will be crucial to leveraging the opportunities opened up by initiatives such as CPEC, and whatever other regional arrangements that develop between Pakistan and its neighbours east and west.

Let's hope that this modest initiative is part of a longer journey towards greater regional links.

*Published in Dawn, December 14th, 2015*



## Parachinar bombing

THOUGH Pakistan has its own complex internal sectarian dynamics, the influence of communal conflicts in the Middle East has always been strong.

On Sunday, both these streams of sectarian violence — the internal and the external — came together in Parachinar with devastating consequences. At least 25 people were killed when a bomb exploded in a Parachinar market.

While Kurram Agency has witnessed a tribal-cum-sectarian conflict for many years with varying degrees of intensity, a new, disturbing factor has emerged from Sunday's outrage.

*Take a look: [Sectarian terror revisits Parachinar](#)*

The Lashkar-i-Jhangvi Al Alami and Ansarul Mujahideen militant groups claimed responsibility for the atrocity, apparently to 'punish' Shias for "supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Iranian government".

The claim was accompanied by a dire warning that unless Shias failed to stop "their children" from allegedly participating in Syria's civil war, more such attacks would follow.

The number of sectarian attacks in Pakistan has come down considerably — apart from two major attacks in Muharram in Balochistan and Sindh — thanks largely to the anti-militancy and counterterrorism efforts of the military and civilian law-enforcement apparatus.

However, the Parachinar bombing is the latest confirmation of the fact that the militant menace is far from neutralised.

Despite the violence of the past, Parachinar has also witnessed relative peace in recent times, while security forces have kept a strict vigil on the town, with those entering it being searched.

The fact that despite the security blanket militants managed to attack a public place indicates the need for greater intelligence efforts to trace the hideouts of those carrying out terrorist acts as well as their planning and logistics infrastructure in the tribal belt and beyond and destroy them.

As for the Syria factor, events in the Middle East have always had an impact on sectarian dynamics in Pakistan.

It had long been felt that the Syrian civil war would have a particular influence on this country, especially as it acquired an ugly sectarian colour.

With the Parachinar bombing, the Syrian civil war seems to have come home. A recent media report says that "hundreds of Pakistani" Shia fighters have left for Syria; many of these individuals are reportedly from Parachinar. Shia fighters from Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan are also believed to be involved in the Syrian theatre.

On the other hand, the banned TTP has also reportedly been sending fighters to the Arab country, while the Syrian ambassador to Pakistan has said publicly that around 500 Pakistanis are fighting his government.

Whether it is Shia or Sunni militants, the Pakistani government needs to look into the issue of local individuals heading for Syria to fight for either side in the civil war, and curtail their movement.

Along with complicating the situation in a foreign country, this activity can also lead to communal violence and polarisation in Pakistan. Hence, the state needs to take immediate steps to stem the flow of local fighters to Syria.

*Published in Dawn, December 15th, 2015*

## Debate on Rangers

THE Sindh government is entirely within its rights to seek the provincial assembly's input before making a decision. This principle applies to almost any kind of decision, and granting yet another extension to the policing powers being used by the Rangers in their Karachi operation is no exception.

The interior minister has wagged his finger angrily at the leadership in Sindh, and much commentary on TV has raised the prospect of governor's rule if the extension in the powers of the Rangers is not granted immediately.

These suggestions are entirely out of line. What is also not needed are the interior minister's remarks that he would release a video of Dr Asim Hussain, during which the latter allegedly confesses to all sorts of criminal behaviour.

*Take a look: [Federal govt spends Rs9bn annually on Sindh Rangers, asserts Nisar](#)*

We have seen enough media trials, and it is time for the courts to decide if the Rangers have produced sound reasons for having held the former minister for their full 90 days' mandate on grounds of suspected terror financing.

Instead of chastising the Sindh government, the interior minister should be looking at how the wide-ranging powers of detention are being used by the Rangers, and whether their exercise is yielding up convictions or not.

Policing powers are a serious matter, and whenever any institution is entrusted with them, it is crucial to ensure that they are being used only for the purpose for which they were granted. In the case of the Rangers operation in Karachi, most people agree that the operation has successfully brought down the crime rate and disbanded many of the large criminal syndicates that had menaced the city for so long.

But over the past few months, too many questions have been raised about the use of these powers to make an automatic renewal subject to debate.

The interior minister's suggestion to address the reservations of the PPP and the MQM by sitting down and talking may be a sincere attempt to seek a way forward, but he should realise that the right place to do the talking about these issues is the assembly, not the private offices of the interior ministry.

After all, it is the executive powers of the provincial government that are being entrusted to the Rangers, and the

assembly has a natural right to debate this. The assembly's mandate to discuss and vote on the grant of renewal deserves more respect than is being afforded in the debate surrounding the issue.

*Published in Dawn, December 15th, 2015*

## Tapi gas

AFTER years of hearing only talk about the pipeline, we finally have a concrete step towards making it a reality. The groundbreaking ceremony for the pipeline that is to carry 90 million cubic metres of natural gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India is the first move towards realising an old dream.

The volume of gas to be made available to Pakistan is enough to plug just under a quarter of our total present-day natural gas deficit.

The latter is likely to grow by the time the first gas begins to flow. Even though the ceremony has raised hopes for a partial solution to this country's energy woes, it is still a good idea to keep in mind that the project has substantial question marks hanging over it since the route passes through Afghanistan, where the outlook on the security situation is fluid.

*Also read: [25 years in the making: PM Nawaz attends Tapi groundbreaking ceremony](#)*

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the part of Afghanistan through which the pipeline travels is less affected by security considerations than many other areas of that country.

And the pipeline itself can play a big role in aligning the perspectives of major stakeholders on Afghanistan's internal situation, since it will tie the future energy security of three South Asian countries together, making them partners in each other's stability.

Greater economic cooperation amongst the countries participating in the project is an essential foundation for future peace.

This is also a good time to remember that another important natural gas project is languishing due to the government's disinterest: the Iran-Pakistan pipeline. That venture should also be given serious attention. Nothing in the American sanctions laws prevents Pakistan from constructing the portion of the pipeline that lies within its own borders.

The gas itself can start to flow once the sanctions have been lifted. Geopolitics should not be allowed to dictate priorities to economics. Pakistan has a lot to gain from closer ties with its neighbours, east and west, and nothing should be allowed to prevent these ties from materialising.

*Published in Dawn, December 15th, 2015*

## APS: One year after

One year. Even for a country that has witnessed a tableau of horrors over the past several years, Dec 16, 2014 set a new, terrible milestone.

On that day, we learnt that what had gone before could yet be surpassed, that even our children could be deliberately singled out for brutality of the most unspeakable kind. On that day, 144 innocents — 122 students, and 22 teachers and support staff of the Army Public School, Peshawar — were massacred in a terrorist attack that plunged the country into mourning and sent shockwaves around the world.

It was a defining moment in Pakistan's war against terrorism. By laying bare our helplessness in the face of such wholesale, pitiless slaughter, that moment tapped into our deepest fears. It changed us, but not necessarily in ways that can take us closer to the hope of an enduring peace.

Our response, rather than being guided by reason, was born of the desire for revenge. In the immediate aftermath, the government lifted the unofficial moratorium on the death penalty, asserting that only those convicted of terrorism would be executed.

But in the 12 months since, only about 20pc of more than 300 death-row inmates who have been hanged had been so convicted. Vengeance is incapable of inducing justice because it casts its net wide, scooping up not only the guilty — if it does that at all — but also those who are the most disadvantaged.

That is especially so in the case of Pakistan's deeply flawed criminal justice system where the resources of the accused often determine guilt or innocence, death or freedom. Moreover, military courts, hastily acquiesced to by a government that placed expediency — and pressure from an ascendant security establishment — over its duty to protect fundamental rights, have ushered in a 'justice' mechanism unprecedented in its opaqueness.

Thus, over the course of the past year, this country has not only gone against the tide of global opinion that is increasingly turning away from the death penalty, but has also violated international covenants on civil rights.

Certainly, some sorely needed measures were also taken. The government announced a comprehensive National Action Plan for tackling religious extremism in society.

There has been a crackdown against hate speech; some suspect madressahs have been closed down; the leadership of sectarian organisations has been largely neutralised.

At the same time, much remains to be done. This country's ill-conceived journey on the road to extremism has been long, complex and multi-layered. Finding our way back to a kinder, more tolerant place will be far from easy.

To do so requires society to abandon a long-held triumphalist narrative that makes a virtue of rigid dogma and faith-based persecution. But it is a battle we must take on — for our own sake, and that of the children who paid the ultimate price on Dec 16, 2014. It would, perhaps, be the most fitting tribute to their all-too-brief time on this earth.

## Tense ties with Dhaka

IT is certainly a complicated date in the history of the subcontinent. Pakistan and Bangladesh, having achieved independence as a single entity, were broken apart on Dec 16, 1971. Known in present-day Pakistan as the Fall of Dhaka, it is celebrated in Bangladesh as the culmination of the War of Liberation.

Pakistan and Bangladesh need never have been torn apart, but historic, undeniable mistakes by West Pakistani leaders, the eagerness of India to help dismantle the Pakistani project, and — it must not be denied — the struggle of East Pakistan's leaders contributed to the creation of a new nation-state.

More than four decades on, the wounds caused by those wrenching events ought to have healed, but they are in fact being reopened by the Bangladeshi government.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, daughter of Mujibur Rehman and leader of the Awami League, appears to have decided that her domestic battles with the Bangladesh National Party and sundry Islamist opposition parties, headlined by the Jamaat-i-Islami, is best fought by dragging Pakistan into the controversy.

Vilifying Pakistan, forcing through dubious trials in the International Crimes Tribunal — a national court, executing Bangladeshi political leaders who supported unity in 1971, and creating new and wholly unnecessary hurdles in the issuance of visas for Pakistanis, Ms Wajed and her supporters have run the gamut from dangerous cynicism to state-sanctioned violence.

This needs to stop. Pakistan, for all the mistakes its leaders made between 1947 and 1971, is supportive of Bangladesh, respectful of its independence and seeks closer, mutually beneficial ties. But the Bangladeshi government only appears willing to see Pakistan through the prism of domestic politics.

With the Khaleda Zia-led BNP and its Islamist allies implacably opposed to an AL government, Ms Wajed and her government have opted to retaliate rather than seek reconciliation.

That, in the AL's reckoning, involves reiterating the party's liberation credentials — which in turn means escalating Pakistan-bashing. It is dangerous stuff. Unhappily, the response by Pakistan has been less than edifying.

Be it elements within the political government or the Islamist parties or sections of the military establishment, the reaction to Bangladeshi provocations has been to launch into incendiary rhetoric here. That is, to put it mildly, historically incongruous.

For a country that, among other shameful measures, long suppressed the only official report on the events leading up to December 1971, it is perhaps best to always keep a hand outstretched to Bangladesh — no matter the immediate response from the other side.

*Published in Dawn, December 16th, 2015*

## Textile woes again

THE spinning sector is once again warning that it is on the verge of a shutdown. Its representative, the All Pakistan Textile Mills Association, says that the spinning sector is prepared to shut down its factories given the continuous increases in production costs, and the impending gas-load management plan that is set to shut off gas to industry in Punjab in order to divert supplies to domestic consumers.

The warning comes at a time when Pakistan's exports are already on a downward path, with no uptick in sight. The problem is that nobody can figure out how to resolve it.

Gas supplies are dwindling, and SNGPL supplies are inadequate to meet the requirement of domestic consumers in the freezing winter months.

Resultantly, arranging additional supplies of gas for industry is not feasible. The other items on the menu of complaints laid out by the textile industry — tax issues, overvalued currency, import of cheap Indian yarn — are too small to make a dent. Other emerging market economies, which are Pakistan's competitors in the international arena, are using a mix of currency devaluation and tax rebates to breathe some life into their similarly moribund exports.

