

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of February, 2015

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Youth skiing camp

IT is easy to forget that just a few years ago, many areas in Pakistan attracted bustling tourist traffic and there were several spots and resorts that showed the potential of achieving world-class standards.

Much of this activity, and the economies it drove, have dried up since the country became mired in militancy and terrorism, especially in the north.

This context lends greater significance to the few, but crucial, efforts that continue to be made with a view to clawing back to normalcy. It is thus heartening that the Pakistan Youth Outreach Programme recently organised a youth skiing camp at Zartghurben, a ski resort that lies a four-hour trek from the Shimshal valley in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Take a look: [The beautiful side of Pakistan](#)

Sponsored by several institutions, including the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, the event brought together 13 women and 20 men from Karachi, Islamabad, Hunza and Shimshal, with two professional Austrian ski trainers on hand to teach the novices the difference between their baseplates and their baskets.

Understandably, all the participants were pleased, with the president of the programme Mirza Ali — who, along with his sister Samina Baig, made headlines last year when they scaled the highest peaks on each of the world's continents —

renewing his commitment to promoting winter sports in Pakistan.

The initiative shown by this group is commendable, and should come as a reminder to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government that there is much that needs to be done in the province vis-à-vis tourism.

One of the first steps could be the rebuilding of the Malam Jabba ski resort, in its heyday the largest such facility in the country with a much-appreciated infrastructure.

Sadly, the resort was burned down by militants in June 2008, after having been closed for nearly a year while the area was under thrall of militancy. Injecting funds into and re-energising activities such as skiing, trekking and climbing would be one way of resisting the obscurantist push. The path to normalcy lies in revitalising what groups such as the banned TTP are trying to eliminate.

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Non-serious approach

WHILE religiously inspired terrorism continues to take a bloody toll on Pakistan, there is little evidence that the state is taking intelligent steps to root out militancy.

If anything, the government tends to announce half-baked measures that, on the surface, appear to make it look serious, but in reality mean little where neutralising militant infrastructure is concerned.

Take for example the disclosures made in the Senate by Minister of State for Interior Baleeghur Rahman on Friday. The minister told the house that “only” 23 madressahs in Pakistan were receiving foreign funding. What was particularly incomprehensible was Mr Rahman’s claim that no seminary in Punjab received foreign funds.

Also read: [Federal minister accuses Saudi govt of destabilising Muslim world](#)

Assuming that his figures are correct, the fact remains that it is not the seminaries where sources of funding — foreign or local — are known that are the problem; it is the madressahs that are unregistered and unregulated that pose the biggest security threat.

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar recently said that 90pc of madressahs had no link to terrorism. Even if we accept that, what about the remaining 10pc? One estimate suggests there are 20,000 registered and 40,000 unregistered seminaries in Pakistan.

Once we do the math it emerges that there are — at a minimum — hundreds of madressahs with thousands of pupils on their rolls that may have some connection with militancy.

Hence to say that only a handful of seminaries receive foreign funding and leave it at that smacks of denial; the problem is much more complex and also involves support for madressahs from local sources whose credentials must be checked.

One part of the problem is identifying and taking action against those seminaries that are actively promoting militancy and sectarianism. But looking at the bigger picture, there are countless madressahs that — while not having overtly violent agendas — provide the groundwork for militancy to thrive.

When young minds are taught to distrust and disassociate from members of other sects and religions, the seeds of militancy are planted. If such brainwashing intensifies, there is only a short distance from disassociating from the ‘other’ and physically eliminating him.

The only solution is for the state to register and regulate all institutions imparting religious education and keep an eye on the curriculum to ensure no hate material is being taught. The clerical establishment has and will continue to resist all official efforts at regulation, but the state must act if it is serious about achieving its counterterrorism and de-radicalisation goals.

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Unease about US-India deal

ADVISER to the Prime Minister on National Security and Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz had some tough words on Thursday for the attempt by the US and India to put back on track the civilian nuclear deal between those countries.

Speaking at a seminar in Islamabad, Mr Aziz said, “Pakistan is examining the imbalance and the possible ways and means for redressing it,” and added that “Pakistan’s key concern is the paramount importance of strategic stability in South Asia”.

Take a look: [The wolf and the fox](#)

But what do those words mean? The Pakistani state has always resented and been suspicious of the Indo-US nuclear deal for essentially two reasons: one, the security establishment here fears that a flow of foreign nuclear fuel into India for civilian purposes will free up more of India’s own fuel supplies for diversion to military purposes; and two, the deal is a milestone in India’s attempt to elevate itself into the so-called global big boys’ club.

In addition, hardliners here with long memories are not convinced that the safeguards built into the 2008 deal will prevent a replay of the 1970s when India first tested a nuclear device using nuclear resources that the Indian government had pledged were only being used for peaceful purposes.

Ultimately, it comes down to India getting a deal that is clearly not even on the negotiating table with Pakistan — the legacy of the A.Q. Khan proliferation network; concerns about the

security of Pakistan’s nuclear assets from the militant threat; and Pakistan’s not having the growing economic heft of India or the ability to help the US balance out a rising China have all contributed to make a deal for Pakistan a non-starter.

The Pakistani state’s response though can be one of two. It can either acknowledge that strategic stability is linked fundamentally to political relations and not try and make deterrence about simply pursuing more and more missiles and nuclear warheads, or it can take the paranoia route by acquiring more missiles, delivery platforms and warheads of sizes big and small.

Perhaps what Mr Aziz should have done is deliver a more substantive, nuanced set of comments, one that highlighted the choices for the political government and the military establishment and that would inform the apex nuclear decision-making body, the National Command Authority.

If a reinvigorated US-India nuclear deal requires Pakistan to tweak its own national security strategy, would it not make sense to contribute to the debate and shape it rather than just reiterate stock, tired phrases?

Consider that it has been nearly a decade since the deal with India has been proposed and its broad contours known. What has Pakistan done in the meantime?

Has the military component of the national security response ever been debated? What about the economic and diplomatic components of national security and strategic stability? It seems words come easier than policymaking here.

Breakthrough in sight?

The long-running saga that is the PTI's quest to get the PML-N government to create a high-powered commission to investigate allegations of electoral fraud in the May 2013 general election is set to take a new twist – hopefully the last in this most wretched of affairs.

PPP Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Khurshid Shah is set to mediate between the two sides this week and, with both sides welcoming mediation by Mr Shah at this stage, there is surely a chance to put the finishing touches on an agreement that has proved elusive for so many months.

Until recently, the problem essentially was that the PML-N wanted an inquiry commission to work on terms that would ensure no possibility of mid-term elections while the PTI wanted a commission that could pave the way for mid-term elections, either directly or indirectly by giving the PTI enough ammunition to reinvigorate its anti-government street protests.

So whether PML-N leaders like Finance Minister Ishaq Dar spoke endlessly about their being only minor differences on the terms of reference for the inquiry commission or the PTI leadership spoke innocently of just wanting the facts to emerge, each side was ultimately suspicious of the other's true intentions.

Now though the situation has changed significantly. A series of concessions by the PTI has made it clear that the party is retreating from its position of demanding mid-term elections – the decision to contest the upcoming Senate elections being

just the latest sign that the PTI is returning to full-time participation in parliamentary politics.

In the present scenario, even were the PTI to try and twist the facts and findings of an inquiry commission to once again demand the ouster of the government, it would be perhaps one too many a flip-flop for the public to digest – and without mass public support the PTI will never be able to topple the government.

So the risk of betrayal by the PTI is lower than ever, while the onus of responsibility on the PML-N is greater than ever. Much as the PTI and PML-N would like to cast this as a private, albeit high-stakes, dispute, what the affair is really about is the goal of free and fair elections where every vote cast is counted and is legitimate.

That is the people's right – the right that the government owes to the people and which needs to be delivered to the people.

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America's U-turn on Afghan Taliban

Even when the US does get it right, it tends to do so for mostly the wrong reasons. The Afghan Taliban, according to a White House spokesperson, are not a terrorist organisation but an armed insurgency.

A belated, welcome realisation — and a correct one at that — on the part of the US government, but then there are the circumstances that triggered it.

The war in Afghanistan is over — at least the war that the US-led coalition was fighting since 2001 — and the fight against the Islamic State is picking up, so now it appears the time is right to do everything possible against the new enemy and try and get along with the old.

Read: [White House declines to call Afghan Taliban 'terrorists'](#)

That the White House deputy spokesperson Eric Shultz was trying to explain why it was possible to do a prisoner swap with the Afghan Taliban but not the IS makes the matter all the more farcical.

The consequences though are anything but. It was only in the very recent past after all that the US turned a blind eye as it allies in the Middle East did everything they could to topple the Syrian regime of Bashar Al Assad — including supplying arms and creating the conditions that led to the rise of IS.

Now, the Americans are reluctant to talk about Mr Assad and everything is about IS. But before IS and Assad, there was Iraq. And before Iraq there was Afghanistan.

And before that there was Latin America. And before that there was some other region or country in which the US made disastrous miscalculations — and then left it to others to pick up the pieces.

Also read: [US may not target Mullah Omar after 2014](#)

To be sure, the Afghan Taliban, whether designated an armed insurgency or terrorist organisation, have made some terrible decisions of their own — not least of which was the choice to align with and protect Al Qaeda on Afghan soil.

Ultimately, however, the Afghan Taliban have no ambitions outside the territory of Afghanistan, and are an inwards, nationalist movement that has little in common with the pan-Islamist ideology of groups such as Al Qaeda and the banned TTP.

While the US corrects its past mistakes — and makes new ones elsewhere — it only emphasises the need for the Afghan and Pakistani states to put their own regional house in order.

After outlasting the American will to fight and with an Afghan army and police system that is already reeling, the Afghan Taliban believe they have more reason than ever to keep the pressure on, go for outright victory and take Afghanistan back into the 1990s.

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Where then is their incentive to negotiate with the Afghan government? Even some of the best-case scenarios describe a non-reconciled future as involving an Afghan government that cannot be toppled and an insurgency that cannot be defeated. The key, as ever, remains Pakistan: push the Afghan Taliban to negotiate and accept that a return to the 1990s is unacceptable.

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Gas for steel

THE threats by Tuwairqi Steel Mills Ltd to uproot their investment and move it to Saudi Arabia if an agreement on gas supply is not reached quickly ought to be taken more seriously than they are being taken currently. The project's requirements are large, and admittedly this is a time of gas shortages in the country and every decision on incremental allocations needs to be weighed carefully.

But options other than complete dismissal of their case are available. In other situations, where gas claimants are loud but their claims not as strong, the government has gone the extra mile to make arrangements that satisfy the claimant without adversely impacting the allocations granted to others. The key example is the CNG sector, and the new arrangement to allow CNG stations to import their own LNG and sell it in the market. Given the will, the government can no doubt find a similar proposal for TSML that can satisfy their needs for

feedstock gas without eating into others' allocations or creating a large subsidy bill.

Reportedly, many members of the cabinet, and those in attendance at the Economic Coordination Committee, are willing to show flexibility in searching for a resolution. The government should show more seriousness when dealing with one of the largest foreign investments in the country in over a decade, especially in an area as crucial as steel, where the country already suffers from a lack of capacity. This isn't about TSML alone. Other foreign investors are watching the matter carefully, and if the perception settles in that doing business in Pakistan is fraught with risk resulting from the capriciousness of government decision-makers, it will have a very negative impact on future investors' appetite for stakes in Pakistan. A way out is not impossible to find, and the government should show more seriousness of purpose is searching for a solution. The stakes are too high in this affair to merit such dismissive treatment.

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Mission accomplished?

GOING by what the government's spokesman is saying, it would appear the economy has turned a corner and is now poised for sustainable growth.

The emphasis placed by Information Minister Pervaiz Rasheed on the government's track record in the economy is a little baffling coming on the heels of an announcement by the finance minister that the fiscal framework will need to be adjusted to accommodate a higher budget deficit, and the twin petrol and power crises we have just emerged from.