But the larger problem is that Pakistan's exports are stuck in a narrow band of cotton products, whereas preferences in market destinations are shifting quickly, further constraining room for growth in exports.

Breathing life into industry using inflationary measures, or through diverting vital gas supplies from other equally deserving categories of consumers, or bargaining with the tax base, can be a temporary measure at best. Efforts by government and industry representatives to sit down and evolve a path of consensus were tried a few months ago, without yielding any major breakthrough other than a regulatory duty on cotton imports.

The matter is becoming serious, and the government needs to think a little outside the box to try and develop a response to a problem that is growing bigger with each passing year.

*Published in Dawn, December 16th, 2015*

## 'Anti-terror' alliance

WHILE Foreign Office officials claimed they were 'surprised' by Pakistan's inclusion in the 34-nation alliance announced by Saudi Arabia it now appears that Riyadh had received assurances of Pakistan's participation — though it is not clear at what level.

Pakistan has, however, sounded a cautious note regarding "the extent of its participation". Indeed, it is best to proceed carefully, given the number of member-states and the geographical sweep of the area, in addition to the fact that the alliance seeks to bring together countries as disparate in foreign policy orientation as Nigeria, Turkey and Malaysia.



Not included in the alliance that has both military and 'ideological' content as announced by Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir are some of the Middle East's key states, including Iran, Iraq and Syria, the last two ravaged by the militant Islamic State group, which — along with the ill-defined terrorism — is supposedly the pact's target. What is missing is a common threat perception.

The US-led military alliances formed after the Second World War had members which saw a common threat in the Soviet Union and the communist movement. In this case, the 34 member-states do not share a common perception of events in the Levant, their attitudes towards IS varying from non-active opposition to indifference — with many governments fearful of actively taking on IS.

For Pakistan, the alliance poses many questions. Since Riyadh, according to the Saudi defence minister, will be the 'joint operations centre', it is not clear whether alliance members would be required to take part in military action on Syrian or Iraqi soil.

Because President Bashar al-Assad enjoys unqualified Iranian support, besides that of Hezbollah, such an intervention will appear to have sectarian overtones which countries like Pakistan and Lebanon with large Shia minorities can ill afford.

Similarly, while air strikes by America and some European countries are targeting IS, Russia has recently stepped up its support of the Baathist regime by also attacking other groups.

Turkey has shown no interest in degrading IS, even when Abubakr al-Baghdadi's hordes had reached its border by taking

Kobane; Ankara is more concerned about the Kurdish militia and is involved in crisis management after Turkish forces shot down a Russian warplane.

With international powers and non-state actors working at cross purposes in the Syrian cauldron, Pakistan, like many of the other countries, would find it extremely difficult to be part of an alliance which has not stated categorically that the target is only IS.

This is not to deny the need for all regional countries, and the Muslim world in general, to evolve a common strategy to fight the evil that is terrorism, but the way to achieve this is a gradual alignment of anti-terror policies free from any thinking that smacks of sectarianism.

Pakistan must seek more details, especially about the kind of military role it will be required to play as a member of the alliance.

*Published in Dawn, December 17th, 2015*



## SCO promise

THE prime minister chose the occasion of the 14th meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation heads of government in Henan, China, to reiterate his government's commitment to greater regional ties with its neighbourhood to the north.

The remarks focused on identifying common values and regional cooperation to reap economic benefits, as well as to strengthen each country's commitment to the fight against the forces of disorder and conflict that are a "threat to state sovereignty and territorial integrity" everywhere.

The remarks are welcome, as well as the larger vision that they derive from. Greater cooperation among neighbouring states on infrastructure and energy, as well as connectivity and broader developmental goals, can go a long way to strengthen their own capacities to withstand challenges to their sovereignty and deliver on promises to their citizenry.

Pakistan's support for the 'one belt, one road' initiative being advanced by China is well known, and its potential to boost the framework for growth in the country is equally well understood.

But it will take more than resolve to realise the vision and take it beyond just a statement of intent. First order of business ought to be ensuring a consensus within Pakistan, and not repeating the mistakes of the past, when foreign assistance in critical infrastructure projects ran aground on the myriad dissensions that are the hallmark of our democracy.

This is a fragile task, and it will take skilful politics to navigate. Second order of business must be to ensure that Pakistan's own interests have been properly safeguarded when negotiating the terms of the country's integration into a regional matrix.

We have a history of making such decisions in an emotional manner, and that mistake ought to be avoided. Third, and equally importantly, polite suggestions to consider broadening the participation in this regional matrix to neighbours east and west ought to be entertained with seriousness, and again without emotion.

Regional connectivity and cooperation yields its benefits with growing generosity with a larger number of partners, and Pakistan's location holds far greater promise than can be envisioned through a geopolitical lens.

Realising the vision contained in the prime minister's remarks is a tougher challenge than many realise.

Yet it is quite possibly the single greatest guarantor of our future growth and prosperity. It is important to not let it devolve to the lowest common denominator, where Pakistan becomes little more than a road for other people's commerce.

*Published in Dawn, December 17th, 2015*

## Schools at risk

WHERE Pakistan is in general characterised by either the shortage of meaningful initiatives or disinterestedness in following through on them, the problems often seem to multiply exponentially.

Consider the issue of security for schools, which have been on the list of institutions under the militant-terrorist threat ever since the Army Public School massacre last year brought the unthinkable into the realm of the real.

In March, a partnership between the police and a mobile phone service provider made possible the initiation of an Emergency Alert System for educational institutions.

The idea was to provide school administrators/employees with registered handsets through which, at the click of a button, any perceived risk could be communicated immediately to police officers trained and deputed to take matters from there.

The project was launched in Punjab and Karachi. In the former, the initiative has been expanded gradually to cover every district. In Karachi, though, while the initial push was made — in the first six months the police registered over 4,000 schools and deputed 200 officers to receive panic alerts — the situation now is that the system has been lying idle for three months. As reported on Wednesday, the continued non-payment of dues has led to SIMs being blocked.

With the country observing this week the death anniversary of APS students and staff, the timing of this disclosure could not

be more heartbreakingly poignant. What more could be needed to make the authorities in Karachi prioritise security for educational institutions and the safety of our children?

It is this sort of disinterestedness that communicates the idea to the people that state authority is not just incapable, it is callous to boot. Here, the issue is grave and the danger frighteningly real; just a day before the Dec 16 anniversary, the security establishment had put out a terror threat warning for the city's educational institutions.

It is downright shocking that a system that has the potential to save lives has been so carelessly flung by the wayside.

*Published in Dawn, December 17th, 2015*

## Resolution on Rangers' powers

AFTER some tense haggling, the Sindh Assembly has finally authorised the provincial government to extend police powers to the Rangers in Karachi, but with some significant changes. It is important to bear in mind that the assembly has acted entirely within its mandate, and the fact that many people, including the federal interior minister, need to be reminded of this is a sad reflection on the status we accord to our democratic institutions.

The campaign in the run-up to the assembly's resolution bore the hallmarks of a political campaign, with protesters rallying on the city's streets, in some cases holding up placards with large pictures of the army chief.

The armed forces of the country are not a political force, and should not behave, nor be treated, as such. There were legitimate questions about the extension in the grant of special powers, stemming from the perception that these powers are being misused to raid government offices and detain people on suspicion for extended periods of time without any evidence being produced following the end of the detention period.

*Take a look: [Sindh Assembly adopts resolution to curtail Rangers' powers](#)*

Since this perception of the misuse of powers has developed since the last extension was granted, the Sindh government had every right to refer the matter to the assembly before making a decision this time round.

But for its part, the Sindh Assembly has also left many people puzzled with its resolution, which was effectively bulldozed through. What is the point of referring a matter to the assembly if discussion there is not going to be entertained? Moreover, the way the powers have been redefined in the resolution is puzzling.

The resolution says the Rangers will be allowed to use their powers only for cases of targeted and sectarian killings, extortion and kidnapping, and that these will not be applicable to anyone "who is not directly involved". Does this mean a target killer can be detained by the Rangers, but those who

ordered the killing cannot? And what is the justification for restricting cases of terrorism to those who are inspired by sectarian motives only?

By exercising its powers in this manner, the assembly has in turn fuelled the perception that it is primarily interested in restricting the Rangers' powers to ensure they cannot be used against the militant wings of political parties in the city.

The whole matter of defining the paramilitary's powers and using them judiciously is a slippery slope in the city of Karachi, where terror, politics and racketeering mix in a deadly cocktail that can be hard to tackle surgically.

Ultimately, both parties in this matter will need to make a demonstrable commitment that they are using their respective powers — whether coercive or legislative — only for the pursuit of the city's peace and for no other motive. Until that happens, the battle of perceptions is bound to continue.

*Published in Dawn, December 18th, 2015*

## Towards Thar coal

FOR more than two decades now, the massive deposits of coal in the Thar desert have been like a shimmering mirage in our imagination.

Since their discovery in the 1980s, and one failed attempt to get an investor to help tap them for power generation in the mid-1990s, followed by their detailed mapping by the US Geological Survey, they have always been cited by energy-sector professionals as the country's best hope for breaking its growing dependence on imported furnace oil for power generation.

*Also read: [CPEC project: China approves \\$1.2bn for coal mining, power plant in Thar](#)*

But attempts to actually tap these reserves floundered on the same questions every time: there wasn't enough fresh water in the area, the government did not have the resources to lay the transmission line for power evacuation, the financing requirements were too large for domestic markets and foreign financiers were not willing to invest in dirty technology in a risky environment like Pakistan, and so on. Company after company tried, and walked away from the venture — Shenhua in the early 2000s, AES a few years later.

Now a credible effort is finally afoot as the long-awaited approval from Chinese state-owned banks has been obtained and in a few days, documents to conclude the loan agreement and insurance will be signed in Beijing.

The government is making credible advancement towards laying the power transmission line, and arrangements for fresh water are also in place. What looked like a mirage yesterday is looking more like an oasis today. But there are still good reasons to keep a sober lid on expectations.

It will be many years before the first power will be generated from the plant, if all other obstacles are successfully overcome. The cost of the project has risen as it was negotiated, with water-pumping charges, Sinosure fees, higher Returns on Equity than normal, and many other charges that have been added to the tariff.

Nevertheless, the end result is that the tariff at which power will be sold now stands at 9.6 cents per unit, much higher than what was imagined years ago, but lower than what we are paying for furnace oil-based power today. The benefits have been reduced with time, with further whittling down possible in the years to come.

It is a great step for the country that Thar coal is getting closer to being tapped, but whether it will live up to the promise expected of it over the decades remains an open question.

*Published in Dawn, December 18th, 2015*

## Indian FM's resolve

IT doesn't appear to be the same Sushma Swaraj who had issued an ultimatum to Sartaj Aziz in August to scuttle the national security advisers' talks.

On Wednesday in the lower house of parliament, the Indian foreign minister defended her government's decision to have a comprehensive dialogue with Pakistan because "war is not an option".

The "shadow of terrorism", she said, could only be combated by dialogue with Pakistan and one meeting wasn't enough. Ms Swaraj dwelt on the background to her meeting with Pakistan officials at Islamabad and referred to the two prime ministers' meeting in Ufa and Paris and the NSA-level talks in Bangkok.

Also read: [War with Pakistan not an option: Indian FM](#)

The two prime ministers had developed the "understanding" that the way forward was talks; this was followed by the Bangkok meeting where the national security advisers of both countries had "candid and constructive discussions".

She referred several times to "all problems" but implied that those concerned only terrorism. Ms Swaraj, of course, couldn't afford to utter the 'K' word while facing a hostile opposition, but she stoutly defended the resumption of talks. Two days earlier, too, she had spoken of her visit to Pakistan before an opposition which seemed to delight in flippancy.