Also read: [Economy rejuvenated by PML-N govt, claims minister](#)

How is this the right time to be reminding everyone of what a stellar job the government has been doing in managing the economy since memories of mismanagement and a near-crisis situation in fuel supply are still fresh?

Nevertheless, now that the minister has played the economy card, it is worth examining the case he has built to substantiate his point.

For one, he says the FBR has collected more revenue this year than the last. But the increase, 12pc, shown in his numbers hardly inspires confidence. Recall that just last week the State Bank said that a 42pc growth rate is required in the second half of the fiscal year to meet the revenue target.

Far from using revenue collection as a yardstick of stellar performance, what the minister needs to explain is why revenue collection has lagged so abysmally thus far. It is also somewhat strange to use remittances as an indicator of economic performance.

If there is an increase in remittances, it owes entirely to developments that took place prior to the arrival of this government. Inflation has remained contained, and this might have something to do with limited monetisation of the fiscal deficit, although the shift in deficit financing towards bank sources has had other adverse consequences that the minister did not go into.

In every area listed by the information minister, the shine comes off the numbers when examined closely. Reserves had risen, but largely due to borrowings and one-off inflows.

The stock market is no indicator of economic performance. The GDP growth rate has seen some improvement, but in fits and starts. Last year, for instance, a large boost to GDP came as gas provision started idle capacity in fertiliser plants, hardly a turning of the corner as such.

At a time when the government's team is sitting down with the IMF in Dubai to go over the targets for the release of the next tranche, this statement appears to be an attempt on the part of the minister to set the stage for some positive spin.

But the fiscal framework is under serious stress and exports are continuing to fall, placing a large question mark over the overall state of manufacturing. Surely the government can do better than trying to put a positive spin on the situation.

Attack on gas pipeline

EVER so often, we are reminded of the symbiotic relationship between Balochistan and the rest of Pakistan.

On Sunday, Baloch separatists blew up a 24-inch diameter gas pipeline in Dera Bugti, which reduced gas supplies to Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and some other parts of the country by a massive 25 million cubic feet, and severely impacted the textile sector which is already under strain from power shortages.

This is the latest in a spate of attacks carried out by insurgents on infrastructure and vital installations — including gas and power distribution networks and railway tracks — within the last few weeks.

Also read: [Militants blow up gas pipeline in Balochistan](#)

Gas pipelines have been attacked in several districts of Balochistan, including Jaffarabad, Naseerabad, Sohbat Pur and Dera Bugti. On Jan 25, the bombing of two major transmission lines in Naseerabad district precipitated one of the worst power failures Pakistan has ever experienced, plunging 80pc of the country into darkness.

A few days before that, three towers of the Guddu-Sibi transmission line were blown up, causing disruption to the national grid. Also in January, a Rawalpindi-bound passenger train sustained damage in a bombing near Quetta although luckily no one was hurt.

According to estimates, during the last four years insurgents have carried out more than 100 attacks on gas pipelines and around 45 targeting trains/railway tracks in Balochistan.

Although the sabotage of gas and power supplies does not per se result in casualties, it has a far-reaching impact on the economy and quality of life.

Gas for heating is in particularly high demand in the bitter cold, which means that targeting gas pipelines in winter makes strategic sense for Baloch insurgents.

The string of attacks recently also underscores the fact that notwithstanding the heavy presence of paramilitary forces in many parts of the province, there is hardly any way to secure thousands of kilometres of gas pipelines — which are either exposed or just beneath the surface — or electricity transmission networks and railway tracks.

At the most, security at key installation points can and should be enhanced. Overall though, it is clear that this is an unsustainable situation that cannot be resolved through military might, but requires a well-considered political solution.

The central government must revive contacts with those who may be better placed to bridge the chasm of mistrust and long-standing grievances between the ‘angry Baloch’ and the state. And the establishment must demonstrate the wisdom to stand aside and let this happen.

Published in Dawn, February 3rd, 2015

Road classic

YOU don't often see them on the streets ruled by grime and chaos as they are in Karachi; once in a while, though, the acute observer will notice heads turning as a vintage car tools along, hearkening back to a time when the streets were safer than they are now.

Like anywhere else, there are many of them in Pakistan's towns and cities, spending most of their time hidden away in garages, safe from harm.

Now and then, though, these stately vehicles gather together in a classy show of force, and when they do, it is impressive. So it was that for the many car enthusiasts in the city, the 3rd Annual Volkswagen Show that was held outside the Forum Mall on Sunday was a treat of the highest order — a chance to let go for a brief while the many cares this troubled metropolis imposes, and allow themselves to be absorbed, instead, by timeless style.

Also read: [Volkswagen show attracts many vehicles and fans](#)

Organised by the Volkswagen Club of Pakistan and Motorheads Pakistan, the weekend line-up included a number of classic Beetles, from the Microbus — some might remember the days when the vehicle was fondly referred to as the Kombi — to the popular 1972 model, a VW jeep, a convertible and even a tricycle hybrid created by an enthusiastic owner who calls it the 'Foxy Triangle'.

There may have been variety in how these cars looked, but all had one thing in common: a proud owner who had spent time and effort making sure that they were maintained in shipshape condition.

Vintage car exhibitions and rallies have become a pleasure that Pakistanis now encounter fairly frequently, and the dedication of the enthusiasts that made this so deserves high appreciation.

In a country where so much has gone wrong and where every day offers up new opportunities to lament, such efforts towards keeping a rosier picture fixed in people's minds take on greater meaning. More power, then, to the organisers of this rally, and may others follow suit.

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Shocking statements

IT is unfortunate that the statements made by ANP lawmaker Ghulam Ahmed Bilour on Monday did not invite the opprobrium they merited.

While most members of the house were pondering the Shikarpur tragedy, Mr Bilour chose to concern himself with Charlie Hebdo and offered to pay ‘bounty’ to the heirs of the Paris attackers.

Not content with this, he offered \$200,000 more to anyone who took the life of the magazine’s owner.

Also read: [Bilour's publicity stunt: A reward for the heirs of Charlie Hebdo attackers](#)

Since these statements cannot possibly be explained away as condemnation of the publication’s editorial choices, in a civilised polity they would have been recognised for what they are: at the very least, incitement to violence and the glorification of acts of terror.

Yet why should there be any surprise? In 2012, Mr Bilour similarly offered a ‘reward’ for the elimination of the person responsible for a film that was that year’s blasphemy flashpoint.

His zeal won him “complete amnesty” from the banned TTP — though his brother Bashir Bilour was not so lucky and was killed in a TTP-claimed attack. So whether the lawmaker was

moved by motives of religion or cynical self-preservation might be considered a moot point.

If it is appalling that such statements have come from a member of a party that is considered left-oriented and has suffered much at the hands of religious extremism, worse is the fact that they were made from the floor of the National Assembly, and that no one present saw it fit to object.

Evidently, even those sitting in the corridors of power prefer to keep silent rather than voice their dissent, and thus the need for justice and rule of law go unremarked upon. Just as religious, political and citizens’ groups have every right to protest peacefully against images they deem insulting to their religion, those in parliament who see little sense in calls for a violent response must also express their views openly.

A craven approach further empowers the extreme right’s narrative. What hope can there be if those that envision a prosperous Pakistan cannot close ranks?

Published in Dawn, February 4th, 2015

Illegal money

IT is heartening that the interior minister wants to see a more strenuous effort against money laundering and terror finance, as well as hundi and hawala transactions.

It would be more encouraging still if he had any ideas on how to strengthen these efforts beyond simply thumping his fist on the table and demanding action.

In a meeting with the Federal Investigation Agency on Monday, the minister reportedly said he wanted stronger action against hundi and hawala operators, and “a strict watch” on suspicious transactions that might be linked with terrorism.

Also read: [No proper training to investigate terror financing, sub-committee finds](#)

The number of suspicious transactions detected in the last year are indeed very low and a far more robust effort is required if the action against terrorists is to succeed.

But does the minister know that hundi and hawala transactions are not even scheduled offences under the Anti Terrorism Act or the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act?

Does he know that they become scheduled offences only under an ad hoc arrangement whereby a notification is issued every year by his own ministry?

And does he realise that the laws and guidelines that require banks to identify suspicious transactions are very weak and ambiguous for the detection of terror-related transactions?

The minister could put his own energies to better use by championing reform of the legislation under which hundi and hawala operators can be proceeded against, as well as reform of the laws and guidelines to facilitate the detection and reporting of suspicious transactions by banks.

Detecting hundi and hawala transactions is still relatively easier, but tracking terror-related funds is going to require very careful coordination among various law-enforcement and regulatory bodies, as well as intelligence agencies.

The interior minister’s powers can be very useful in helping to bring about this coordination. A detailed list of individuals and entities whose financial activities need to be monitored must be created and then communicated to the banks.

Banks need to be urged under threat of penalty to play a stronger role in tracking these individuals and entities on the list. Law enforcement can only begin once the architecture of a stronger detection and monitoring regime has been built.

Demands for action without the necessary reforms risk creating unnecessary panic in the financial system as the law-enforcement agencies will be compelled to apprehend people without strong probable cause. We can only hope that the minister has feasible ideas on how to bring about these reforms.

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Uncertain action

DESPITE the pretence of movement, there is an unmistakable sense that the state's fight against militancy has stalled — again.

The political and military leadership would likely reject such a claim. They would point to near-daily statements made by senior government and military officials, frequent meetings and reports of so-called intelligence-based operations that result in the capture or death of sundry militants.

They would also point out the serious and sustained interest that the very highest level of the political and military leadership has demonstrated since the Peshawar tragedy — just yesterday was a corps commanders meeting in Rawalpindi to apparently assess the security situation in the country and on-going military-led operations while on Monday the federal government promised the provinces to more than match their interest. All of that, however, would be missing the point.

Also read: [Corps commanders conference held at GHQ](#)

Much of the focus of the government and military has been on a narrow, militarised version of a response against the spectrum of extremism, terrorism and militancy.

It amounts to casting a wide net, catching a few terrorists and disrupting parts of the physical infrastructure of the militants. What the state most certainly is not doing is developing a strategy that goes beyond hunting down the terrorists of today and ensuring that the supply of jihadists, militants, terrorists

and extremists is progressively reduced in the years and generations to come.

Essentially, the state's response so far amounts to standing at the mouth of the militant pipeline and killing or capturing many who tumble out, without in any way trying to get to the source of the problem or attempting to stem the spread of extremism and militancy in society.

Perhaps it would help to return to the specifics — or just basic numerics — of the National Action Plan. To begin with, the 20 points in NAP were supposed to be elaborated on and explained in detail later, but, as expected, that has not happened as yet.

Other than the legal framework for military courts and some ostensible movement on urban, counterterrorism capabilities, there has been virtually no interest in implementing, or even understanding, the other elements of NAP.

It is not too late yet — surely, in the context of doing everything to save Pakistan from a terrorist and militant oblivion, it can never be too late — but there are only so many opportunities the state will get before the consequences of inaction grow larger than even the Peshawar atrocity.

It is, for example, not enough for the state to hint at a sequential approach to dealing with militancy when all that implies is delaying action endlessly; after all, there have been several so-called game changers and turning points in the fight against militancy with the status quo eventually asserting itself.

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Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and army chief Gen Raheel Sharif have a greater, inter-generational, burden on their shoulders than either appears to realise.

Published in Dawn, February 4th, 2015

Barriers on the roads

AT his appearance before a Sindh High Court bench on Tuesday in connection with a petition regarding barricades on public roads, Karachi's commissioner said that they did not hinder the movement of citizens.

To claim this is to deny reality. Bollards and barricades that impede traffic, container blockades occupying footpaths and layers of security cordons encroaching on roads are unfortunate realities in the city.

Meanwhile security concerns only seem to intensify, given these times when government and military installations, premises of foreign consulates and residences of important personalities face varying levels of threat.

Also read: [Removal of street barriers in city ordered](#)

In Islamabad and Karachi in particular, many roads have been rendered inaccessible to the public for so long that they have virtually been forgotten about.

To take just two examples, consider Bilawal Chowk in Karachi, and the section of Aabpara Road in Islamabad fronting the headquarters of an intelligence agency — both formerly key thoroughfares.