Given New Delhi's hard line since Narendra Modi's assumption of power last year, Ms Swaraj's assertion that she believed in the continuation of the dialogue deserves to be welcomed, with the hope that India will not look for an excuse to wriggle out of the commitment.

Given the repercussions of the Mumbai carnage, there is a need for the two countries to activate the "anti-terrorism institutional mechanism" set up by former president Pervez Musharraf and former Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh at Havana on Sept 16, 2006.

The mechanism never got going and needs to be pulled out of dusty files and resurrected. Another act of terror could sabotage the nascent dialogue, but, as Ms Swaraj said, "we would like to ensure we are not provoked by saboteurs" to stop the peace process.

*Published in Dawn, December 18th, 2015*

## Shedding light on urbanisation

A REPORT released by the World Bank uses an innovative new tool to map South Asian cities and their growth along economic and demographic lines.

Pakistan's urbanisation is featured in the report, and since the country is dealing with large urban problems such as law and order in Karachi and mass transit in Punjab's cities, the report deserves a close read.

The new tool they use is night lights data, which shows the extent of urban sprawl by examining the spread of city lights as seen from weather satellites that have been collecting this imagery since the early 1990s.

*Know more: [WB report highlights 'messy, hidden' urbanisation](#)*

Since the images are taken every night, then averaged out for the year to show the spread of luminosity associated with growing urban areas, the methodology actually takes into account power outages.

The World Bank recently embraced the technique and produced the new report looking at urbanisation in South Asia, and the results are quite impressive.

Urbanisation in our region has progressed with staggering speed. The entire stretch of land between Delhi and Lahore, for

instance, now appears as a single agglomeration when viewed from satellite night lights data, a virtually unbroken band of urban space.

This growing urbanisation holds much promise for the region, mainly in the "unintended benefits that firms and workers experience from one another as they cluster together", say the authors of the report. But this potentially transformative opportunity presented by growing urbanisation is undermined by the poor quality of urban management as cities spill beyond their boundaries.

More than 130 million people in South Asia live in urban slums, the report reminds us, where life is hazardous and the quality of urban services like water, sewerage and waste, land titles, law and order and electricity are all dismal.

The failure to properly extend urban services to urban slum dwellers in some measure grows out of the inability of the state to even see these populations, as one important characteristic of South Asian urbanisation, according to the authors, is that it is "hidden and messy".

It is hidden because many of the regions that are urban in all but name continue to be classified as rural, and messy because they have been left to their own devices as they grow without the guiding hand of city or state authorities.

Night lights data enables us to see this in Karachi and Lahore, as well as track the growth of these large urban informal settlements over the years.



Tapping the potential of our growing cities is a crucial growth opportunity, but to do so, we must first learn to see urbanisation as it has developed over the years, and then invest in the institutions required to nurture and build on urban spaces. Pakistan's policymakers — federal and provincial — need to listen keenly to the message of this report.

*Published in Dawn, December 19th, 2015*

## Education crisis

MANY of Balochistan's social indicators are not encouraging, and the situation in the education sector appears to be particularly troubling.

Speaking in Quetta recently, the adviser to the Balochistan chief minister made some frank and worrying admissions about the state of education in the province.

Sardar Raza Barrech said that 1.6 million children were out of school in the province; two-thirds of these unfortunate youngsters were girls.

*Also read :[1.6m children out of school in Balochistan, says adviser](#)*

The official also observed that there was a shortage of schools, while the ones that existed lacked facilities. Such figures are routinely quoted by education activists and NGOs. While the

latest version of the Annual Status of Education Report shows a slight improvement in enrolment figures as well as learning outcomes in Balochistan's rural districts as compared to last year, there is still much ground to cover in the province.

It is welcome that a government functionary can realise and admit to the scale of the problem. Yet simply stating the problem will not be enough; thorough action is needed to remedy the situation.

While such a vast number of children out of school is problematic, it is just as unfortunate that school-going children are apparently not learning very much.

For example, discussing learning levels, the 2015 Aser survey says that 60pc of class five students could not read class two-level sentences in English.

On the other hand, 55pc of the surveyed class five children could not read a class two-level Urdu story. This small window into the state of education in Balochistan shows that matters still need massive improvement. While public education in Pakistan overall is mostly below par, in Balochistan (as well as in Sindh) the situation is particularly bad.

Teacher absenteeism is a problem, as is the menace of 'ghost' schools. So whether it is out-of-school children or poor learning outcomes, unless there is a complete overhaul of the education system in Balochistan the outlook will remain bleak.

A generation of illiterate or poorly educated children will have adverse socioeconomic and sociopolitical consequences for the province, which already lags behind in most fields.



December 2015

Both the provincial administration and the centre must realise that while Balochistan's law and order and political problems are indeed major and require full attention, the state of education is no less alarming and requires equal focus.

The state has promised to fight illiteracy in response to the Army Public School tragedy. Balochistan must not be left behind in this endeavour.

*Published in Dawn, December 19th, 2015*

## Glory lost

WITH the passing on Thursday of veteran satirist and actor Kamal Ahmed Rizvi, yet another link has been lost to what many consider the glory days of Pakistani drama.

Having migrated to the newly formed Pakistan and enduring a life of privation and struggle, he was kept afloat only on the back of his tenaciousness and a talent that was as acerbic as it was impossible to deny.

He ceased to work in his sunset years, and was not part of Pakistan's liberalised media landscape, where channels and productions in unprecedented numbers sleet past a bemused audience. What he, and others of his generation of drama, will be remembered for is the work done in the '60s, '70s and the '80s on the then single, state-owned PTV channel: work of biting wit, satire and social relevance.

*Take a look: [Kamal Ahmed Rizvi — Allan forever](#)*

The fact that these programmes are remembered with such nostalgia today may be because they shone like stars in the emptiness of the space that was Pakistan's media landscape then. Yet there is no countering that between Pakistani drama then and now, there is a palpable, though perhaps nebulous, difference.

That difference is worth pondering today when the drama on the television screens is frequently criticised for having trite or hackneyed storylines, and an over-vigilant eye on ratings and profits.

What Rizvi and others of his generation, some of whom continue to work today, embodied was the steadfast adherence to an ideology. That ideology was the use of drama to not just hold a mirror up to all segments of society, but also, crucially, to work as a vehicle for social change.

This last is what is missing now. Whether it was Alif Noon or Mr Shaitan, Such Gup or Fifty Fifty or a host of others not necessarily comedies, much of the work back then was underpinned by keen observation of the Pakistani condition in all its shades, thus becoming arrestingly relevant as well as enduring. It was an ethic that could do with a revisit now.

*Published in Dawn, December 19th, 2015*

## National crises and missing facts

ALL week, the first anniversary of the Army Public School attack rightly dominated the national discourse. Dec 16, 2014, was a day that not only shocked a nation, but galvanised a country too. The memory of the victims has been honoured by deploying the full resources of the state in the fight against the Taliban. But there remains a great deal about the APS attack itself that is unknown — and unacceptably so. Earlier this week, the Senate echoed with some of those concerns as senators called for the creation of an independent judicial commission to investigate the circumstances that made the APS attack possible. Some senators went further — and logically so — in calling for responsibility to be affixed for previous national disasters, from Kargil to the secession of East Pakistan. The US raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad was mentioned as well. Each one of those events impacted national security in profound ways, but none of them have led to an open and fundamental inquiry that publicly established the facts and pursued accountability.

All too often, when accountability and national security are mentioned together, there is a tendency in some quarters to deflect the serious questions. The questions themselves are alleged to be unpatriotic or anti-institution. Nothing could be further from the truth. Inquiries properly done — transparently, independently and in a non-partisan manner — can shed light on everything from policy failures to operational issues. Inquiries make reforms possible and can help prevent catastrophes from being repeated. Inquiries are the sine qua

non — the essential and indispensable ingredient — of democratic governance. Yet, the institutional aversion to accountability and transparency appears to dominate the true national interest here. A year on from the APS attack, precious few facts are publicly known, even though four individuals have already been executed after convictions in military courts for ties to the attack. The preferred public narrative of the state simply appears to be that the Taliban are savages who are being hunted in counter-insurgency and counterterrorism operations across the length and breadth of the country for their crimes against the state and society.

Yet, it was the sixth month of Operation Zarb-i-Azb when the APS attack occurred and the country's intelligence, security and law-enforcement apparatuses were supposed to have been on the highest alert. What went wrong? When failures, lapses and oversights are identified, institutions can be strengthened. When errors are covered up, future catastrophes become more likely. The state is not, at least in its design, a benevolent overlord of a grateful people. State actions — and its inaction — must be open to public scrutiny and institutions must be amenable to reform. That alone will ensure the true safety and security of the Pakistani people. A year on from the APS attack, however, the unfiltered and unmitigated truth is yet to be publicly known.

*Published in Dawn, December 20th, 2015*

## Displaced by conflict

IN and of themselves, the numbers are shocking: nearly a million people have made the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean in their bid to reach the shores of Europe, despite the uncertain, frequently hostile attitudes that await them. The number of people displaced by war and conflict has far surpassed 60 million since the beginning of this year — a record in human history; by the end of June, 20.2 million people were living as refugees worldwide; in the same period, at least five million people were newly displaced, including 839,000 who crossed borders. Averaged out, one in every 122 people on the planet has been forced to flee their home, the UNHCR pointed out in its Mid-Year Trends 2015 report, released on Friday. The report looks at worldwide displacement resulting from conflict and persecution. In his statement, the body's chief António Guterres underscored the fact that these figures refer to only the first six months of the year. "We believe things will be much worse in the second six months," he added.

Behind the statistics, of course, lies a world of desperation, pain and helplessness, much of it the result of the extended conflicts that have broken out and been left to fester in large swathes of the Middle East. Yet the world's response, while positive in some quarters — for instance, Canada and Germany have taken in a number of refugees — has by and large been uncaring. Sadly enough, the latter category includes resource-rich nations such as Saudi Arabia and the United States. As Mr Guterres pointed out, "never has there been a greater need for tolerance, compassion and solidarity with people who have lost everything". This is a basic reality, and ought to inspire citizens

of the world and their governments to undertake some deep introspection in terms of addressing what is a humanitarian crisis of huge proportions. But in the long term, it is even more important for the world to come together, cooperate, and find ways to end the conflicts and instability that have caused large-scale displacements, whether relatively recent such as in Syria, or decades-long, as in the case of Afghanistan. The need for a global push towards this end has long been recognised in saner quarters; the predicament faced by such large numbers of people across the continents ought to constitute a clarion call for concerted action. No one flees their home — whether within the borders or beyond — by choice.

*Published in Dawn, December 20th, 2015*

## Phone service suspension

IN Pakistan, it is unfortunate that the state tends to address peripheral issues instead of tackling the root causes of this country's problems. Take the case of Maulvi Abdul Aziz and his attempts to deliver the Friday sermon at Lal Masjid. While the controversial cleric has not been attending the mosque for the past year, he has been using technology — in the form of a mobile phone — to address his flock instead. To counter this, the administration has taken a rather bizarre step: mobile signals were suspended in parts of Islamabad on Friday for a few hours to prevent the cleric from delivering the sermon. This is apparently the third time the authorities have taken such a step. A government official confirmed that mobile signals

December 2015

were suspended on the interior ministry's orders to counter the telephonic sermon.

While the state now, as a matter of routine, shuts down mobile services in various parts of the country during sensitive times, such as certain dates in Muharram or Rabi-ul-Awwal, to prevent acts of terrorism, the use of this tactic to prevent the Lal Masjid brigade from misusing the pulpit is questionable. For one, why should the people of the federal capital be deprived of mobile phone services on a regular basis simply to stop one man from stirring up trouble? Wouldn't it make more sense for the administration to prevent a man, who has clear sympathies for militant outfits and whose name is on the Fourth Schedule of the Anti-Terrorism Act, from indulging in public activities, such as delivering sermons through mobile phone, by other means? After all, Maulvi Aziz's actions appear to violate elements of the National Action Plan, such as those calling for countering hate speech and extremist material, as well as banning the glorification of terrorism and militant organisations. Hence, instead of shutting down mobile services in Islamabad every week, the state must take legal action against Maulvi Aziz if it feels he is breaking the law.

*Published in Dawn, December 20th, 2015*

## Owning the fight against militancy

WHILE some gains have been made in the battlefield, the fight against militancy may be veering towards defeat in the more important theatre of hearts and minds.

The recent arrest in Karachi of four men of highly educated backgrounds, for providing financial support to and brainwashing the murderers of Safoora Goth shows how far and deep the mindset of militancy has spread.

The narrative of militancy is no longer confined only to the madressahs, but has found its way into mainstream educational institutions, seducing even those who have no dearth of opportunity and space in society.

*Also read: [Four well-educated men held on terrorism charge](#)*

The growing number of cases of involvement in militant violence by individuals with jobs, businesses and sound educational credentials is cause for deep alarm. It can no longer be claimed that this is a fight being waged by marginalised segments of society, nor is it confined to those who never had a place at the table.

It is becoming a bigger fight to define who we are and what we are fighting for.

And the inability of the authorities to advance a convincing case in this theatre is what is fuelling the spread of the militant narrative in all directions.

At the very heart of this failure to present a case against militancy is the failure to publicly own and acknowledge the mistakes of the past.

The biggest of these past mistakes was the belief that militants could be used as tools of foreign policy to project power in deniable ways in neighbouring countries.

Until 9/11, militant groups were actively nurtured on Pakistani soil. After 9/11, Gen Musharraf tried to change direction, declaring some of these outfits banned organisations, such as Lashkar-e- Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. But many members of these groups decided to carry on their fight, with Pakistan and its people as their newest enemies.

The state has failed to explain to the people that a flawed policy was being followed, one that needed correction; as a result of this failure, the perception has spread that the fight is being waged only to please the United States.

The unfortunate result of this is that all attempts to own the fight and say ‘this is our war’ seem to lack conviction in the eyes of the wider public, creating widespread confusion about the war. In that confusion, which engulfs all, the narrative of the militants and the claim that the state of Pakistan has sold itself to foreign interests finds fertile ground.

To really win this fight, the confusion needs to be cleared up and the moral high ground reclaimed; the public needs to be

told clearly and convincingly that we are in this fight because of our own past mistakes and are not fighting simply at the behest of somebody else. It is a task that must be undertaken soon.

*Published in Dawn, December 21st, 2015*

## Return of IDPs

IT is perhaps the most difficult phase of a successful counter-insurgency. After the so-called clear-and-hold phases – where the military recovers territory from militants and then reasserts state control — comes the tasks of physically rebuilding the war-damaged areas, resettling IDPs and, eventually, establishing a civilian administration that focuses on the needs and aspirations of the people.

Over the weekend, Gen Raheel Sharif, on a visit to North Waziristan, met tribal elders and resettled IDPs and emphasised that rehabilitation and resettlement remain priorities for the military.

*Also read: [Nearly 40pc IDPs have returned to North Waziristan, army chief told](#)*

His words ought to be welcomed. Far too many state officials appear content with touting the successes of military operations and counterterrorism efforts while ignoring the humanitarian aspect of military operations and the aftermath.

But consider the magnitude of the challenge: while roughly 100,000 families have been resettled, more than 180,000 families are yet to return home. Not only are these families Pakistanis, but their sacrifices have been immense — victimised first by the Taliban and then leaving their homes so that military operations can be conducted.

For that reason alone, the welfare and resettlement of IDPs ought to be a high priority of the state. There is, however, a security dimension to resettlement: the resumption of normal life in militancy-hit areas creates an additional buffer against the return of militants. When a local population has a stake in peace and stability in the neighbourhood, particularly in Fata, it can help prevent re-infiltration by militants.

Reassuring as the army chief's words were, the details provided by the ISPR indicate the scale of the problem. Just 15pc of South Waziristan IDPs have been resettled — this six years after Operation Rah-i-Nijaat, launched in October 2009.

Meanwhile, in Kurram Agency, 35pc of IDPs have returned; in Orakzai it is 34pc. These are clearly worrying numbers, though perhaps not surprising.

The return of peace and stability in parts of South Waziristan, for example, has long been contingent on establishing the state's writ in North Waziristan.

Many IDPs have travelled far and wide across the country, where they may have found jobs and new lives. Karachi in particular has received many IDPs who are believed to be integrating into the mega city.

But the percentage of IDP families that have returned is simply too low to be an entirely voluntary number. Clearly, there are many families who would like to return and who cannot either because they are not permitted to, or they do not feel it is safe to do so, or the local infrastructure is still too damaged to allow normal life.

At least one problem can be clearly identified: rehabilitation and resettlement is a combined civilian and military task — but the civilian side is lagging far behind. Perhaps the army chief can find ways to better partner the civilian sides of the state?

*Published in Dawn, December 21st, 2015*

## National health insurance

THE Prime Minister's National Health Insurance Programme raises hopes of a better system being put in place for those who cannot always afford medical treatment.

A few questions remain. We are told that the plan, which has to be implemented in phases beginning January 2016, seeks to insure 55pc of Pakistanis who earn less than \$2 daily. We also know the task will be executed through the State Life Insurance Corporation. But, as the government says, SLIC will in turn be insured itself; however, oddly enough, the firm which is going to insure it has not been named.



Then data from the Benazir Income Support Programme is going to be used for selection. This is difficult to digest given that so much doubt has been expressed over the Bisp numbers, not least by functionaries of the current government.

Take a look: [Health plan to be implemented in phases, says PM](#)

It would have been good if Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, that have opted to stay out of the ambit of this plan so far, had also joined in the effort for a much-needed campaign of truly national proportions. But let's hope that KP sticks to its plans to launch its own insurance plan, starting with a few districts, while Sindh, too, attends to this urgent need sooner than later.

At the outset, there is talk about the basic need for creating awareness about the plan's use.

Hopefully, those who are going to provide the services under the scheme — the hospitals — are also going to be trained in not discriminating between those who pay there and then, and those who clear their bills through the insurance system, which takes time.

The experience thus far has not been good. Hospitals and doctors are not known to be patient-friendly.

They are known to be not very warm towards those who do not pay on the spot. Without a remedy for this reluctance, the benefits of the national health plan cannot be transferred to the people. Such attitudes will not do and every effort must be made to check them.

Published in Dawn, December 21st, 2015

## Ex-cricketer turned back

IT was an embarrassment that could have been averted. Dean Jones, the former Australian cricketer coming for an assignment, was turned back from Islamabad over the weekend.

Investigations, it seems, are 'under way' to ascertain what travel documents were lacking for Mr Jones to 'deserve' what was, technically, a deportation, even if it was effective for a short while. Mr Jones was forced to go back to the Gulf.

Later, armed with the right documents, he was allowed in at Lahore, determined as he was to improve the crisis-riddled game of cricket in Pakistan. It is a bit strange that cases such as this one are still to be found in the age of information.

Know more: [Dean Jones arrives in Lahore after visa row](#)

All that was needed was for someone responsible to make a telephone call or to do a quick internet search to know what was required for a safe landing in this country. If that was an easy formality to fulfil, those who were required to do it apparently took it all too casually.

Some of the reactions to the incident were not expected, and were disappointing. When Mr Jones was refused entry, certain commentators proceeded to recall troubled moments from his past which had little relevance to the issue at hand and over which he had long apologised.



There has indeed been some talk — not least by the no-nonsense Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan — indicating that action would be taken against the airline for flying in a passenger without proper papers. But whereas there may be some merit in flashing this high-profile case to educate aspiring travellers to Pakistan, the focus must soon shift to the Pakistan Super League which is to be played in February.

The exciting Aussie batsman is to join forces with the legendary Wasim Akram to manage the Islamabad team, one of the five PSL teams. It is a happy note for all those wishing and praying that this time it will be a successful take-off for Pakistan cricket.

*Published in Dawn, December 22nd, 2015*

## Fighting in Helmand

TWO months after the fall of Kunduz reverberated around the region and internationally, another Afghan province is in trouble. Parts of Helmand province are virtually under the control of the Afghan Taliban and it appears only a matter of time before a major district falls.

The fighting appears to be following a familiar pattern. The Afghan state has been unable to prevent incremental gains by the Taliban, making the area vulnerable to a seemingly sudden and spectacular collapse. The reasons too appear to be familiar.

Afghan security forces are under-resourced and low on morale, while the assistance of the foreign fighting forces is too small to prevent a Taliban takeover. If provincial collapse or the fall of key districts does happen, the response may also look familiar: global alarm will lead to the government in Kabul, with the assistance of the US, assembling a force strong enough to beat back the Taliban, at least temporarily.

But Helmand is not Kunduz. It is in the heart of the Taliban-influenced south Afghanistan, and not the distant north. Helmand also shares a border with Pakistan and as such could cause fresh tensions in the Pak-Afghan relationship.

*Also read: [President Ghani urged to save Helmand from falling to Taliban](#)*

Curiously, the fighting in Helmand, and thus the continuing of the so-called fighting season deep into December, does not appear to have dampened talk of an early resumption of negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Nor does continuing uncertainty over the unity and cohesion of the Taliban appear to have impacted the insurgency; indeed, it seems to have grown only stronger and more potent. Talk and fight — or perhaps, more accurately, fight and talk — appears to be the new Taliban strategy, borrowed directly from the pages of the strategy that the US has been trying to get the Afghan government to implement in recent times.

It must surely be worrying for the administration of President Ashraf Ghani, and his partners and supporters inside and outside Afghanistan that the Taliban are mimicking state strategy better than the state itself is able to perform. The

December 2015

continuing Taliban onslaught will also likely further strain intra-administration and inter-institutional tensions in Afghanistan.

One half of the national unity government is quite openly opposed to the other half's preference for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban and outreach to Pakistan. Meanwhile, the intelligence apparatus, even after the recent resignation of the NDS chief, remains deeply suspicious of and hostile towards both the Taliban and Pakistan.

For Pakistan, the unfolding events in Helmand should be yet another reason to continue pursuing the twin approach of keeping the lines of communication with Kabul open while nudging the Taliban to the negotiating table.

If Pakistan does both on a sustained basis, it may help address many of the suspicions of true state policy. The twin approach is also the right and sensible thing to do.

*Published in Dawn, December 22nd, 2015*

## Imran Khan's remarks

IN a set of regrettable remarks, the PTI chief Imran Khan has threatened owners of the lands that surround his university project with forcible seizure of their properties if they don't consent to sell their lands at the price being offered to them.

Apparently, the PTI chief wishes to build a stadium for Namal University in Mianwali on land that is adjacent to the campus; but the farmers who own the land have been refusing to sell it at the rates that are being offered to them.

Although Mr Khan may not have the means to act on his warning, even to talk of forcible seizure is reprehensible to say the least.

*Also read: [Imran 'makes jibe' at land owners](#)*

He threatened to invoke Section 4 of the Land Acquisition Act once his party came into power, which he seems to believe is inevitable.

Though his party's steep losses in the recent LG polls would appear to belie his belief at this point, given that politics is a game of fluctuating fortunes, the PTI could do much better in the next general elections.

This is one reason why a more mature attitude befitting a leader of a major political party should have been in evidence.

Instead, his remarks were disappointing and revealed a dictatorial mindset, which can hardly prove a boon for Pakistan's democracy.

True, there are others in the political pantheon that may also harbour what can be called a feudal mindset. Pakistan has seen several such politicians whose arrogance and determination to persecute those with differing views have proved to be costly mistakes.

Perhaps, appreciating this, and also as a consequence of being censured routinely by a society more informed about its rights than it was previously, many politicians have seen the wisdom in being moderate in their approach, at least in their interactions with the public.