For years now, road users have had to take detours to reach their destination near such areas, where no balance is struck between genuine security concerns and public access.

Unable to ensure foolproof security, law-enforcement agencies take the easy way out and erect a wall or put down a barrier; or bollards are placed so that traffic has to slow down ostensibly to facilitate inspection by law-enforcement personnel. Either way, the convenience of the public is sacrificed with nary a thought, and the impediments left exactly where they are.

In this context, then, it must be welcomed that the matter has been taken up by both the Supreme Court, and the Sindh High Court. On Tuesday, a bench of the former summoned the chairman of the Capital Development Authority and ordered the removal of all hurdles within 24 hours.

The same day in Karachi, the Sindh High Court directed the city commissioner and law-enforcement agencies to similarly remove illegal barriers and submit a detailed report in a fortnight. In Islamabad, as many as 216 roads have restricted access — a large figure given the size of the city — and in Karachi, as claimed by the petitioner, some 70pc of roads are similarly affected.

It is hoped that these august houses continue to pursue the matter. As it is, the general public is barely ever given a reason to believe that it figures in any of the authorities' schemes; at

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the very least, the roads and footpaths need to be given back to the users.

Published in Dawn, February 5th, 2015

Corridor furore

IF any proof were required that when it comes to Pakistan's relationship with China, people tend to lose their minds, then Tuesday's session of the Senate provided it in considerable quantity.

Some senators hailing from parties from Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa led a loud protest against what they alleged were changes being made in the route of the Pakistan-China economic corridor, a project that aims to connect the port of Gwadar to China's Xinjiang region.

Also read: [Livid over corridor route, senators walk out of Senate twice](#)

The senators, from parties including the PkMAP and the ANP, as well as an independent, first made angry speeches against the alleged route change then walked out of the Senate in protest, even as the government members tried in vain to tell them that no such change in route had been approved.

One senator, independent Humayun Mandokhel, was so swept away with emotion that he decided to switch loyalties

altogether and sit on the opposition benches, where he was received with loud thumping on the desks.

There is a point when desk thumping begins to sound like chest beating, and this was one example. The rhetoric that was hurled at the government included allusions to Kalabagh dam, and a dire warning from Senator Ilyas Bilour of the ANP that "the country will not remain united if the route is changed".

What is this if not overwrought emotionalism regarding what is otherwise a fairly straightforward infrastructure project? What evidence is there of a route change? And how will the country "not remain united" if there is indeed a route change? What is it about this proposed road project that got the senators so worked up when other far more pressing matters regarding their respective provinces hardly elicit much concern from them?

If the senators in question have evidence of an arbitrary change of route, designed to benefit a few individuals rather than satisfy the technical requirements of the project, they should present it.

For its part, the government should also bring more transparency into its dealings with China, especially in the reasons behind the shelving of the Gadani power projects.

Many politicians tend to go overboard when it comes to the country's China conversation, with the government employing the usual rhetoric about Sino-Pak friendship and, in this case, opposing politicians invoking Kalabagh dam and the unity of the country.

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What is lost sight of every time is that the projects being negotiated with China are purely commercial ventures with little more than the cold play of geopolitics behind them. They should not be vested with such over-the-top emotion, nor be seen as some sort of prize to be fought over so bitterly.

A little level headedness and transparency will go a long way to ensure that our China conversation remains focused on the country's national interests, as opposed to the parochial interests of a few.

Published in Dawn, February 5th, 2015

Karachi literature festival

“A ROOM without books is like a body without a soul,” said Marcus Cicero a long time ago. One could say the same about a people without a love of books. Thankfully though, many Pakistanis have rediscovered the joy of the printed word — if they had ever lost it at all — as the increasing number of literary festivals all over the country indicate. The Karachi Literature Festival 2015 begins tomorrow, the sixth iteration since it launched in 2010. It has since evolved into a much-anticipated event, an intellectual and cultural oasis in a teeming, frenetic city whose internal tensions often threaten to tip it into violence. Audience numbers have risen exponentially, from about 5,000 in 2010 to 70,000 last year. Speakers/participants have similarly gone up from 35 to over 200 over the same period. This year, although the number of sessions has been reduced, they have been crammed into two

days, which is certain to leave many among the audience feeling they have a choice too many. Nevertheless, as always, the event will offer a platform for debate and discourse through panel discussions and talks on a diverse range of issues, as well as nearly 30 book launches.

While KLF is said to have taken its inspiration from the Jaipur Literature Festival, it has provided the impetus for other similar events in Pakistan, some of them organised by the KLF team itself. There are now literary festivals in Lahore and Islamabad, as well as children's literary festivals — proving that instilling a love of books in children is possible even in an age of instant gratification via video games and multiple television channels. Nor are such events limited to the major urban centres of the country. Gwadar hosted a well-attended book festival last month. Some days before that, Shah Abdul Latif University in Khairpur was the venue of an international literature festival. All of which leads you to believe that the battle for the soul of Pakistan is far from over.

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Islamic State's brutality

IT remains to be seen whether the strong verbal reaction to the recent burning to death of a Jordanian pilot and the beheading of two Japanese hostages will translate into a punitive response to the so-called Islamic State's threat to human values in the cradle of civilisation.

The barbaric form of death inflicted on Jordan's Moaz al-Kasasbeh and the killing of the Japanese hostages are only two examples of IS brutality in a long list of crimes against humanity since the group began its murderous but unstoppable military advance from western Iraq to sweep into Syria and reach the Turkish border.

Jordan's King Abdullah II vowed an "earth-shattering response", Saudi King Salman bin Abdul Aziz called the pilot's murder an "odious crime", Al Azhar denounced it as un-Islamic, while the UAE said this was "a brutal escalation" of the war by the terrorist group.

Know more: [Jordan executes 2 Al Qaeda prisoners after IS kills pilot](#)

An angry Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe, pledged his government's continued support to the war on terror, and US President Barack Obama promised "decisive action". But, despite this diplomatic rhetoric, the situation on the ground hasn't changed much, and the IS militia looks unbeaten.

The only setback the militants have suffered is their failure to take Kobane. But this relative success for the US-led coalition was due to the tenacity shown by the Kurdish fighters.

Jordan has responded by hanging two jihadists, but, as remarked by the dead pilot's father, execution is no response, because what is missing is a concerted military offensive commensurate with the task involved.

In fact, it is surprising that, with such a massive military presence in the region, the US is unable to reverse the IS tide.

Also puzzling is Turkey's aloofness from the events unfolding in its 'underbelly', as is the total absence from the scene of the Iraqi government.

The truth is that vast sections of people in the Middle East do not believe all parties in the US-led coalition have their heart in the fighting, and the Islamic State's militants enjoy many parties' tacit sympathy.

Published in Dawn, February 6th, 2015

Targeted polio workers

AS the state struggles to formulate an effective counterterrorism policy, it should not forget the threat that militants continue to pose to Pakistan's polio eradication efforts.

A number of vaccinators and security men deputed to guard them were killed throughout the country last year; and if the events of the last few weeks are any indication, far from being challenged, this violent trend is continuing in 2015.

As reported, a policeman deputed to guard vaccinators was shot dead in Quetta on Wednesday. The officer was not on duty when he was targeted. On the same day, two polio workers were savagely attacked and injured in a village in Jacobabad district while they were administering drops.

Also read: [Two polio workers injured in attack](#)

Earlier in January, at least two policemen guarding vaccinators were killed in Karachi in different incidents. Such brazen targeting of individuals associated with the anti-polio campaign poses a major question mark over official claims of progress on the counterterrorism front. If anti-militancy operations are indeed yielding results, how would it be possible for attackers to target polio workers at will?

This clearly shows that massive loopholes exist both in the state's anti-militancy drive, and the campaign to counter polio.

Perhaps the state has still not realised the extreme danger polio poses to Pakistan. Figures show that last year, there were just over 300 polio cases reported in the country — by far the highest number in the world.

If earnest efforts are not made to vaccinate all children and neutralise the militants standing in the way of vaccinators, we may see an equally high, or even higher, number of cases this year. We fail to see which insurmountable barriers are standing in the way of thorough anti-polio campaigns.

It is surprising to note that even in parts of Syria and Iraq controlled by the self-styled Islamic State — an outfit hardly known for its commitment to humanitarian values — the militant group has allowed polio vaccinators access to children.

It is also true that vaccinations are continuing in Syria despite a devastating, ongoing civil war. Nigeria, another polio-endemic country which also faces a vicious Islamist insurgency spearheaded by Boko Haram, has seen no new polio cases since July 2014.

If Syria, Iraq and Nigeria, countries with just as volatile — if not more — security situations as Pakistan, can have the upper hand over the spread of polio, what is stopping us? Simply put, the anti-polio campaign — particularly its security — must be a national priority.

Published in Dawn, February 6th, 2015

No direction in anti-militancy fight

A PATTERN has quickly been established: the government will talk up every success, mostly minor, in the fight against militancy while simultaneously warning that the fight is a long-term one.

That has the benefit of gaining credit for even assumed successes while deflecting the blame in case — rather, when — something goes terribly wrong.

The post-Peshawar world is beginning to look very much like the pre-Peshawar world. On Wednesday, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan took to the floor of parliament to claim a major breakthrough against anti-Shia Hazara militants, with a nationwide, possibly even a regional, network being broken up on the back of close civil-military intelligence cooperation here.

Also read: [No short-term solution to terrorism: Nisar](#)

To the extent that the state is taking anti-Shia Hazara militancy seriously and even deploying significant resources to prevent attacks, the actions should be welcomed and the state should be encouraged to do more.

Shia Hazaras are perhaps uniquely vulnerable even in the spectrum of militant targets and given the savage, mind-numbing atrocities committed against them in recent years, they deserve to be accorded the very highest priority.

For all the credit the interior minister would like to take, however, there remains a basic problem: there is still no clarity on what exactly is the state's strategy to fight all forms of extremism, terrorism and militancy.

It appears that government officials believe that the mere repetition of the National Action Plan or reference to it is enough by way of explanation.

Reality suggests that NAP is anything but a coherent, cohesive and well-delineated plan to fight militancy. But the government seems unconcerned and unhurried about trying to move towards such a plan.

Worse, it appears to believe that such a plan already exists. But it does not. Where, for example, are the lists of banned organisations, their leaderships, their financing networks and what specific legal steps have been taken to shut down the public and clandestine operation of such groups?

Can there really be said to be a National Action Plan if something as basic as a comprehensive listing of the enemy is yet to be created or made public?

That is not wanton criticism. If questions about the details can be obfuscated by counter-details by the government — mere claims of breaking up terrorist networks mean little unless identities, affiliations and roles are revealed — there is also a simpler route.

Yesterday was Kashmir Day and to mark the day a number of rallies were held in various parts of the country. Simply, how

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many extremists, terrorists and militants were present at those rallies?

How many of those rallies were organised and led by avowedly militant groups and their leaders? The state, both the civilian and military sides of it, can have little credibility when it claims to be fighting one side of the militancy spectrum while simultaneously enabling another part of it.

Published in Dawn, February 6th, 2015

Napa turns 10

Gathered together to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the facility, the administrators and faculty of Karachi's National Academy of the Performing Arts looked proud of their work, and justifiably so.

Ever since it was established under the aegis of the Musharraf regime and supported by a grant from the centre, the academy has had an appreciable effect on the city's theatre and music landscape.

The people it has trained have not just swelled the ranks of well-taught actors, directors and musicians, etc, they have also helped raise standards in fields other than those taught directly at Napa, such as television.

Read: [Napa celebrates 10th founding anniversary](#)

The school has successfully met challenges such as developing from scratch a curriculum that incorporates elements of both

Eastern and Western academic thought, and teaching primarily in Urdu despite the paucity of texts in the language. But perhaps its most important contribution is to bring the disciplines it teaches out of the realm of the amateur, to which they had long been relegated, and turn them professional.

In Napa's success, there is a lesson to be learnt. It is important that projects such as this should not have to depend on commercial viability, for that compromises the integrity and standards of their output.