It is hoped that Mr Khan, too, will see the wisdom in adopting a less belligerent tone.

He must revise his opinion if he thinks that private ventures are automatically synonymous with the public good, and that putting pressure to achieve what he believes is a noble goal is justified.

It is about time he understood both sides of the picture and refrained from pushing a personal agenda. In any case, Mr Khan needs to realise that his remarks were hardly those that one associates with national leaders of stature and that the land and people of Pakistan are not there to serve his private interests.

*Published in Dawn, December 22nd, 2015*

## Senate as an institution

MONDAY's debate in the Senate on the 34-member Saudi-led alliance serves to focus our attention on the crucial role an upper house plays in a federation.

Even though our Senate has existed since 1973, when Pakistan's first directly elected National Assembly enacted the Constitution, the upper house has not been able to play the role expected of a chamber that represents the constituent units and performs functions that serve as a check on the powers of the lower house, besides holding the government to account.

Even though Britain has a unitary form of government, the House of Lords, despite the clipping of its powers twice, still performs some useful functions like putting brakes on speedy legislation and enlightening the Commons by the quality of its debate.

America has a powerful upper house. It not only scrutinises money bills but also deals with the appointments of cabinet ministers, besides having a crucial foreign policy role that includes the ratification of treaties and ambassadorial appointments.

By having the powers to amend or reject aid bills, the US Senate plays a key role in shaping American foreign policy.

In Pakistan, two military interventions since 1973 have militated against the evolution of constitutional institutions and done incalculable harm to the country in the domain of external relations.

Resultantly, the Senate hasn't been able to perform the role expected of it. Ideally, the government should be bound to sound out the upper house on foreign agreements, treaties and defence deals — indeed, the ratification of these should be contingent upon the approval of the Senate.

In fact, the latter should be able to summon both politicians and military personnel holding high office to account for the state's gains and losses in its interactions with, say, Afghanistan and India.

True, it carries on with its functions of scrutiny and revision of bills passed by the lower house but in most cases, major decisions are taken by the executive branch and the military, bypassing parliament.

The Senate already has many committees — to which it could add a special committee to review decisions made by the military and intelligence agencies — but obviously it will take time before hearings acquire credibility and make a difference to bills and state policies.

Against the background of the challenges now facing Pakistan, it is time the Senate stopped being a debating forum and actively served as a watchdog on government policies.

The powerlessness of parliament was evident from its lack of input on several issues — the latest being Pakistan's entering a 34-state alliance the knowledge of which we owe to the Saudis.

There is no doubt the road to parliamentary sovereignty is a long and hard one. Keeping a close check on various

institutions is a difficult challenge, but Senate chairman Raza Rabbani is well placed to meet it.

*Published in Dawn, December 23rd, 2015*

## Malnutrition remedies

THE finance minister acknowledged the widespread incidence of malnutrition in Pakistan the other day, but missed the point in presenting remedies for the problem.

The annual report of the National Economic Council, placed before the National Assembly by Mr Ishaq Dar, says that one out of three Pakistanis “does not have regular and assured access to sufficient nutritious food”.

The words in which the problem is identified immediately betray a lack of awareness about malnutrition and how to study its incidence.

The report goes on to suggest that the “poor performance of the agriculture sector in recent years” is responsible for this situation, and that the remedy must, therefore, be in making agriculture growth more “pro-poor”, that is by diversifying the base of incomes and creating more linkages between the farm and non-farm sectors.

*Also read: [One in three Pakistanis lacks access to adequately nutritious food](#)*

If the authors of the report had studied the literature on malnutrition in Pakistan, they would have realised that increasing the supply of food, or producing greater rural incomes will have only a marginal effect on nutritional outcomes.

The latter are more closely linked to social variables such as female education. They could have taken, as an example, a report published in the Lancet Series on Maternal and Child Nutrition in Pakistan in 2013, which found that half of all children in this country are chronically undernourished, and a quarter of all children are born underweight.

These are staggering numbers, and the vulnerabilities they create to disease aggravates the problem further. In a list of remedies required to arrest the growth of these numbers, the authors had mentioned steps such as marrying girls at a later age, greater awareness of prenatal health, improved health programmes to give women access to trained birth attendants, targeted safety nets in rural areas, empowerment of women, early childhood development programmes, and so on.

Malnutrition can occur widely even in areas of food abundance, and should not be just linked to incomes.

By taking such a narrow economic view of malnutrition in Pakistan, the finance minister has revealed a poor understanding of the problem, and has gone on to identify a flawed set of policies as the remedy.

When the Lancet study was launched back in 2013, the Planning Commission was represented at the event, and promised that its findings would be incorporated in Vision

2025 to guide the government's approach to long-standing problems. Sadly, this does not appear to have happened.

*Published in Dawn, December 23rd, 2015*

## Poll culture

THE elections of 2013 may have been historic, but Pakistan still has a long way to go before a truly democratic culture takes root in the country.

After all, polls here — from general elections to more local exercises — are still marred by controversy, particularly when it comes to allegations of rigging and malpractice. That Pakistan's electoral machinery is far from perfect is true; even ECP officials have admitted as much.

One example of how elections can go wrong even in relatively smaller organisations — compared to the district or provincial level — was witnessed in the recently held polls for the Arts Council of Pakistan, Karachi.

As a picture, published in Dawn's Metro South section showed, election material was being hauled away by officials under the watchful eye of Rangers' personnel.

Controversy erupted after one panel accused its rivals of rigging, which resulted in the election commissioner concerned taking away the ballot boxes.

This disputed election — and the picture in question — symbolises two things. Firstly, while the military has rightly been criticised for interfering with the democratic process throughout Pakistan’s history, it is also true that civilians, perhaps due to their mistrust of each other, are often the first to call for the involvement of the men in khaki in electoral and governance affairs.

Secondly, civilians have not done enough to strengthen the democratic culture in this country. For example, on Monday, the ECP secretary told senators that the recently held LG polls in Islamabad, Sindh and Punjab were “flawed”. According to him, the staff was not trained, while some presiding officers were apparently biased.

The judiciary was also criticised for its involvement in electoral affairs. And who is responsible for these flaws?

Clearly, all the stakeholders — particularly the ECP and the political parties, on both sides of the aisle — have much to answer for. Unless the stakeholders lead the way in ushering in deep-rooted, systematic electoral reforms and promoting a democratic culture, elections, from the national to local level, will continue to be controversial affairs.

*Published in Dawn, December 23rd, 2015*

## Crisis over Rangers’ powers

THE continuing dispute between the government of Sindh and the centre about renewing the power of the Rangers in Karachi is approaching crisis proportions.

Technically speaking, the federal government may have a point in arguing that the powers conferred upon the Rangers “cannot be conditionally abridged or customized”.

But then, this is neither a technical nor an administrative dispute. It is a fundamentally political issue, and must be resolved through political means.

By mishandling the affair, the interior minister is shaking the pillars of the federation. The federal government must realise this is not a debate on Article 147 of the Constitution versus Section 4 of the Anti-Terrorism Act (1997).

Rather it is about the reservations of the Sindh government regarding the use to which the powers conferred upon the Rangers have been put, and that these reservations originated long before the detention of Dr Asim Hussain.

The prime minister, who should not remain aloof from the affair any longer, would do well to recall the days when he was himself tried and convicted on two counts — terrorism and hijacking — in an anti-terror court in Karachi.

While his interior minister’s memories of those days may be a little less dismal, and therefore less likely to have left him with any profound lessons to apply in the present instance, the prime



minister should know better than most how terrorism charges can be swivelled around to advance political aims.

For its part, the Sindh government has, in the manner it has gone about seeking redressal, allowed the perception to spread that it is putting up a fight only to protect one man from spilling the beans.

But now that a provincial assembly has owned these reservations, casting them in such personalised terms is no longer valid. What really needs to be debated all over again is why the Rangers were given these powers in the first place.

These powers were needed to pursue the objectives of the National Action Plan in Karachi, and the Rangers have indeed performed admirably in restoring a sense of normality to the city.

But the city has its slippery slopes, and when the powers began to be used to charge people with terror financing when no evidence of such activity was found, or when they began to be used in a clampdown on speeches of specific political party leaders, then a debate about the real reasons for these powers becomes necessary.

Tough talk about overriding the expressed wishes of the provincial assembly, or veiled threats of imposing governor's rule in the province are not the way to carry NAP forward in an environment as tricky as Karachi.

It will take a delicate high-wire act to secure the gains made by the Rangers. That will take mature politics, and the time is now to activate things on that front.

## Musharraf's emergency

IT is a rather extraordinary and thoroughly self-inflicted descent into ignominy.

Pervez Musharraf, the brash general whose dictatorial rule over Pakistan left no one in doubt who was really in charge, has told the FIA that the November 2007 emergency was the result of a vast consultative exercise, imposed on the advice of then-prime minister Shaukat Aziz and approved by soon-to-be army chief Ashfaq Kayani, among many other senior political and military functionaries at the time.

Gen Musharraf, it seems, was so enfeebled that he could not possibly have acted on his own — at least as far as he himself can tell. The November 2007 emergency required principal offenders, aiders, abettors and collaborators so numerous that it is — again according to Gen Musharraf — simply wrong and unfair to target him alone.

It is an unbelievable tale, particularly since Gen Musharraf handpicked Mr Aziz and Gen Kayani for the slots of prime minister and army chief, respectively. Yet, it is also fairly obvious why Gen Musharraf has chosen to go down this ignominious path and try and spread the blame onto former allies and colleagues.

While it has been apparent for a while that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's bid to have Gen Musharraf tried for treason has been delayed, and likely blocked, by the military establishment, the prime minister has not given any indication that he is willing to let Gen Musharraf simply walk free.

The trial itself was thrown into turmoil by the special tribunal's insistence that former chief justice Abdul Hameed Dogar and former law minister Zahid Hamid also be investigated.

Now, with the FIA conducting its inquiry anew and the likelihood that it may complete its job soon, there is a possibility that Gen Musharraf could face renewed legal jeopardy.

In a rather transparent calculation to help stave off that possibility, the legal team of Gen Musharraf appears determined to draw in as many individuals as possible to make a fresh trial unlikely.

The direct reference to Gen Kayani as a principal offender, an aider and abettor in the continuation of the emergency seems particularly designed to draw the military further into the equation.

If the military establishment is skittish about seeing one former army chief tried on treason, it will be doubly concerned about two former chiefs facing treason charges — especially if the two are the immediate predecessors of Gen Raheel Sharif. Ignominious and desperate as Gen Musharraf's chosen strategy may be, could it be a winning one?

*Published in Dawn, December 24th, 2015*

## Ministerial overreach

PETROLEUM Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi may be correct in pointing out that the outstanding amount owed by Pakistan Steel Mills to SSGC for gas supply has risen too much, but by saying that the issue can “destroy and finish” SSGC he has indulged in uncalled for hype.

It is a fact that the steel mills is lagging far behind in making its payments to SSGC, and the outstanding amount at Rs35bn is too large for the gas distribution company to carry for very long.

But it is also true that public-sector enterprises do not sink, let alone stand destroyed and finished, due to outstanding receivables.

The context for Mr Abbasi's remarks is the impending privatisation of the steel mills, whose accumulated losses have reportedly risen to Rs104bn, far too large for a government bailout.

The minister claimed that a proposal is under consideration to transfer land belonging to the steel mills worth about Rs35bn to SSGC as a settlement for the outstanding dues, but the mills' management has to approve the proposal first.

A number of issues come up when we consider the minister's remarks. First of all, such alarmist language, speaking of companies being destroyed and finished, should not be used at the ministerial level.

We are accustomed to hearing such words from the heads of public-sector entities when they want to highlight their liquidity problems from outstanding receivables, but elevating them to the level of the minister adds a new dimension.

Second, another context for the remarks is the sharply growing gas shortages in the country, which have begun to bite in the gas-surplus provinces of Sindh and Balochistan as well.