State support is absolutely vital and once that is forthcoming, there is no dearth of interest and talent.

Sadly enough, the provincially administered Arts Councils that exist in a number of towns and cities were originally created with this very aim, but can hardly be said to now be carrying out such a supportive function. It is time for them to be revamped, and also for the Napa model to be replicated across the country.

Some might wonder at the need, given the uncertain times.

There is a simple point to ponder, though: at its heart, the conflict in Pakistan is a war of narratives — and where are narratives born and strengthened but in the creative arts?

Published in Dawn February 7th , 2015

Madressah reform

A RECENT interview in this paper with an office-bearer of an umbrella group representing madressahs of five major sects, the Ittehad-i-Tanzeemat-i-Madaris-i-Deenia, was very revealing precisely because it was so unforthcoming.

Maulana Mohammad Hanif Jalandhri, repeatedly avoided giving a direct answer to the query as to what precisely the ITMD finds so objectionable in the questionnaire for registration of madressahs in the country.

However, the religious establishment's reticence is matched by the government's unwillingness to clearly spell out its modus operandi regarding the registration and regulation of madressahs. The latter is part of the 20-point National Action Plan rolled out after the APS Peshawar attack.

Take a look: [Sound bytes: 'Consult us or forget about seminaries registration'](#)

Bringing madressahs into a regulatory framework was never going to be an easy undertaking. These institutions have long thrived in an environment where no questions have been asked of them, regarding either financing or curricula.

Now and then, reforms have been half-heartedly attempted but quietly abandoned in the face of an obdurate and aggressive religious establishment. Even at this watershed moment, instead of holding firm to its resolve to tackle one of the fundamental issues that have a bearing on extremism, the

response of the government has been weak, erring on the side of caution rather than the rulers asserting their writ.

The pushback from religious quarters that began with the furore created by Jamaat-i-Islami and the JUI-F over the 21st Amendment, which the parties decried as an attempt to link terrorism with religion, appears to have had the desired effect.

The interior minister may have had a point when he stated that 90pc of madressahs in Pakistan have no role in promoting terrorism. What he left unsaid was that the remaining 10pc is enough to create havoc in a multicultural, multifaith society: there are around 35,000 madressahs affiliated with the ITMD, a tally that does not take unregistered madressahs into account.

After all, these institutions are performing the critical task of shaping the minds of our young generation — 3.5 million of them, according to estimates. It is unfortunately in the very nature of a madressah education that it promotes conservative thinking, and many of these institutions do, at the very least, foster a divisive approach in society.

At the same time, it is also the state's dereliction of duty towards formal education that has created the conditions for madressahs to proliferate. Reform must therefore encompass not only madressahs but ordinary schools as well, with a revised curricula that promotes tolerance and inclusivity.

Published in Dawn February 7th , 2015

Obama's outreach

IF there is to be an honest effort to transform the mistrust and confrontation that characterises the relationship between many Western and Muslim societies into one of engagement and harmony, there is no alternative but to choose the path of dialogue to address prevailing tensions.

In this regard, Barack Obama's comments at Washington DC's National Prayer Breakfast on Thursday were a timely reminder — especially in an age where militants worldwide are claiming to fight in the name of Islam — that throughout history, believers of various faiths have used their religious convictions to commit atrocities.

Also read: [Extremism not unique to Islam, says Obama](#)

The US president cited some of the darker chapters from the world's past, such as the Crusades, the Inquisition and the history of slavery and segregation in America, to illustrate his point. Mr Obama added that the self-styled Islamic State is “distorting” Islam, and that people should “push back” against those who twist religion.

The US president's speech harks back to his landmark address to the Muslim world he made in Cairo in 2009, soon after moving into the White House. In that speech too he had hit all the right notes, seeking a “new beginning” with Muslim nations.

Yet between the 2009 speech and the latest comments, the gulf dividing the West — particularly the US — and the Muslim

world remains as wide as ever. Perhaps one of the biggest factors fuelling anti-Americanism, and with it extremism, in Muslim societies is the Palestine problem.

Despite over six decades in the wilderness, all too often subjugated to Israeli brutality, the Palestinian people still have no viable state of their own.

Hence when Mr Obama says US ties with Israel are “unbreakable”, as he did in Cairo, many in the Muslim world see Tel Aviv's excesses supported or condoned by Washington, even though in the same speech Mr Obama admitted that the Palestinians' plight was “intolerable”.

Also, the Afghan and Iraq wars have cast America as a belligerent aggressor in many Muslim eyes, willing to engineer regime change militarily. And despite all of America's talk of standing for human rights and democracy, Washington's support of Muslim despots and dictators sends the message to Muslim masses that when it is a question of strategic interests, the US is willing to look the other way as allies suppress their own people.

Indeed, many of the Muslim world's problems are of its own making. For example, the denial of fundamental rights to citizens by ruling elites in countless Muslim lands results in failed states and rising extremism. Hence the need for Muslim states to put their own house in order cannot be understated.

Mr Obama has pushed the dialogue in the right direction. We hope this spirit of engagement is continued so that a just resolution to the Palestine problem is reached, and that Western

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and Muslim states can cooperate to combat militancy, and work for a better future for their peoples.

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LG polls muddle

RAPPED by the judiciary several times over, three ‘delinquent’ provinces have finally shown what appears to be a grudging willingness to hold local government elections. At a meeting with Chief Election Commissioner Sardar Raza Khan in Islamabad on Friday, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa official gave May as the month for the polls, while Punjab and Sindh could only make promises for next November and March 2016 respectively. Undoubtedly, all three provinces are guilty of dodging the polls to what indeed is the first rung of democracy, but the dates given by Punjab and Sindh come as a rude shock. Both the PML-N and the PPP have been running these provinces for six years, and they still do not find themselves in a position to give their people democratic institutions at the grass roots. Even at this late stage the provinces have stirred only because the Supreme Court in its Jan 8 judgment asked the ECP to make arrangements for the polls and let the court know its programme at the next hearing on Feb 12.

That there are still hurdles to be overcome became clear at Friday’s proceedings. Since a census was held as far back as 1998, major changes in demography have rendered the existing constituencies outdated. The provinces had been asked to provide data to the ECP for the delimitation of constituencies. This was not done, and it is difficult to see how the poll process can be completed smoothly without the full involvement of the

provinces. In fact, Punjab’s commitment to the polls was conditional, for the official concerned told the meeting the promise to hold polls in November was subject to the fulfilment of certain prerequisites. These bureaucratic hitches apart, the truth is that all provincial governments fear the political consequences of local government polls if the results go against them. It is, thus, a matter of shame that the elected governments should deny their people the benefits of representative municipal bodies for partisan reasons.

Published in Dawn, February 8th, 2015

Serious allegations

THERE is no doubt that the truth behind the Baldia fire tragedy of 2012 — in which 258 workers perished — needs to emerge. While it is bad enough that the inferno was billed as one of the nation’s worst industrial disasters, the fact that the fire may have been caused deliberately is particularly disturbing. In this regard, the startling revelations about the incident made in court on Friday need to be thoroughly verified and cross-checked. According to a report, compiled by the joint investigation team probing the tragedy, filed with the Sindh High Court, a statement from the Rangers claims that individuals associated with the MQM deliberately set the factory on fire. As per information gleaned from a suspect — allegedly a Muttahida worker — by the paramilitary force, the factory was set on fire as its owners refused to pay extortion money. The report says a “party high official”, through a front

man, had demanded Rs200m in extortion money; when the owners did not pay the building was set on fire using chemical substances. These are very serious allegations and cannot be taken lightly. But before jumping to any conclusions we must realise that this claim is based on the ‘confession’ of just one individual who was picked up by the Rangers. A more detailed investigation is needed to reach the facts in this case. It is hoped scientific investigation methods are used to uncover the truth behind the inferno.

The onus now lies on the MQM to disprove the allegation and clear its name as the party or its activists have been accused of strong-arm tactics in the past. In fact, Muttahida chief Altaf Hussain himself has publicly lashed out at “corrupt and unwanted” elements within the party. In 2013 he had said there was a ban on party workers collecting ‘donations’, and that there was no room for land grabbers within the Muttahida’s ranks. The Coordination and Karachi Tanzeemi committees have also been shaken up in the recent past; the latter outfit was believed to have become too powerful even by some party members. Despite the MQM’s efforts at internal cleansing, the stigma caused by the activities of ‘unwanted elements’ remains, and the party will have to make a greater effort — especially in light of the latest allegations — to root out such forces. The fact is the Muttahida is a major player in Sindh’s politics, as well as nationally, and cannot afford to have black sheep within its fold.

Published in Dawn, February 8th, 2015

Confusion after IMF review

THE sixth review of Pakistan’s IMF programme has concluded successfully. The latter remains on track with all targets met and no waivers being sought. But confusion has arisen in the wake of an announcement that the revenue target envisaged in the programme has been revised downward while the fiscal deficit target remains the same, therefore implying that expenditure cuts will become necessary. The downward revision in the revenue target is actually Rs65bn going by Fund figures, or Rs119bn according to Finance Minister Ishaq Dar. The revenue target envisaged in the IMF programme is Rs2,756bn as of the last review, whereas the government budgeted revenue collection is Rs2,810bn. The new revenue target following the sixth review is now Rs2,691bn.

The matter becomes important because since January the government has been searching for ways to accommodate expenditures arising from implementation of the National Action Plan, and rehabilitation of the IDPs. These expenditures, which were not budgeted, are expected to soar in the second half of the fiscal year. In early January, the government expected to raise \$380m from the third donors’ conference held in Islamabad, but was disappointed when the United States failed to commit an expected \$250m for the rehabilitation of the IDPs. Only days later, Mr Dar announced that the fiscal deficit target ‘may remain above the target of 4.9pc of GDP’ due to expenses arising from implementation of NAP and rehabilitation of the IDPs. Then again, on the eve of his departure for Dubai to take part in negotiations with the Fund, the finance minister repeated that the fiscal deficit target

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for the year may not be met because of additional spending due to NAP and the IDPs.

So far, no figures have been released by the government about how large these expenses might be, but according to media reports the total sum may be as large as Rs100bn. The IMF mission chief has confirmed that the government delegation did indeed raise the matter of additional spending arising from NAP, but that no changes in the fiscal deficit target were approved. So the question naturally arises: if everyone now agrees that revenues will be lower than projected, and expenditures will be higher, how does the government intend to keep within the deficit target? One way could be for the government to step up its efforts to obtain international assistance. Another way could be through a hike in the deficit target and greater borrowing, steps not allowed under the fiscal terms agreed during the sixth review talks. The forthcoming spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank could provide an opportunity for the government to raise the matter of raising the deficit target with the IMF high-ups. But without these steps, there is a question mark hanging over the fiscal terms agreed during the just concluded sixth review negotiations.

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Purchase of vaccines

After the 18th Amendment, the procurement of vaccines was to be, ultimately, the responsibility of the provinces.

According to an understanding, the federal government had accepted the responsibility of obtaining the vaccination drugs for onward supply to the provinces until June 2015. Now the provinces — or at least two of them at present — want the same arrangement to continue beyond June.

Both Punjab and Balochistan favour a uniform vaccine procurement policy for the country, which is no surprise given that uniformity in outreach, quality and commitment for all parts of Pakistan is crucial for the success of the immunisation programme.

Read: [Arrangements made to launch new polio vaccine from July](#)

The surprising part is that this basic question has been left pending with only a few months to go for the deadline set for handing over the task of obtaining the vaccination drugs to the provinces.

The devolution dates back to July 2011 and this is an issue serious enough to have been decided long ago.

Now that the matter has been brought up for consideration, it has to be tackled with utmost urgency.

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The failure of the provinces to evolve a system of their own to deal with the crucial job apart, quite a few positives of the federal government acting as the national supplier have been mentioned.

For instance, economy of scale in the event of Islamabad buying on behalf of provinces is quite a solid reason.

It is also said that the Expanded Programme of Immunisation that exists at the federal level has the capacity to take up the job of procurement.

A report in this paper on Friday quoted an EPI official as saying that requests from the other two provinces — Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — are being ‘awaited’ before a decision could be taken for procurement of the vaccines at the federal level beyond June.

Immunisation is something that cannot afford the luxury of anyone ‘waiting’ to act. The formalities have to be overcome.

Take a look: [Lab tests show polio vaccine is not ‘Haram’](#)

If the provinces are not coming to the centre on this promptly, let the federal government go to them immediately to ensure the immunisation programme runs without any hiccups.

Published in Dawn, February 9th, 2015

Mysterious numbers

IT is an impressive figure — 10,616 individuals arrested in 14,886 raids conducted across the country since Dec 24 under the National Action Plan.

Which only makes the mystery even bigger: with thousands upon thousands of individuals arrested in anti-terrorism raids, how come nothing has been heard from any of the arrested, their families or their lawyers?

Usually, when someone is detained and charged with crimes as in the anti-terror scheme of things, there is some statement by the arrested, a protest by family members perhaps or even a news conference by legal representatives.

Take a look: [Over 10,000 arrested as National Action Plan against terror continues](#)

But the interior ministry, which passed on the latest data to the Prime Minister’s Office which made them public on Friday, appears to have found 10,616 of the rarest of individuals in Pakistan: those who are amenable to being arrested and charged with presumably serious crimes without so much as even trying to go public with their side of the story.

There is of course a much more likely explanation. The arrested are overwhelmingly drawn from a pool of the usual suspects — militants and extremists who are used to being periodically arrested or detained and then, after a suitable pause and easily dodged legal troubles, simply cycle back to active duty.

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There is no need for them to create a ruckus and they know the rules of this semi-formal game well enough to realise that there is no real danger of lengthy incarcerations or convictions that will stand on appeal.

The government may well challenge this notion. It has the easiest of routes available to it to do so — simply list the names of the individuals, state where they were arrested and by whom, name the groups they are alleged to be affiliated with and explain what crimes they are believed to have committed and are to be charged with.

Much as the government wants to be seen to be serious about implementing NAP, there are also pre-existing duties that it owes to the public, and even the individuals arrested.

Transparency and accountability are at the top of that list. The interior ministry's various law-enforcement and intelligence arms are overwhelmingly operating in the country's cities, towns and rural areas, not in Fata war zones where different rules apply.

The public has a right to know not just which extremist groups and militants are operating among the citizenry but also what the state is doing against individuals in the name of security. More transparency, please.

Published in Dawn, February 9th, 2015

YouTube: a calcified issue

THE outrage is over, the perceived hurt has healed and the piece of mischief that caused the furore in the first place has taken its place in the dustbin of history.

The world has moved on — except for Pakistan, which stubbornly refuses to come to terms with the realities of the age of information, and in doing so, continues to deprive its citizenry of internet freedoms.

We refer, of course, to the blockade on access to the file-sharing site YouTube. Imposed on Sept 12, 2012, this was originally an ill-thought-out fire-fighting measure, but more than two years later, matters stand exactly where they did that September.

Take a look: [‘No solution but to persist with YouTube ban’](#)

If anything, the issue has calcified: the site cannot generally be accessed from this country; those with the ability have found means of bypassing the ban; and the government is still casting about for ways and means to block content it considers blasphemous on the site.

Most recently, on Friday, Minister of State for Information Technology Anusha Rehman told the Senate that as a result of the Supreme Court ordering the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority to block all offending material, the matter had been reviewed several times but there was no way to do this other than by imposing a blanket ban on the site.

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The irony here is that it was Ms Rehman who, soon after taking office, promised the restoration of the site.

Leave aside the issue of offensive content, what this sorry story speaks volumes for is the state's attitude towards citizens' right to attain information — apparently, it really could not care less. In trying to ensure that access to selective content is restricted, it has completely shut down a site that is the gateway to information and entertainment for millions of people.

While other nations factor in and meet the challenges thrown up by the internet and a globalised world — including Muslim countries — Pakistan penalises its citizens under the pretext of protecting them from material they might — might — find offensive. Today it is YouTube; tomorrow it might be the internet in its entirety. And, the acerbic would argue, why stop here?

This piece of absurdity has to come to an end. Of the various potential solutions that have been thrown up during these two years, the most feasible might be the one suggested by Google itself but which the government does not seem to have pondered over much: the display of interstitial warnings on pages that contain objectionable material.

This, as the Lahore High Court observed last year while hearing a petition on the issue, would pin liability on the user who “consciously and deliberately ignore[d] the warning page” before accessing content that is offensive or in contravention of local laws.

The approach Pakistan has taken so far is not just laughably ineffective, it is indicative of just how out of touch the state is with technological realities.

Published in Dawn, February 9th, 2015

Ajmal's return

While the beleaguered Pakistan cricket team continues to grapple with the chequered form of its players and a spate of injuries ahead of the Cricket World Cup, ace off-spinner Saeed Ajmal's clearance by the International Cricket Council on Saturday has come as a morale booster.

Read: [Saeed Ajmal's bowling action declared 'legal'](#)

The player put in four months of a Herculean effort to correct a suspect bowling action, for which he was banned by the ICC last year, and made a swift return to the game.

Take a look: [ICC bans Saeed Ajmal from bowling](#)

As he underwent a number of biomechanics tests at London and Chennai, though without much success, his detractors insisted that Ajmal's brilliant career had come to a sad end.

Read: [Will this be the end of Ajmal?](#)

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The emergence of the talented Yasir Shah and Zulfiqar Baber in the back-to-back series in the UAE against Australia and New Zealand had further dampened Ajmal's chances of returning to the national team.

To his credit, Ajmal has remained focused throughout his period of banishment and has weathered the storm with determination, never succumbing to the heavy odds stacked against him.

Credit is also due to Ajmal's mentor and ex-Pakistan spin wizard Saqlain Mushtaq — the inventor of the magical delivery 'doosra' — who thankfully never lost faith in Ajmal's ability to make a comeback.

Saqlain convinced the Pakistan Cricket Board to allow him to work with Ajmal in the resurrection process and the move has surely paid off.

Subsequent to his clearance by the ICC, there is now a vociferous campaign by his fans and a handful of former cricketers to quickly induct Ajmal into the Pakistan World Cup squad to salvage some of the dented pride after a string of defeats in warm-up games.

Read on: ['Team management refuses to include Ajmal for World Cup'](#)

No doubt, Pakistan would want a match-winner like Ajmal to spearhead its bowling attack in the mega event. However, Ajmal himself has said that he is a bit rusty and is keen to play matches in the domestic circuit to test his remodelled action before resuming his international career.

This is a sensible, unselfish approach by a player whose focus is on skills, not glory.

LG for cantonments, Islamabad

AS the mystery of when the exact dates for local government polls in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh and Punjab will be announced continues, we must not forget that cantonment boards across Pakistan, as well as the federal capital, also need to have representative local bodies.

While politicians and the bureaucracy have successfully managed to delay LG polls in three provinces, movement has also been slow on paving the way for the elections in cantonments and Islamabad.

Also read: ['LG polls in Sindh, Punjab may be delayed beyond 2015'](#)

This is despite the fact that the Supreme Court has ordered the federal government to promulgate an ordinance that would allow the ECP to hold polls in cantonments.

In fact, were it not for the apex court's constant reminders to the government, perhaps the issue of local elections would be placed by the rulers in perpetual limbo.

It is important that citizens living within cantonments have representative local governments. When these military

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facilities were first established, they were mostly located far from population centres.

However, today, in nearly every provincial capital cantonments have either been enveloped by the city, or are barely distinguishable from the 'civilian' part of town.

Also, cantonments occupy significant acreage in all cities, and far from housing only military personnel, also accommodate civilians. Hence residents of cantonments should not be denied the right to elect their own local representatives.

Coming to Islamabad, the city is practically run by the Capital Development Authority. While it may be relatively better planned and run than Pakistan's other cities, there are more than enough civic issues in Islamabad that warrant an elected local government answerable to its people.

A draft law that would amend the Cantonments Ordinance, 2002, and allow the ECP to conduct local polls is reportedly ready and sitting with the law ministry awaiting promulgation.

Similarly, a draft bill that would enable local polls in the Islamabad Capital Territory — both rural and urban portions of it — is also ready and awaiting passage. Both these laws need to be passed without delay so that these areas can have elected local bodies and not have to be run as per the fiat of bureaucrats or generals.

As for the rest of the country, the judiciary needs to continue to pursue the matter until the KP, Sindh and Punjab governments do their constitutional duty and provide the legal and logistical foundation for LG polls.

It is shameful that while the people have elected members of the National Assembly and the provincial legislatures, many lawmakers sitting in these august houses are trying their best to block elected representatives at the local level.

Let us be clear: no amount of bureaucratic oversight or interference from the provincial governments can replace an elected dispensation at the local level which can address people's everyday problems most effectively.

Published in Dawn, February 10th, 2015

LoC suspension

THE Chakothi-Uri crossing point on the Line of Control in Kashmir reflects just how tenuous the link between Pakistan and India is.

A bus service that operates every Monday through the crossing was suspended on Feb 9 after allegations that 12 kilogrammes of contraband had been recovered from a truck bound for Uri in Indian-held Kashmir.

The incident also brought to a halt the transportation of goods. In a repeat of familiar scenes at the LoC, traders once again complained that the blockage had caused them huge losses.

Also read: [Travel across LoC suspended through Chakothi-Uri route](#)

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Just as last summer a similar dispute had drawn protests from the exporters of Pakistani mangoes across the divide, this time, reports said as many as 49 trucks laden with bananas were stuck up.

Some traders put the value of the fruit at Rs30 million as they called on the authorities to address the issue urgently.

The figure given by the traders for the rotting bananas may or may not be inflated, but there is no doubt that their call for urgency in tackling the problem on a permanent basis is rooted in genuine concerns.

There can be no two opinions about the need for evolving a fast-track system that ensures smooth travel and trade on the Chakothi-Uri sector, and similar other crossing points in Kashmir and on the border between Pakistan and India elsewhere.

Initial reports on Sunday had an official on this side of the line predicting an early reopening of the road link. Considering how hopeful he sounded, it would be in the interest of Pakistan-India ties that steps are taken to avoid such hiccups in the first place rather than look for emergency remedies later.

Once there is suspension, there could always be complications which may not yield quickly to negotiations. The instances of the past are proof of how long it can take matters to resolve once there is a dispute.

In the interest of uninterrupted exchanges, utmost caution has to be displayed in screening goods that are to be sent across the border and the emphasis has to be on keeping things moving

rather than on finding, or looking for, a reason to hurriedly close the crossings.

Too many flights between Pakistan and India have been discontinued in recent times and too many ground routes have come under a cloud. Too many travellers feel restricted. These road links are crucial to connecting the two countries.

Published in Dawn, February 10th, 2015

Overstepping the limits

FOR as long as there has been politics, there have been politicians willing to indulge in the business of slander, mudslinging and worse. Pakistan has been no exception.

Over the decades, there have been many politicians and political operatives who have said and done ugly things, sometimes coming to regret them later, often remaining unapologetic.

But perhaps there have been few who have indulged in accusations and recriminations as wantonly as Altaf Hussain and Imran Khan, and their respective parties have done against each other.

Also read: [Imran vows to take Altaf Hussain to court, again](#)

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Sadly, another round appears to have erupted as the mercurial MQM chief and the shoot-from-the-hip PTI supremo tear into each other and each other's politics for the umpteenth time.

Many of the allegations are old, some new, but together they amount to another sorry episode in politics here. For, despite Mr Hussain's apology to PTI's women supporters, the MQM chief and the PTI leader are tarnishing the very image of politics itself.

It is not so much what the two leaders, and their eager courtiers, have been saying but the context itself. To be political rivals, even sworn enemies, is one thing — there can be little expectation either side would pull their punches in that environment. But the two parties appear to want the nation to forget that their relationship is less a continuous downward spiral and more a rollercoaster.