In either case, whatever the context in the mind of the minister, it would be better if he used his own platform in the National Assembly to focus the debate more on the policy questions facing the gas sector and left more operational issues like liquidity shortages at SSGC to be resolved in the appropriate forum.

*Published in Dawn, December 24th, 2015*

## Jinnah's vision

The frequent projection of Mohammad Ali Jinnah's Aug 11 address to the Constituent Assembly creates an impression that this is the Quaid's only speech that gives us his vision of Pakistan.

On the contrary, throughout his political career, Jinnah made it repeatedly clear that he visualised Pakistan as a democracy guaranteeing fundamental rights to all its citizens irrespective of their beliefs.

As he told a rally in Chittagong in March 1948, the denial of these rights in a united India was one of the reasons why South Asian Muslims had struggled to create a country of their own.

In February 1948, in a radio broadcast, the Quaid declared that Pakistan was not going to be "a theocratic state — to be ruled by priests with a divine mission". Non-Muslim minorities, he said, would "enjoy the same rights and privileges as any other citizens and will play their rightful part in the affairs of Pakistan".

It is difficult to be precise if we try to determine exactly when retrogressive forces found an environment conducive to their growth. But the consequences of Pakistan's involvement in the US-led 'jihad' against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan unleashed forces that have over the last 36 years traumatised the nation and torn asunder the very fabric of society.

While terrorism and armed rebellion are the visible manifestation of this reactionary radicalism, the more insidious

form of it is to be found in the silent spread of the virus of mediaeval intolerance at all levels of society — even at places where it shouldn't be, for instance, institutes of higher learning, cultural organisations and the arts.

The harm done to education is a subject unto itself, but what is happening is the consequences of what Jinnah had expressly warned students against in a speech at Dacca in March 1948: “You will be making the greatest mistake if you allow yourself to be exploited by one political party or another ... Your main occupation should be ... to devote your attention to your studies.”

In contrast, the standards of education have gone down because the academia and student bodies are under the influence of religiously inspired hard-line elements whose brainwashing techniques are no more confined to madressahs.

Is there a silver lining in the cloud? It is hard to see one. Those at the helm are seen as largely corrupt and lack the fundamental attributes of leadership.

There is no statesman in sight who could have the courage to take on the extremists and tell the truth — that behind the façade of fiery rhetoric and street power, bigoted minds do not have with them the blueprint of a scientifically advanced and prosperous nation that conforms to Jinnah's vision of a democratic state where people could “breathe as free men and which we could develop according to our lights and culture and where principles of Islamic social justice could find free play”.

*Published in Dawn, December 25th, 2015*

## Muslims & Christmas

At least two Muslim countries — Brunei and Somalia — have officially banned Christmas celebrations this year, while another — Saudi Arabia — has had a long-standing ban in place against them.

Pakistan is doing somewhat better by not officially banning celebrations of religious holidays of minority communities, and the leadership too has seen it fit to participate on a few occasions, demonstrating some semblance of openness tolerance at a time of general upheaval in the Muslim world.

But it is also important to realise that it will take a lot more than platitudes from the top to make a genuine difference in the daily lives of minority communities in the country.

Over the years, creeping intolerance across society has been twisting itself like a vine around the country's minorities, to the point where there is genuine hesitation on their part to openly practise their faith or celebrate their holidays. This wasn't always the case in Pakistan.

There was a time when Christmas was a festive occasion in most parts of the country, particularly in Karachi where balls were held in hotels and Christmas trees could be seen in many public locations.

All that is now gone or is confined largely to churches and a few select shops and malls participating in the season's cheer.

Many members of the Christian community have either moved out of Karachi, or are too afraid to celebrate in public, and many in Punjab are too fearful to even worship openly, given the animosity they have faced even from ordinary people.

Indeed, there have been incidents where they have been attacked, killed or have seen their homes being burned down. It was positive to see the leadership partaking of Diwali and Christmas festivities with members of the Hindu and Christian communities. But the challenge ahead is much bigger, and cannot be met through a few gestures.

There are ingrained attitudes as well as economic disparities that need to be addressed, in addition to reforming a legal framework that enshrines discrimination.

Perhaps we should use this season, when Muslims and Christians both have cause to celebrate, to embrace the view that religion is about peace, understanding and a search for our common humanity, and not about violence and severing the bonds of empathy.

One much-needed step in this direction would be for our leaders to implement measures that would restore a sense of security amongst our minorities. No celebration would be complete without that.

*Published in Dawn, December 25th, 2015*

## Lodhran by-election

IT is difficult to establish trends on the basis of just one by-election. However, it is true that certain contests have a symbolic effect for the parties concerned.

For example, the success of the MQM's candidate in Karachi's NA-246 by-election in April this year — as well as the party's romp to victory in the recently held LG polls in the metropolis — was seen as a symbolic triumph.

This was especially true if viewed in the context of the Muttahida's fluctuating fortunes, in particular its soured relationship with the security establishment.

The result of Wednesday's NA-154 by-poll in Lodhran appears to have had a similar effect for the PTI in Punjab.

On Thursday, unofficial results suggested that the PTI's Jahangir Tareen had a comfortable lead, of about 35,000 votes, over his main rival, the PML-N's Siddique Baloch.

The poll saw a healthy turnout and the victory comes at a time when the PTI had fared poorly in Punjab's LG elections. The party had also been nursing its wounds after it lost the NA-122 by-election in Lahore to National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq in October.

It appears that Mr Tareen had worked on the constituency, cultivating voters, while some observers note that the negative media coverage surrounding Mr Baloch — who had won the

seat in the 2013 polls and was later disqualified by an election tribunal — also had a role to play in the result.

Mr Tareen also reportedly put in efforts to foster local alliances. Of course, the media has emerged as a major influence on the voter, hence candidates have to remain alert to the fact that their shortcomings — real and perceived — can be highlighted by the media and affect the voter's decision.

There are other elements at play as well, including biradari politics and money spent on campaigns. The victory should make the PTI focus its energies on delivering the goods to the voter, instead of engaging in confrontational politics. And it should certainly serve as a moment of reflection for the PML-N.

*Published in Dawn, December 25th, 2015*

## Modi's visit

IT was a delightful surprise on a special day: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stopping by in Lahore to meet Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. On his birth anniversary, the Quaid-i-Azam would surely have approved. Much as Pakistan-India relations have the ability to disappoint and confound, they can occasionally spring a welcome surprise. Twelve years was 12 years too many for an Indian prime minister to have stayed away from Pakistan. Mr Sharif had already demonstrated last year that a visit to the other side of the border was not only

possible, it could be done on relatively short notice. Deplorable as Mr Modi's brinkmanship and insistence on a one-point agenda (terrorism) in talks with Pakistan is, his willingness to reverse himself and engage Pakistan should be welcomed by all right-thinking and sensible denizens of the two countries. The two states owe it to their peoples to work on normalising Pakistan-India relations. The 25th of December was an auspicious day to mark the possible beginning of a new era of stability in South Asia.

Yet, there are many questions that Mr Modi's short trip to Lahore has not answered. Diplomacy — meaningful, result-oriented diplomacy — is serious business. It is not at all clear at this moment if what transpired in Lahore was part of a coherent, well-thought-out diplomatic strategy on the part of the Indian and Pakistani governments or just a glorified photo-op. Contrast the visit to Lahore with the earlier legs of Mr Modi's trip to Russia and then Afghanistan. In those two countries, there were a range of substantive meetings and initiatives launched or inaugurated. In Lahore, neither the Pakistani nor the Indian prime minister announced anything meaningful. The news conference of Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry was also devoid of any details or the steps to come. Raising public expectations — and putting hostile lobbies on alert in both countries — while keeping the details to a minimum can be a dangerous approach in the subcontinent. The Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue may be fleshed out in an anticipated meeting between the foreign secretaries next month — a deadline that should be adhered to. Mr Sharif's trip to Delhi in May 2014 ought to be a reminder of what meetings without clear strategies for dialogue can lead to, ie nothing.



There is also the issue of how Mr Modi and his government will handle domestic elements hostile to the idea of talks with Pakistan. While Mr Modi's solid poll numbers and his secure majority in parliament give him some room to manoeuvre, history suggests that even the most secure of political leaders can be thwarted by anti-peace hawks. Already there are voices — including, grimly, in the Congress itself — castigating Mr Modi for his outreach to Pakistan. The Indian public, the media and national-security institutions, will all have to be brought aboard. The days ahead will reveal if Mr Modi is serious about the business of peace.

*Published in Dawn, December 27th, 2015*

## Gender and politics

THE crimes and transgressions committed against women by men in Pakistan, in fact sometimes by the machinery of the state itself, are in their broad brushstrokes all too well known. But broad brushstrokes, while reflective of the reality, are all too often reductive and erase nuances that are of importance in terms of understanding the whole picture. Consider, for example, that notwithstanding Balochistan's deeply patriarchal society, the provincial assembly unanimously elected on Thursday MPA Rahila Hameed Durrani of the PML-N as speaker of the house — she is the first woman in the province to have secured the post. A couple of days earlier, on Tuesday, PTI candidate Dr Meher Taj Roghani was elected deputy speaker of the assembly of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province

that, like Balochistan, is overwhelmingly dominated by conservative attitudes. Once again, she is the first woman to have taken up this particular mantle of honour in the province. Having won by a margin of 40 votes against her PML-N rival Arbab Akbar Hayat, Dr Roghani's victory is resounding. Behind achievements such as these stand those who have been the path-breakers; a prominent example is that of Dr Fahmida Mirza who served as the country's first woman speaker of the National Assembly in the last PPP tenure from 2008 to 2013.

Such examples of women's participation in the political process are encouraging, and do indicate some measure of the political parties' concern for and ownership of the struggle for gender equality. However, far more needs to be done and indeed, can be done, to bring about a sea change. One concrete step to bring female politicians out of the shadows, for example, would be for the political parties — in particular the big ones with an appreciable footprint in the country — to field female candidates for the general seats so that in time the system of reserved seats is no longer required. The parties need to repose trust in the women amidst their ranks, thereby sending out the signal to society that where public representation and the political process are concerned, gender need not be relevant. As everywhere else, a change in social attitudes can be brought about by leading through example from the highest levels of governance and political activity; it is in the hands of the country's major political parties to make this urgently needed reorientation a priority. In doing so, they can truly demonstrate their oft-voiced commitment to gender equality.

*Published in Dawn, December 27th, 2015*

## Islamabad-Dhaka ties

PAKISTAN and Bangladesh have had a complex relationship since the tragic events of 1971. The current phase of the relationship — ever since Sheikh Hasina Wajed took over her prime ministerial duties in 2009 — has been marked by mostly frosty ties.

A sign that ties are less than cordial came in the shape of the recent report which stated that a Pakistani diplomat had been recalled from Dhaka over an ‘extremist link’. The diplomat left Bangladesh after Dhaka ‘informally’ asked for her departure.

While in principle, diplomats breaking the law in foreign countries is not something that can be condoned, in this case, it appears that politics may be at work.

For example, the diplomat is accused of transferring a grand total of 30,000 taka — around \$380 — to a Bangladeshi suspect. In a world where huge amounts are transferred by militants, and governments everywhere are working to shut down the channels of terror financing, how seriously should this accusation be taken?

Instead, perhaps more than the merits of the case itself, it is the anti-Pakistan mood prevailing in Dhaka — which the Awami League-led government has been instrumental in whipping up — that is responsible for this diplomatic incident.

Whether it is the latest incident or earlier issues — such as the trial of suspects for alleged war crimes by a controversial tribunal, or the tightening of the visa regime for Pakistanis —

the time has come for the situation to be addressed at the highest level.

Both prime ministers should rise to the occasion and initiate a reset in ties that can help move the relationship forward.

While Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif should take up the gauntlet — and it would certainly help if Pakistani leaders refrained from publicly commenting on Bangladesh’s internal affairs — the ball is firmly in Sheikh Hasina’s court.

If intervention at the top level can help change the atmosphere positively in Pakistan-India ties — easily South Asia’s most difficult relationship — there is no reason why such efforts cannot open a new chapter in Islamabad-Dhaka ties.

*Published in Dawn, December 27th, 2015*

## Traders and taxes

IF reports of a breakthrough having been achieved between the government and the trader community over tax issues are true, then there is good cause for some optimism.

Both parties, the government and traders, have been at loggerheads since June over a new tax on banking transactions by non-filers of income tax returns.

The trader community, whose leadership has been splintered and riven by discord, has been urging a withdrawal of this measure since it impacts them disproportionately; they are for the most part non-filers and engage in a large volume of daily transactions through the banking system.

To its credit, the government has refused to back down on the measure, preferring to keep the door of talks open while agreeing to temporarily reduce the percentage at which the tax will be charged.

Now there are reports that a breakthrough may have finally been achieved, with the government agreeing to give the traders one opportunity to declare their assets, accumulated largely outside the tax net, and get them whitened.

The finance ministry deserves credit for its skilful handling of this entire affair. This is the first time that any government has managed to turn the tables on the trader community whose members are perennial non-filers of income tax returns, and put them in a position where they are bargaining over the terms of

their inclusion in the tax net rather than demanding the right to stay out forever.

The measure, expected to be announced in early January, should not be politicised or clumped together with other amnesty schemes offered in the past as part of a grand bargain with non-filers.

This will be the first time that a non-coercive measure would have been used by a sitting government to get non-filers to voluntarily submit their asset declarations and to file returns.

As such, the measure stands a far better chance of fulfilling its objective than any other coercive exercise to force people to start filing. Those who are voicing the expectation that the measure could triple the number of filers may be indulging in some overstatement, but there are nonetheless genuine grounds for optimism.

As it currently stands, there is only an agreement between the government and the traders. It would be better if the measure is tabled before parliament assuming matters hold up till that stage. It would also be better to avoid politicising the process as it moves ahead.

*Published in Dawn, December 28th, 2015*

## Treading carefully in Afghanistan

AS the new year approaches, there is an unmistakable sense of urgency on Afghanistan. Gen Raheel Sharif's visit to Kabul yesterday is in no way a make-or-break trip, but it is certainly significant in terms of expectations over the weeks and months ahead.

The central concern is well known: the Afghan Taliban are growing in strength and the Afghan government is losing ground, both politically and militarily. All sides — barring, critically, perhaps the Afghan Taliban themselves — appear to agree that a peaceful settlement is the only realistic hope for a stable and peaceful Afghanistan.

The key then for all outside powers and the Afghan state will be to first create the conditions for a political settlement and then do what is necessary to find a viable settlement that is long-lasting.

In the first stage of creating the conditions for a so-called Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, Pakistan's role is undeniable, but so is the Afghan government's willingness to address Pakistani concerns.

As highlighted by ISPR chief Gen Asim Bajwa yesterday, the twin concerns of the Pakistan Army on Afghanistan are better border management and the Afghan peace process.

In the military's reckoning, there was a sincere effort made here to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table last summer — a sincerity that was not reciprocated across the board when it came to addressing Pakistani concerns about TTP militants who have found sanctuary in eastern Afghanistan.

Yet, the concerns run in the opposite direction too. Since the tumultuous elevation of Akhtar Mansour to the top of the Afghan Taliban leadership, there has been furious criticism of Pakistan by the security establishment in Afghanistan for allegedly aiding the Taliban in the wave of attacks across Afghanistan. Given the mistrust and suspicions, perhaps the best approach would be to move in lockstep: jointly addressing better border management, and individually, but simultaneously, acting to suppress Taliban and TTP activities on both sides of the border.

That would not only help address the trust deficit, but also help nudge the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table.

While the road to a peaceful settlement will inevitably be bumpy, there is an additional unpredictable element in the equation here: the US itself.

Bereft of any coherent strategy in Afghanistan and perhaps panicking at the thought of an imploding Afghanistan in the final year of the presidency of Barack Obama, the US administration could resort to putting pressure on Pakistan to abandon trying to patiently nudge the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table and, instead, force a dangerous showdown.

There is a line between careful prodding and reckless pressure, and there is no sense in Pakistan crossing that line with the

December 2015

Taliban. With the domestic fight against militancy far from over, there is a need to move ahead wisely.

*Published in Dawn, December 28th, 2015*

## Defective justice system

CRIMINAL justice reform is, unfortunately, a subject that does not rank very highly on the rulers' list of priorities. Whether it is the trial of violent criminals or terrorists, our investigation agencies and courts have failed to probe cases in a scientific manner and deliver verdicts based on incontrovertible evidence.

The result is apparent in the low conviction rates and general lawlessness that prevails in society, with criminals and militants aware that there are good chances that they can get away with their crimes.

As recently reported in this paper, faulty investigations and lack of witness protection are the main reasons for the low conviction rates in Sindh's anti-terrorism courts.

The conviction rate between January and November of this year was a mere 33pc. The investigation agencies and provincial government of Sindh have mainly been held responsible for this state of affairs, though it is true that things are not much different elsewhere in the federation.

Amongst the factors standing in the way of the delivery of justice is lack of coordination between investigation agencies and prosecutors, as well as a heavy backlog of cases.

Much has been written and said about the need for effective investigation and prosecution services, and witness protection programmes.

Though laws have been passed to set up forensic science units and witness protection programmes, where the implementation of these reforms is concerned, much work remains to be done.

For example, in the recent past, witnesses in a number of high-profile cases have been eliminated, including the Sabeen Mahmud and Wali Khan Babar murder cases.

Indeed, the state has to commit considerable trained manpower, funding and infrastructure to reform the criminal justice system and initiate effective witness-protection programmes.

Without these fundamental changes, dealing with crime and terrorism in the long run will be an impossible task. Moreover, when regular courts and ATCs fail to deliver justice, parallel systems — such as military courts — may well become institutionalised and established as permanent features, instead of being temporary solutions.

*Published in Dawn, December 28th, 2015*

## Rouhani's call

THEY are strong words and all the stronger for the fact that they ring true. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has spoken with great conviction and frankness in acknowledging a deep malaise within the Muslim world. Be it online or in the real world, the narrative of Islam that is seemingly ascendant in the world is one propagated by bigoted and militant elements in the Muslim world. Most “violence, terror and massacres, unfortunately, take place in the Islamic world”, President Rouhani has been quoted as saying. There is a need to remove “Islam’s negative image” in the world, the Iranian leader added. Unquestionably, Mr Rouhani has given voice to a feeling that is widespread among right-thinking and sensible individuals across the Muslim world. It is not enough to say that Islam is a religion of peace; societies that represent Islam have to search within and fight the hate and violence that appears to have washed over so much of the Muslim world.

Courageous as President Rouhani has been in acknowledging that a great deal of the responsibility for fixing Muslim societies afflicted by war, violence and militancy lies with the Muslim world itself, he fell short of stating the full truth. Are Muslim-majority states, particularly the ones that are explicitly Islamic, truly ready to stand up for a broad, inclusive, tolerant vision of Islam? Consider Iran itself. From its support for Hezbollah to its early attempts to prop up Bashar al-Assad when the Syrian people rose up against his dictatorial rule to possibly stoking sectarian tensions in Bahrain and Yemen, has Iran really played a positive role in the region? To many outsiders, it still appears that it is an article of faith of the Iranian leadership, especially its clergy, that the Iranian

revolution must be exported. But Iran is surely not the only, or even worst, offender. The extraordinary brashness of the new Saudi leadership, almost certainly fuelled by the fear that the people-power phase of the Arab Spring could penetrate Saudi Arabia, has led to extraordinary violence in Yemen and Bahrain. In addition, Saudi leaders are encouraging pro-Saudi Sunni militias to counter groups like the militant Islamic State, a move that can only backfire and prove disastrous for the region. Mr Rouhani is on firmer ground when he advocates social development and education as a long-term response to the poison that has seeped into Muslim societies. Surely, without a change in state policies, the violence on the ground will not go away. But just as surely, Muslim societies will not be able to get rid of the hate within until the people themselves have better prospects: better education, better jobs, better amenities and more representative governments. For now though more Muslim leaders need to follow Mr Rouhani’s example and speak frankly about the problems within their societies. For the truth to prevail, the hate must be challenged.

*Published in Dawn, December 29th, 2015*



## Pilgrimage operators

EVERY now and then, reports emerge of unscrupulous travel agents defrauding their clients in the name of Haj, Umrah and other religious pilgrimages. In fact, in many Pakistani cities and towns, it is not unusual to come across packages from ‘travel agents’ offering visits to holy sites in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran at rates that seem too good to be true. Now, the FIA has claimed that “most operators of Haj, Umrah and other pilgrimage services are defrauding people”. The agency adds that human traffickers are also operating in the garb of travel agents. While it is difficult to say that most travel agents indulge in the racket of defrauding prospective pilgrims, it is certainly an area of concern. In fact, in the past duping people in the name of the provision of pilgrimage services has been traced to the top of the governance structure in Pakistan. The Haj scam of 2010 reportedly involved figures high in government overcharging pilgrims and mismanaging the pilgrimage. In another instance, in 2009, a case emerged from Karachi in which Umrah pilgrims claimed they had unknowingly been given footwear stuffed with illicit drugs by their travel agent to take to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, several recent reports have indicated that crooked travel agents in various Punjab towns as well as Karachi have made off with passports and millions of rupees after promising clients low-cost pilgrimages. Some blacklisted operators have also continued to function despite their proscription.

People put away money throughout their life to be able to make a once-in-a-lifetime journey to the holy places. Hence, when crooks walk off with their hard-earned money, the experience can be shattering. People indeed do have a responsibility to be

extra careful when confronted with offers that promise unrealistically low-cost pilgrimages; if the rates quoted are unbelievably low, chances are something is amiss and it is better not to patronise such operations. However, it is primarily the duty of the state — particularly the religious affairs ministry and the FIA — to clamp down on such rackets. Firms must be thoroughly vetted before they are given licences to deal in Haj, Umrah and ziarat packages; even after they are given permission to operate they must be periodically audited to confirm they are working within the bounds of the law. Only tighter regulation of the sector can prevent scams and save people from being defrauded by unscrupulous elements.

*Published in Dawn, December 29th, 2015*

## Former CJ’s party

THE Pakistan Justice Democratic Critic Party may be more than a mouthful, but it is unlikely to become a handful for the major political parties in the country. Former Supreme Court chief justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, the founder of the PJDCP, has unveiled an expansive manifesto and made familiar-sounding promises about who would be eligible for induction into the new party, but the newest aspirant to the political pantheon appears to have an interest problem — no one, politician or voter, appears to be interested in joining the Chaudhry mission. That is unsurprising. The former chief justice’s public appeal was rooted, firstly, in what was his willingness to stand up to a dictator and, secondly, the perception that he was fighting on

the side of the common man against the politicians. But both those attributes were rooted in Mr Chaudhry's role as chief justice.

Without his judicial robe, the former chief justice of Pakistan is an ordinary, albeit famous, citizen. A news conference simply cannot compare with the chief justice's gavel in Courtroom No 1 on Constitution Avenue. So while Pakistan has moved on — there have been several chief justices after Mr Chaudhry — it appears that the former CJP has not. History is replete with instances of what Mr Chaudhry is now trying to do — and each time history has proved it to be an unwise, somewhat embarrassing choice. Once upon a time, a retired Gen Aslam Beg thought he would win the public's affection and their vote. The Awami Qiyadat Party barely merits a footnote in history. More recently, a deposed Gen Pervez Musharraf thought he knew the pulse of the people better than politicians. Instead, Mr Musharraf has largely been confined to his house, with even his famed Facebook supporters not agitating for his release. The All Pakistan Muslim League has no discernible presence anywhere in the country. At the last election, Abdul Qadeer Khan felt that Pakistan had to be saved and so launched the Tehreek-i-Tahaffuz-i-Pakistan. It was quickly dissolved. Can Iftikhar Chaudhry's fate be any different?