Also read : [Altaf apologises for derogatory remarks against PTI women](#)

At various occasions, both sides have sought each other's help, have allied with each other and provided political cover to each other.

It seems the MQM and PTI want to be each other's political enemies when beneficial and quietly revert to a semblance of friendship when more convenient.

Could there be a more cynical kind of politics than that? It is not hard to imagine that days or weeks from now, the two parties' leadership will be exchanging smiles, handshakes and

even hugs, the vitriol, vile accusations and uncouth behaviour forgotten — until the next time.

Perhaps the greater problem here is not the faux war of words between the two but, as ever, how that taints the public's perception of politics, the political process and democracy itself.

The partisanship does not rankle so much as the utter hypocrisy of what is on display. Pakistan has urgent, serious problems to attend to. Karachi is a city that has been mauled by yet another period of strife and conflict.

The MQM and PTI are both navigating an uncertain period in their immediate political futures. How does any of what is on display in recent days help any of that?

To expect the public to be conveniently distracted, to expect the people to fall for ratings-hungry plotlines of the electronic media, to expect that the citizenry will simply accept the theatrics on display is perhaps to expect too much.

The question, as ever, is what happens when the people tire of politicians?

Published in Dawn February 11th , 2015

KCR: never-ending delay

THE four-decade-long tomfoolery concerning the Karachi Circular Railway shows no signs of dying out. On Monday, a Sindh minister said the project would be launched “soon”, even though he informed the provincial legislature that they would now approach the Chinese for help, the Japanese having shown their frustration by withdrawing their offer.

Some Chinese companies, he said, had demonstrated an interest in the project, but Transport Minister Mumtaz Jhokrani did not rule out bringing the Japanese International Cooperation Agency back.

So a mass transit plan first heard of in the 1970s is now to be launched “soon”, even though the Sindh government still has to decide whether it would approach the Chinese or mollify the Japanese.

Mr Jhokrani also said the provincial government would approach federal authorities to hand over the complete ownership of the project to the Sindh government. In the first place, one wonders if Islamabad is willing to trust Karachi with the execution of a project as big as the KCR. Secondly, what is the federal government’s own record when it comes to the KCR? It is equally casual.

Countless studies and feasibility reports over the decades have yielded nothing, and the nation’s biggest city remains without a modern mass transit system. In the 1990s, an Indus Mass Transit Company was formed, having a consortium of foreign entities, with all plans approved and money pledged.

It never saw the light of day, with the federal government showing a lack of interest for reasons it never fully explained. The real issue is lack of political will.

There were times when the PPP was in power in both Islamabad and Sindh. The provincial government, if it wanted, could have used that opportunity to kick-start the project. But it never could make up its mind on the issue.

The reason why Jica ran away was the Sindh government’s failure to remove encroachments on the existing tracks. Sindh’s two leading parties, the PPP and MQM, must share the blame for Karachiites’ transport misery.

Published in Dawn February 11th , 2015

Madressah funding

AFTER weeks of commentary in the media about Saudi Arabia's role in financing an extremist mindset in Pakistan, a clarification has finally emerged.

The kingdom's embassy in Pakistan says all cases of financial assistance being given to seminaries, mosques and charity organisations are vetted by the Foreign Office before any funding is approved.

While the correct procedure seems to have been followed by the Saudi Arabian government, it is sad that the Foreign Office itself has nothing to say on the matter.

Also read: [Foreign funding to be scrutinised without discrimination: FO](#)

How many such requests for vetting have been sent to it? How much money has flowed in and to whom thus far? And do other countries sending funds for seminaries, mosques and charities also follow the same procedure of first getting the intended beneficiary vetted by the Foreign Office?

These questions become all the more important since they are left hanging in the air after a protracted controversy in the media and in the National Assembly.

The money coming in from formal sources has hardly been the issue, and the real challenge has been funds from secret channels. These have been used to promote extremism in the country. The matter of foreign funding of the 'extremist

mindset' in Pakistan was raised in the debates on the 21st Amendment and on other occasions.

The government even received advice from the home ministries of the four provinces on the subject.

Following the report from the provincial governments, the federal interior minister went to the length of telling the nation that funding for seminaries, mosques and charities was now a provincial subject and it was up to the provincial law-enforcement authorities to follow up on it.

According to him, only 10pc of the total number of madressahs in the countries promote extremism — a figure that translates into hundreds of possibly radicalised seminaries, with independent reports suggesting the number is even higher.

The government has chosen not to reveal much about the matter, or washed its hands of it. Unfortunately, the clarification from the kingdom raises more questions than it answers.

Saudi Arabia and a number of other Muslim countries from where funds flow to seminaries in Pakistan should clarify how private donations are handled by them.

On its part, the federal government should provide answers to how it has been vetting the beneficiaries of funds coming from these secret channels. The matter is important, and deserves far more serious handling.

Published in Dawn February 11th , 2015

Waiting for hepatitis drug

AN estimated 10 million hepatitis C patients in the country may hear the good news soon.

A life-saving drug to be administered orally to such patients is expected to be cleared for distribution next week, long after it got the approval of the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan.

Also read: [Inordinate delay in approval of hepatitis C drug](#)

The matter has been pending with the Federal Ministry of Health Services Regulations and Coordination for the last three months, which somehow could not take out the time to give a formal nod to the medicine called Sovaldi. Whereas doctors have prescribed the tablet to a few thousand suffering Pakistanis in anticipation of its availability on the local market, one distribution company has been selected for its supply.

The company is going to buy it from the United States. It was initially in competition with many other aspiring distributors, but managed to convince DRAP that it had the right combination of price and quality.

As opposed to the painful process of getting injections over a prolonged period, the patients will be required to take one tablet of Sovaldi daily.

At around Rs2,000 a tablet it is a very costly medication, but as compared to the interferon injection the oral drug is said to have fewer side effects and greater efficiency.

Experts say the tablet has a 95pc success rate and it is already being tried as a remedy for hepatitis C in many countries.

With a slightly more efficient ministry in place the drug could have been made available to patients in Pakistan much earlier than its expected introduction now. If that gives one a cause to sigh and protest at official lethargy, it is something that cannot be undone.

Millions in the country will now be hoping that the medicine lives up to its billing as a life-saver. One hopes that this will encourage other drug companies to find and market affordable alternatives — without compromising on quality and efficacy — so that the maximum number of hepatitis C patients can benefit.

Published in Dawn, February 12th, 2015

Blasphemy cases

OVER the years, as self-anointed ‘defenders of the faith’ have multiplied in a rightward-drifting Pakistan, the number of people accused of ‘offences against religion’ has gone up exponentially.

As reported in this paper, the Punjab prosecution department, in collaboration with the home and police departments, has shortlisted 50 undertrial blasphemy cases to be fast-tracked in which the state itself will defend the accused.

Also read: [Govt to defend ‘victimised’ blasphemy accused](#)

According to the government, the selected cases — chosen from 262 being tried in different courts in Punjab from 2010 to date — are of those who have been languishing behind bars due to lack of, or weak, evidence and non-availability of counsel.

Further, it has been said, the accused in these cases are ones who have been ‘victimised’ and that some of them may also be medically examined to gauge their mental health.

It is encouraging that Punjab is making efforts to expedite matters for those who appear to have either been unjustly charged with blasphemy, or deprived of their right to due process in such cases.

However, the criteria for their selection say much about the radicalisation of this society, in which vigilante justice in matters of faith is often feted rather than vilified.

Why are there such few lawyers available to defend blasphemy accused? Because lawyers defending such individuals are deemed guilty by association, sometimes by those who themselves have sworn to uphold the law.

Advocate Rashid Rehman, shortly before his murder in May last year, received death threats from fellow lawyers for defending a blasphemy accused. Then there is the blasphemy law itself, and the procedural requirements according to which someone can be charged under it.

While no one should have to fear being charged with a crime — any crime — in the absence of the requisite prima facie evidence, a charge of blasphemy instantly stigmatises the individual and invites the risk of violence against him.

Several such accused have been murdered behind bars, some even after being acquitted. A revisiting of the blasphemy law, at the very least, to prevent false allegations based on vendetta or even pure mischief, is thus urgently required.

Finally, it would have been appropriate if some of the cases selected for speedy trials involved accused that belong to minority faiths.

For while allegations of blasphemy menace Muslims and non-Muslims alike, minorities are especially vulnerable, with entire communities driven out of their homes in paroxysms of faith-based violence.

Published in Dawn, February 12th, 2015

Iran's energy overtures

THERE are strong grounds for seizing the most recent Iranian offer to sell Pakistan electricity and feed it directly into our national grid.

The benefits of this proposal are self-evident, even as it sidesteps all the security-related questions concerning other proposals to import electricity.

Also read: [Iran offers electricity at low tariff](#)

The Iran-Pakistan natural gas pipeline has also languished for too long, due in significant part to Islamabad's deference to American sensitivities in dealing with Iran.

A body of expert opinion, however, clearly states that Pakistan has a strong case to argue that the sanctions regime on Iran does not cover the pipeline project, primarily because the Gas Purchase Agreement for that project was signed before the latest sanctions came into force.

There are good reasons to press ahead with that project as well, especially now that American sensitivities in the region appear to be undergoing a paradigm shift.

Iran's overtures to Pakistan present an opportunity that the latter can only benefit from if it demonstrates courage and gritty resolve.

Pakistan has been struggling with gas and electricity shortages that are crippling the economy and bringing ever-increasing distress to the population with each passing year.

The size of the circular debt is growing, and the vulnerabilities that it exposes other sectors of the economy to are also becoming more evident as the recent petrol crisis brought home so clearly. Pakistan cannot muddle through the energy crisis indefinitely, and pinning all its hopes on a massive infrastructure bailout from the Chinese is to put too many eggs in one basket.

Other options to carry energy — whether in the form of natural gas or electricity — from Central Asia have too many question marks hanging over them due to their transit through Afghanistan. In fact, Iran is a natural partner for Pakistan when it comes to energy, gas and electricity both.

But this natural partnership will not come walking in through the door on its own. It will need to be pursued with vigour. What helps is the fact that the United States is itself struggling to overcome formidable opposition to arrive at an agreement that ends Iran's isolation from the world.

President Barack Obama openly sparred with the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who has vowed that he would "do everything and will take any action to foil this bad and dangerous agreement".

The terse exchanges taking place across the Atlantic between Mr Obama and Mr Netanyahu are evidence that the US leader is determined to pursue talks with Iran until the deadline set for

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late March, no matter what the scale of the opposition might be.

Clearly, he sees the moment as a historic opportunity to be seized. It is time for Pakistan to also find the determination to do what is necessary and bring an energy partnership with Iran to fruition so that it can tackle the crisis at home.

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Houbara hunters

The then heir (now king) to the Saudi throne Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud picked up several districts in Balochistan in addition to two others and a tehsil in Punjab.

The ruler of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan bagged four districts in Sindh, as many in Punjab and upwards of six in Balochistan.

Read: [Saudi Royal on Houbara Bustard hunting spree in Balochistan](#)

Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum got one district in Punjab and a couple more in Balochistan, while Bahrain's King Sheikh Hamad bin Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa did rather poorly with only one district.

Qatar's ruler Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani did a little better with a district each in Sindh and Punjab.

These details are part of an official list concerning the parcelling out of vast tracts of land across the country to Gulf royalty and members of their families that the media made public last November.

Going through them, Pakistanis would be justified in wondering whether the government was pondering the efficacy of princely kingdoms.

Also read: [Arabs visiting 'development sites' not hunting Houbaras: Govt official](#)

In fact, this was an account of what areas have been allotted to which foreigner to hunt the houbara bustard.

The latter is an endangered migratory bird whose numbers are decimated by hunters who are, year after year, given special permission by the government to kill it even though the hunting of the species is in contravention of both domestic and international laws.

Efforts to prevent this from happening again this year have met with mixed success so far.

Soon after the licences were issued in November, the Balochistan High Court cancelled the allotments made by the provincial government.

Also read: [Hunting permits for migratory birds challenged in IHC](#)

Apparently, though, the latter approached the Supreme Court to challenge the move, and while the outcome is yet to be decided, media reports from the area speak of some hunters having arrived already.

On Wednesday, the hunting permits were challenged in the Islamabad High Court and a hearing has been fixed for next week.

It is to be hoped that the outcome is one that protects the bird. In our case, special permits for hunting an endangered species only underscores the state's cravenness.

Why this timidity from a country that roars so often about its sovereignty and strength?

Unclaimed bodies

IN a country where the needs of the living barely register with the state, is it any wonder that the dead are treated with indifference?

During the course of a Supreme Court hearing of an application filed by the Voice for Baloch Missing Persons, it has emerged that at least 4,557 bodies have been recovered from various parts of the country over the past four years.

Also read: [4,557 bodies found in four years, SC informed](#)

A sizeable number remained unclaimed. Given that some of the provinces and the Islamabad Capital Territory gave statistics for only the last two years, the actual figure could be much higher.

In the case of Balochistan and the murky goings-on under the label of 'security imperatives' in that province, which gave rise to the aforementioned application, we can postulate that the facts are even further from the surface.

As per the figures cited at the hearing, the highest number of bodies found was in KP with 2,600, of which 43 remained unidentified.

The statement by the KP AAG that in his province many mutilated corpses were found in sacks is telling and we must ask whether the police have investigated the motives behind the obviously premeditated murders, identified the bodies and informed bereaved family members.

While the circumstances in which other individuals had met their death was not clarified, a more streamlined procedure is clearly needed to address the issue of unclaimed bodies.

Behind every such body is a family that needs closure, as quickly and with as much dignity as possible.

One stumbling block to identification could well be that large numbers of Pakistani males are part of the migrant labour force, leaving behind their families in search of work elsewhere in the country.

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The archaic system whereby the police places notices with pictures of unclaimed bodies in local newspapers, asking for family members to come forward, is no answer in such circumstances.

The problem, however, could be resolved by expanding the scope of recently introduced digitisation of law-enforcement processes to create a centralised database of 'found' bodies.

Such a database would enable the police to cross-reference FIRs filed with them of missing people against bodies found in areas outside their jurisdiction.

The public too could be given access which, given the often suspicious circumstances of their loved one's death, would be the very least the state can do.

Published in Dawn, February 13th, 2015

Celebrating iron ore discovery

THE discovery of a large iron ore deposit in Chiniot is indeed good news but it is useful to keep in mind that the hard part begins now. By itself, the discovery is actually not new.

The deposits were identified as early as 1989 by the Geological Survey of Pakistan, and verified in 1999 by the Department of

Mines and Minerals of the Punjab government in a study using samples from 14 bore holes around the Chiniot area.

Each bore hole yielded high-quality iron ore deposits at depths ranging from 120 to 160 metres below the surface, which make these the deepest deposits in Pakistan where all other iron ore extraction is done on the surface.

Know more: [Pakistan discovers 'huge' reserves of iron ore](#)

The study found verified reserves of iron ore of around 13m tons. In 2010, the Punjab Board of Investment and Trade began the process to develop a bankable estimate of the total deposits using scientifically proven methodologies that would be acceptable to the global mining community.

That work got under way in 2013 and has just concluded, and the results authenticate the findings of the earlier study done in 1999. Total proven and estimated reserves of iron ore are larger than 100m tons, with another 500m tons of anticipated deposits, making this a large find indeed.

The quality of the iron ore is also comparable to some of the better deposits being mined around the world as well as in Pakistan.

The hard part comes now as Punjab moves to chart a mining methodology, and determines the cost of extraction for these deposits.

Given the depth at which the seam sits, and the fact that multiple water tables lie between the surface and the seam, mining these deposits is going to pose significant technical

challenges and will likely require a large initial capital outlay. This will have to include the cost of erecting a steel mill near the mines since surface transport of iron ore is very costly.

Complicating matters is a steep drop in the international price of iron ore in global markets since 2012, when the request for proposals for the study just concluded was sent out. With iron ore prices plunging, and cost of extraction likely to be very high, the commercial viability of mining these deposits could prove to be difficult, trace findings of copper in the samples extracted thus far notwithstanding.

Clearly, it is far too soon to be rejoicing over this find. The road ahead is still fraught with too much uncertainty. Pakistan has a poor track record in developing its mineral resources, as evidenced from the failure to tap Thar coals or develop Saindak or Reko Dik mines.

Far from celebrating the find in such overwrought terms, the government's energies would be better used by accelerating the search for a commercially viable route to utilise the deposits.

Published in Dawn, February 13th, 2015

Sectarian attack

ANOTHER week, another sectarian attack, yet another attack in Peshawar. While no one expected the state to shut down the militancy complex and suppress terrorism in a matter of weeks, what yesterday's attack in Peshawar seems to have underlined is that the state strategy in the fight against militancy is inadequate and not wide-ranging enough.

There are at least two points to be made here.

First, the sectarian equation. From Shikarpur to Peshawar, militants have struck against Shias and their places of worship seemingly at will, indicating that yet another front in the militancy wars is once again being aggressively pursued.

While not all militant groups are avowedly and determinedly sectarian, it is nevertheless true that practically all operating here have a sectarian strain.

Know more: [20 killed as Taliban storm Peshawar imambargah](#)

The failure of the state was in not giving priority to stemming the growth of avowedly sectarian militant groups — the longer those particular groups have been allowed to operate with near impunity, the more it seems to have encouraged other militant outfits to focus on their sectarian agendas.

It is still not too late. The country, despite grievous blows to the Shia community in recent years, is not on the verge of a full-blown sectarian civil war. But if fighting sectarianism is not made a priority now, the implosion in parts of the Middle

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East is a haunting reminder of how quickly and irreversibly matters can get out of control.

The other aspect is Peshawar. Sitting pressed up against the tribal areas and a regional hub for so many trouble spots, the provincial capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a front-line city in the fight against militancy.

As such, it will always be a city militants look to stage attacks in. But it cannot be forgotten that Peshawar is also the administrative and military hub from which the state projects its power in the immediate region. The troops fighting in Fata are commanded from Peshawar.

The writ over KP and Fata is administratively handled from Peshawar. As such, it is a city that has vast resources and from where both the civil and military arms of the state have over the years learned how to work in cooperation with each other to help secure it.

In essence, then, why are such large groups of militants, as in the case of the Army Public School attack and now the Shia mosque, still able to so easily penetrate high-security sites in Peshawar?

Surely, that is not too much to ask for — that droves of militants not arrive at their targets undetected from where they proceed to deliver yet another blow to the national psyche?

Something is wrong here and neither the military nor the civilian, provincial and federal, leadership is willing to admit it.

The enemy is proving to be more resilient and smarter than the state that is purporting to fight it.

Published in Dawn February 14th , 2015

Cricket World Cup

The much-awaited ICC Cricket World Cup finally commences in Australia and New Zealand today.

The euphoria around the 11th edition of the mega event is no different from past World Cups where just about everything was put on the back burner as the top teams of the cricketing world clashed to prove their supremacy in the four-yearly event.

Quite significantly, however, this World Cup does not have a clear favourite due to the near similar strengths of a number of teams such as Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and England, which renders the event wide open and makes it more exciting compared to previous editions.

The leading Asian outfits, too, are in the same boat this time, with none among Pakistan, India or Sri Lanka managing to rise above the turbulent waters of international cricket in recent months.

Having said that, hosts Australia and New Zealand do have a slight edge due to home crowds and local conditions.

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New Zealand, in fact, have been enjoying a purple patch of late, thanks largely to their skipper Brendon McCullum who has instilled a rare fighting spirit in his players that they previously lacked.

Among the minnows, the pundits have tipped the ever-improving Afghanistan and the mercurial Ireland teams to create a few upsets. Both sides comprise talented players who may well prove to be a surprise for the rest.

The World Cup will also see the ICC impose stringent disciplinary measures to curb the corruption menace and avoid any incident that could harm the game's image.

While players from all competing nations will be reminded of their obligation to be on their best behaviour and report any suspicious activity to the authorities, the ICC has also handed a watch list to the host countries of about 100 match-fixers who are banned from entering the World Cup venues.

All in all, the 45-day extravaganza promises to be a thrilling spectacle for cricket enthusiasts around the world besides being the swansong of many a stalwart of the game.

Published in Dawn February 14th , 2015

Currency dogma

THE good news is that the stubborn trade deficit, that widened all through last year, is showing the first signs of falling.

This means the gap between Pakistan's exports and imports may finally be beginning to narrow after a year of worrying increases. This January the trade deficit came in at \$1bn, whereas it was more than double that the previous year in January.

Also read: [Tax revenue shortfall at Rs196bn, Dar warns](#)

The bad news is that the decline is marginal, and may be difficult to sustain given the new strength of the rupee, which is getting close to Rs101 to a dollar.

A stronger currency means trouble for exports and cheaper imports, and this is the balance the PML-N government is famous for wanting every time they come into power.

Cheaper imports are a boon for retailers, a key constituency for the ruling party, and they fuel higher levels of consumption of imported durables, something that creates the illusion of prosperity. When you can't deliver genuine prosperity, illusions will do just fine.

But not all illusions are benign. The finance minister takes pleasure in announcing that reserves have touched \$16bn, and large inflows are on their way in the form of the next IMF tranche and further CSF reimbursements.

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The last few months have also been good ones for the reserves, which have risen by appreciable amounts largely on the back of multilateral inflows.

As a result, the government appears less troubled by the trade deficit than it would otherwise have been, and more indulgent of a stronger rupee than perhaps fundamentals warrant. But it is worth asking whether the comfort the government is deriving from the strength of the reserves is illusory.

Most of this money is borrowed, and many of the inflows besides remittances are multilateral or bilateral disbursements.

This means the situation can reverse fairly quickly, and is certainly not a sustainable foundation upon which to build our future growth.

The world is seeing severe competitive devaluations between emerging market economies, and just this Tuesday, the US Treasury secretary had to warn the G20 countries that his country will “push back very hard” against efforts to gain trade advantage via weaker currency policy.

This shows the extent of the competitive devaluations sweeping the world as more and more countries place greater value on their external trade than their domestic consumption.

Perhaps more than the Treasury secretary’s warning, Pakistan ought to draw its lessons from those at whom his words are directed.

Published in Dawn February 14th , 2015

Long way to peace

As with much in the Pakistan-India relationship, even the welcome news is often accompanied by bad news. On Friday, the Indian government announced that Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar will be dispatched to Saarc countries, with the focus inevitably being on speculation that the foreign secretary-level talks cancelled by India last August are now back on track.

Then, yesterday, another round of violence along the Line of Control resulted in the death of a Pakistani sexagenarian in firing by Indian border forces.

The up-and-down nature of mere expectations that India and Pakistan will begin to approach the idea of talks again indicates just how far from the path to normalisation the two countries have strayed.

Read: [Modi calls Nawaz, wishes luck for cricket World Cup](#)

As ever, there are two sides to the story. In the current Nawaz Sharif-Narendra Modi era, a great deal of responsibility for the impasse must be borne by the Indian side.

Seemingly determined to take a tough, almost belligerent, line with Pakistan, the Modi government appears to have been in denial of a basic reality of the Pak-India relationship — as frustrating as it is for both sides to deal with each other, deal with each other they must.

Also read/ [ISI cultivated Taliban to counter Indian action against Pakistan: Musharraf](#)

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The decision to call off talks last August was a particularly petulant one, given that the Pakistan high commissioner to India, Abdul Basit, did nothing unusual — in fact, it was fairly routine — in meeting the leadership of the Hurriyat Conference.

Moreover, the simmering tensions along the Line of Control and Working Boundary for much of the last year can be largely explained by the Indian government adopting an explicitly disproportionate approach in responding to any trouble in the area.

Even now, the imminent visit of Mr Jaishankar is being cast by the Indian government as a so-called Saarc yatra — indicating that India is not keen on doing anything more than the bare minimum. If it is true that US President Barack Obama nudged Prime Minister Modi to reach out to Pakistan, it seems Mr Modi is sending a message that he is neither very keen on it nor very hopeful.