*Published in Dawn, December 29th, 2015*

## Suicide attack in Mardan

A YEAR in which significant progress has been made in the fight against militancy is nearing its end with a grim reminder that the war is far from over — and is far from being conclusively won. The suicide attack in Mardan yesterday on a Nadra office has claimed over 20 lives and injured some 60 people. It is hoped that the injured will be given the best possible medical care and the needs of the families of all victims will be addressed humanely and promptly. The casualties should not become yet more forgotten victims in the fight to save Pakistan. For the state and those whose responsibility it is to keep the country safe, there are some urgent reminders about what is at stake here. Taking the fight to the militants in Fata and ramping up counterterrorism efforts in the major cities through so-called intelligence-based operations was going to leave second-tier targets more vulnerable: smaller cities, soft targets — areas the security and intelligence apparatus may not have prioritised. Therein lies the next great challenge for the state — developing counterterrorism capabilities that are adequate to deal with the evolving terrorist threat.

Unhappily, developing counterterrorism capabilities appears to be the one area that the state — both the military and civilian sides of it — does not consider a priority. While the military leadership does seemingly agitate the issue, there is a basic problem: the perception that the military wants to dominate and lead the effort rather than help the civilian side of the state develop its capabilities and leadership role. But the political government must shoulder a great deal of the blame too. There is a complacency and inertia discernible that is simply

unacceptable. The activation of Nacta is a fabled myth; police reforms remain a distant dream; centre-province coordination is mired in politics; and there is a distinct lack of interest in the scientific method when it comes to assembling the tools and personnel to fight terrorism. The arc of insurgencies and terrorism is a well-known one. In the face of overwhelming state power it is initially diminished, only for a gradual regrouping to usually manifest itself and for the threats to evolve and adapt to the state's responses. To win against terrorism and militancy, the state will need to be ahead of that curve.

There also remains the wider problem: the incubators of hate and extremism where terrorists and militants continue to find sanctuary. The trail of most terrorist incidents like in Mardan yesterday usually leads to financiers, aiders and abettors and sanctuaries that run into a very long, though familiar chain. It is not enough to demand outside action against sanctuaries that are beyond Pakistan's borders — there must be a sustained effort to ensure that no stripe of militant or terrorist can find aid or safe haven within.

*Published in Dawn, December 30th, 2015*

## PM visits Karachi

HE came, he saw, he left. Many in Karachi are wondering what exactly the purpose of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's visit to the city was. Did he really come only to address a business association and 'inspect' the construction site of a new power plant? Was it simply to announce a reduction in the power tariff for industrial consumers? In ordinary times, any of these could be considered valid enough reason to make a high-profile visit flanked by a number of senior ministers. But these are not ordinary times. As the dispute between the federal government and the provincial government of Sindh over extending the powers of the Rangers has intensified, many thought this visit would be used by Mr Sharif to try and de-escalate matters. Instead, the attention that the prime minister gave to the pressing matter was in the form of a few perfunctory sentences exchanged with the chief minister on the tarmac of the airport. There was also a note of thanks for the Rangers, the police and the chief secretary of the province for playing their role in executing the law and order operation under way in the city for two years now. He also promised the assembled delegates of the business community that the operation would continue.

The chief minister tried to raise the issue immediately upon Mr Sharif's arrival, but received nothing more than an invitation to come to Islamabad and discuss the matter. By ignoring the concerns of the provincial government, while lavishing praise upon the security agencies whose powers are at the core of the tensions, the prime minister indirectly undermined the position of the Sindh government in the dispute. Perhaps this was intentional, but it was not helpful. It now appears that the Sindh government has been excluded from a role in the

implementation of the National Action Plan, and the fiery remarks of Bilawal Bhutto, who attacked NAP for the first time in public, have further fractured the political consensus behind the fight against militancy. If the purpose of the visit was to signal the government's lack of interest in engaging with the core issues in the dispute festering between the provincial and federal governments, that objective could have been fulfilled in a less visible and more direct way. By leaving everyone guessing, the prime minister has played a poor hand in the middle of a delicate situation.

*Published in Dawn, December 30th, 2015*

## A welcome deal

Bizarre it may be, but Monday's deal involving safe passage for civilians as well as militants from three towns in Syria shows what regional powers can accomplish if they make up their mind to stir and help Syria's traumatised people.

Details of how the multiparty deal brokered by Iran and Turkey with UN help was worked out will, no doubt, be revealed later, but the complex evacuation and 're-entry' plan for fighters and civilians with different loyalties demonstrates the regional governments' leverage with the combatants to influence events in the Levant for the better.

Part of the six-month long ceasefire agreed to in September, the plan, already in effect, provides for groups of militants and

civilians to go to Turkey or Lebanon, some flying back to Damascus or going by land route to the war-battered zone of their choice.

The question of who will go back to the charnel house that is Syria underlines the extent of polarisation in that country and the hurdles in the way of reconciliation. While the evacuation and re-entry of civilians to the areas of their choice makes sense, the permission for the militants to cross international borders demonstrates the peculiarity of the deal — even as it helps Syrian civilians, no matter how small in numbers.

Outsiders — non-state actors as well as governments — have been involved in the Syrian slaughter for years now. But it is for the second time — the first being the September ceasefire agreement — that the outsiders' involvement is positive in nature; instead of fuelling the conflagration, they have united for a humanitarian cause.

To what groups the fighters belonged and what compulsions forced the intermediaries to ignore their militancy and allow them cross-border movement defy an answer, given the complexity of the multilateral Syrian war. Nevertheless, the plan deserves to be welcomed, because it raises hopes for more efforts on the part of the regional states to unite for peace. The Syrian people have suffered for far too long.

*Published in Dawn, December 30th, 2015*

## Extremism threat

THE Mardan suicide bombing was a grim reminder of the existing terror threat in the country, but the news from elsewhere is equally worrying. The Punjab Counter-Terrorism Department this week revealed that it had broken up an alleged cell of the militant Islamic State group in Sialkot — the cell apparently consisted of eight individuals who had in their possession propaganda material and were allegedly planning to launch a series of attacks across the country. It is too early to know if a pattern is emerging, but certainly there is no room for complacency. IS is the militant group du jour and would-be extremists are likely to be attracted to the latest that the world of ‘jihad’ has to offer. But examples from Karachi — where the Safoora Goth gang, with university-educated members, has been busted — and from Lahore — where recent allegations that a professor of a well-known private university was consorting with Hizbut Tahrir — suggest that extreme vigilance is needed.

The temptation is to believe that this is a new phenomenon. It is not. The murder of Daniel Pearl in 2002 was linked to Omar Sheikh, educated in prominent institutions in Pakistan and in the UK, and suggested an early link between centres of higher education and militant recruitment. Al Qaeda too has over the years tried to appeal to an urban, educated, middle and upper-middle class. The fear, though, is that IS’s appeal is building on the earlier iterations of militancy and that the militant group is significantly more sophisticated in its propaganda machine. When Iranian President Hassan Rouhani referred to the need to counter the negative image of Islam online, he surely was referring to the new and sophisticated tactics of militant Islam.

Worryingly, states themselves appear least equipped to handle the emerging threat. Pakistan, for example, has banned YouTube for more than three years now, but still has no strategy for dealing with online hate material. The country’s regulators appear more determined to squash legitimate dissent than eliminating hate speech that encourages violence.

Whatever the attempts of the state, however, they must be aided by society and private-sector organisations. While the boundaries between privacy and security must be respected, it is surely the case that far too many institutions of higher education in the country remain lax when it comes to identifying dangerous elements in their midst. Higher education in the country remains mired in the battles of a generation ago. Today, the challenge is to produce college and university graduates who not only have a set of skills that makes them economically and socially relevant, but who can help put Pakistan on a path to stability and peace. It is not just Fata or other militancy-hit areas that have a terrorism problem. All of Pakistan does. Surely the fight to reclaim Pakistan and re-anchor it in its founding principles must be led by the centres of higher education.

*Published in Dawn, December 31st, 2015*

## CII brawl

WHILE ulema are supposed to lead by example, what transpired at the Council of Islamic Ideology's 201st meeting in Islamabad on Tuesday can only be described as disgraceful. Two of the CII's members — its chairman Maulana Sherani and Hafiz Tahir Ashrafi — had a physical altercation after disagreement over agenda items. As reported, while the meeting was in progress Tahir Ashrafi entered and, according to one eyewitness, started making a fuss. While it is difficult to conclude who cast the first stone, what ensued was an ugly exchange of street language, expletives and, eventually, physical violence. This sort of distasteful behaviour is thoroughly unacceptable from 'men of learning', especially those serving an officially sanctioned body. Instead of discussing matters in a cool and collected manner, the individuals involved have put on display antics that have no place in a civilised society.

However, if it were only this single incident involving the CII, perhaps it could be overlooked. Unfortunately, many of the issues the body has chosen to put on its agenda over the past few years are deeply troubling. Apparently, one of the factors behind the brawl was the presence on the agenda of the issue of the status of Ahmadis in relation to Islam, and whether the current members of the community are to be termed murtad (apostates) or not. As it is, Ahmadis in Pakistan live in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation and for the CII to even discuss this is akin to playing with fire. Also on the recent meeting's agenda were items related to defining which sects fall within the ambit of Islam, as well as the imposition of jizya (poll tax). In the past, the council has taken a stance endorsing

child marriage. Clearly, the CII has a penchant for indulging in explosive debate rather than giving progressive solutions to the country's many faith-related problems. These examples of retrogressive thinking justify calls for its disbandment. There is much the council can discuss, including burning issues such as sectarianism, terrorism and rising extremism — problems that have torn the country apart, yet that have not been discussed in a critical and constructive manner by the clergy. The CII has chosen to raise divisive issues and weigh in with regressive views at a time when moderation and a pluralistic ethos are required in society. Moreover, if its members cannot behave in a civilised manner, it is all the more reason to wrap up the CII.

*Published in Dawn, December 31st, 2015*

## Keenjhar Lake

IT is a story that, sadly enough, appears in seemingly endless iterations across the country: official neglect and poor planning leading to the degeneration of valuable resources, and the resultant fallout on both the environment and the communities that eke out a living through it. As reported by this newspaper earlier this week, the biodiversity at Keenjhar Lake in lower Sindh has been practically devastated by the unabated discharge over many years of effluent into it from neighbouring industrial areas. Moreover, the creation of an irrigation link canal several years ago, has led to incoming fish seed being diverted away from the lake, while the unchecked spread of the invasive and toxic floating aquatic fern *Salvinia*



*December 2015*

molesta, which the locals hold responsible for the low fish stock, has left a skin disease that renders any catch worthless.

As noted, variations of this tale are found across the country; are there any reasons that officialdom through the years should have afforded Keenjhar Lake priority and made hectic efforts to reverse a deplorable situation that has time and again been pointed out by both domestic and international forums? Consider just these few facts: this is the second largest freshwater lake in the country, and a major source of water for Karachi and parts of Thatta district. It is also a wildlife sanctuary and a Ramsar site, which refers to the international treaty by the same name for the conservation and sustainable utilisation of wetlands. In a country that is ranked as near 'water-stressed' and where it is feared that climate change will result in all sorts of complications, this sort of neglect is nothing short of criminal. Efforts by this newspaper to contact people in official corridors for an answer were met with either silence or the shelving of responsibility. Meanwhile, conditions at the lake itself continue to get worse. What might it take for officialdom to wake up? That, it would appear, is an impossible question to answer.

*Published in Dawn, December 31st, 2015*