For all the problems on the Indian side, however, there is another basic reality too: Pakistan has simply not done enough to engage India on the matters that are of concern to it.

Two big issues stand out: failure to get anywhere near a closure on the Mumbai-related trials here and shelving the Non-Discriminatory Market Access deal with the previous Congress government. Surely, for all of India's sullenness and petulance, it is Pakistan's inability to approach the Pak-India equation in a cooperative manner that is undermining the prospects of a return to dialogue.

India has legitimate security concerns regarding Pakistan, as does Pakistan with India, but it is unreasonable on the part of the Pakistani state to not even do the basic things that could help pave the way for a meaningful resumption of dialogue.

Published in Dawn February 15th , 2015

Imran Khan's criticism

ON his recent trip to Shikarpur to condole with the families that had lost relatives in the tragic attack on an imambargah last month, Imran Khan criticised the police and government in Sindh — as also in Punjab. He called for police reforms on the model that his party claims to have built in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and demanded that the law-enforcers be freed from political and personal influences.

A few days later, terrorists targeted a Shia mosque in Peshawar, brutally reconfirming that the militant threat is spread over the length and breadth of the country, and that it cannot be dealt with exclusively by a province, or for that matter, by a single party. There obviously is great temptation for his opponents to blast the high-sounding PTI chief who is seen to flaunt his virtuous presence at all times, even on solemn occasions which require the sharing of grief, and not boasting. That is the temptation that needs to be resisted by politicians hailing from different regions and of all stripes. Criticism must be constructive — it would be of little use if, in the context of the strike in Peshawar on Friday, the PTI's remarks about the

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administration in Sindh and Punjab were to be used for political point-scoring.

What can be done, instead, is to press the PTI chief to come up with some practical steps towards improving the performance of the police force. Perhaps the PTI government in KP can call a conference of senior law-enforcement officers from all over the country to discuss ideas. The PTI is fully within its rights to question how resources are being utilised anywhere in Pakistan and to point out how lacking in purpose and vitality the old system of governance is. Pending full-scale reform and just for the time being, however, the party could try and spearhead a move for greater coordination between the federating units. The angry talk alone could frustrate people across any divide of convenience between Shikarpur and Peshawar.

Published in Dawn February 15th , 2015

Baldia: losing focus

REVELATIONS from a joint interrogation report which surfaced last week allegedly linking 2012's Baldia Town factory fire to an MQM worker — suggesting the building was deliberately set on fire due to non-payment of extortion money — have expectedly kicked up a storm. But political point-scoring threatens to take the focus away from the 258 victims of the tragedy, pushing the narrative in another direction.

As the counsel for the victims pointed out on Friday, the statement of the suspect that has caused the uproar forms only one paragraph of the JIT report; the document filed with the Sindh High Court last week did not offer extensive details about the fire tragedy. In fact, the suspect was picked up in connection with a separate case and made the comments about the fire in passing, and, in the words of the counsel, “based on hearsay”, as the individual was not a witness to the blaze, nor did he take responsibility for it. It is also true that interrogation reports such as these are basically recorded statements of a suspect; no judgment is passed about their veracity — that is for investigators to establish. Moreover, the Baldia factory case currently pending with a trial court is a separate murder case.

But if it is true that the factory was set ablaze to punish the owners for not paying extortion money, then this horrific crime needs to be investigated and taken to its logical conclusion. The question is that when the interrogation team — which consisted of police as well as premier intelligence agencies — had the alleged details in June 2013, when the suspect was arrested, why was this lead not pursued then, and why did it only emerge recently? As expected, the MQM's opponents

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have pounced on the party on the basis of the suspect's claims. Nevertheless, the Muttahida needs to continue to convey its version of this matter — it is a fact that the party has earned a reputation for high-handedness, especially in Karachi. So whenever such allegations emerge, there is indeed a rush to judgment. But, ultimately, the Baldia tragedy should not be politicised and the 'confession' of the suspect should not be misread or placed out of context. The timely conclusion of the case assigning responsibility for the tragedy should hopefully give some closure to the families, and prevent similar disasters from being repeated.

Published in Dawn February 15th , 2015

Bank liquidity

FOR the seventh time this year, the State Bank has conducted an outsized Open Market Operation to inject liquidity into the banking system.

The last such operation injected Rs623bn into the interbank market. Such enormous OMO injections have been taking place since last September, although their size and frequency has grown steadily since then.

A peak was hit in December, when the outstanding volume of net OMO injections touched Rs666bn, with daily average volumes going from Rs61bn in the first quarter of the fiscal year to Rs281bn in the second quarter.

Also read: [Banks' liquidity gap alarmingly high](#)

The only other time we saw OMO injections of this size was back in the first quarter of 2013, in the months leading up to the general elections, when the fiscal framework was in serious disarray. Prior to that, one has to go back to 2012 to find comparative examples.

This development ought to inspire questions, and it is surprising to see that little is being said about it.

The liquidity problems at the banks that these OMOs are trying to address are said to have a number of drivers.

The State Bank's annual report points to the November 2013 decision on the discount rate as a key turning point in bank liquidity issues. The period prior to that rate hike was marked by abundant liquidity, and the period following it by a dry spell.

Undoubtedly, expectations of a rate cut have played a role in the banks' decision to accelerate their investments in longer tenor government debt in recent days. But the last monetary policy statement also points out the slowing down of deposit growth as an important factor in the liquidity problems facing the banks.

Deposit growth has been slowing since November at least, with most of the slowdown concentrated in low return current accounts. In the first half of the current fiscal year, there was a net withdrawal of Rs145bn from current accounts while growth in savings accounts surged to Rs350bn from Rs182bn in the corresponding period of the previous year.

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Clearly, bank customers are trying to tell them something: give us a return on our deposits.

Failing to generate deposits, banks appear to be content turning to the State Bank to shore up their liquidity positions, either by visiting the discount window or looking for OMO injections. Indulging this behaviour endlessly carries risks, and the State Bank should be mindful that the large OMO injections should not become a pattern.

Published in Dawn, February 16th, 2015

Gauging media freedom

THE report released on Thursday by Reporters Sans Frontières reminds us that politics around the world today has inevitably taken a heavy toll on media freedoms, squeezing both the public's right to know and journalists' duty to inform.

“Press freedom ... is in retreat in all five continents,” said the RSF 2015 World Press Freedom Index.

The head of the RSF told the media that the deterioration is linked to a range of factors, “with information wars and actions by non-state groups acting as news despots”.

Take a look: [Pakistan ranked 159 out of 180 countries in press freedom: report](#)

Examples of such groups are Boko Haram and the Islamic State, as well as criminal organisations in Italy and South America.

Further, several countries fell in the rankings as compared to last year, for example the US. The latter's drop was in part because it launched a “war on information” against whistleblowers including WikiLeaks and others, while Venezuela's record worsened since the National Bolivarian Guard fired on “clearly identified” journalists covering protests.

Pakistan, where the threats faced by journalists and the constraints on reporting are a dirty, if open, secret, was ranked at 139 of the 180 countries evaluated.

That said, however, some of the positions awarded are curious, and raise questions about the methodology and logic used in ranking countries. Qatar, for example, like several other Gulf countries, is not exactly known for reporting freely on its internal politics. However, it weighed in at 115.

Placed higher were the Central African Republic (110) and Kuwait (90), which, again, can by no means be considered places where there is any degree of freedom to report.

In fact, the ranking exercise falls into the trap of counting statistics rather than analysing the actual situation in its full context, especially in developing countries. In several parts of the world, the growing levels of violence against journalists actually provides a clue to increasing media freedoms since the state or other parties hit back only when there is reportage to resent.

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Pakistan is a good example of this: during earlier periods of severe restrictions on the media, violence against journalists was less frequent because information was so tightly controlled that much of it went unreported.

As the scope of the media has expanded, so too has the resistance to open debate. It is a pity that a number of journalism's watchdog bodies have failed to account for these nuances, for they are of vital importance in the complex web of media repression.

Published in Dawn, February 16th, 2015

Census delay

THIS week a year has passed since the Council of Common Interests debated the census as part of its agenda item, yet the demographic exercise is no closer to being held today than it was last year.

Everybody agrees that the last census conducted in 1998 is hopelessly out of date, and they all believe that this is a serious problem.

Consider the important issues that are built around the availability of census data: the NFC award, delimitation of electoral constituencies, seat shares in parliament, local bodies polls, targeted subsidies, and all other policy matters that rest on population data.

Also read: [‘Politicisation of data’ one reason behind lack of current census](#)

With the census data from 1998 practically obsolete, it is fair to suppose that all of these important matters today are actually based on suppositions that have no grounding in measured reality. Without a clean and impartial census, we don't really know the face of the country that we are trying to run and govern.

A new census is badly needed but the obstacles that stand in its way are formidable and need to be acknowledged. At the heart of the foot-dragging is the demographic make-up of Sindh that nobody is very keen to talk about. With the massive population influx over the years, it stands to reason that Sindh has changed in important ways, and the ethnic balance as well as its share in the total population has undergone a profound transformation.

The Sindhi, Mohajir and Pakhtun populations can shift the internal balance of the province, while the influx of people into Karachi, Hyderabad and Sukkur over the years can alter the share of the province in the total population of the country.

Parties that seek their electoral fortunes in Punjab are reluctant to confront the real picture of what the new population shares of the respective provinces are, since this could affect NFC allocations as well as deal a psychological blow if Punjab's share of the total population were to dip below 50pc.

Sindh is already reeling from a complex ethnic-based power struggle and any new numbers on the ethnic make-up would upset an uneasy status quo.

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With no takers at the national level, the census exercise is being endlessly delayed. But continuing with a fictitious status quo and making policies for a population mix that doesn't exist any longer is no solution either.

The ruling party must take the lead in initiating a credible move towards a new census, while finding a way to make the exercise agreeable to everyone.

Perhaps the case of India can serve as a model, where they decided to freeze all seat shares in parliament irrespective of what the census revealed. That compromise paved the way for a political consensus around a new census, and could serve as a model for Pakistan too.

One way or another, this government must ensure that a census is held during its term.

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Militarised society

IN the two months that have now elapsed since the attack on the Army Public School, much has changed in the country.

Dazed citizens have had to adjust to a series of unpalatable realities, the lifting of the moratorium on executions and the setting up of military courts being just one dimension.

Some of the measures the state and provincial administrations have considered necessary to adopt may or may not have far-reaching and negative consequences.

Also read: [Teachers undergo weapons training](#)

But there is one particular path that can already be identified and on which the country has already set foot that will without a shadow of doubt lead to an even more violent future: that of further militarising the population.

Since the APS attack, around the country children enter their schools as gunmen stand by. As reported in this paper on Sunday, the enhanced security measures at one school in Peshawar include a guard who used to be the office peon, and whose training in the use of guns lasted just one day.

KP's decision to give school teachers training in the use of weapons and, in case of an attack, expect them to act as the first line of defence was shocking.

The problem that is developing, though, is much larger than just protecting educational institutions. On Thursday, the

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Peshawar High Court directed the provincial government to award licences of prohibited-bore weapons to lawyers, as is already the case for doctors and teachers.

The issue is not just about arms in untrained hands, even though accidental shootings have already occurred: it is the apparent attempt to counter guns by putting more weapons on the street, in the hands of people who do not represent state authority.

It is perhaps a sign of the grim times we are living in that the trend has not received the serious and critical societal debate it merits. But the alarm bells must be sounded, for this is exactly the sort of slippery slope that leads down to the abyss.

Published in Dawn, February 17th, 2015

Hazardous rail travel

PASSENGERS on board the Shalimar Express bound for Karachi had a narrow escape last Saturday near Hyderabad.

Some 18 of them were injured, including two Pakistan Railways guards. However, according to the local administration in Hyderabad, only one of the wounded needed to be admitted to hospital.

Considering that the two bogies of this top-of-the-line express train that derailed in the accident were crowded with passengers, this will go down as a lucky escape in a country that has, sadly, had many minor and major accidents on the rail tracks over the years.

Also read: [18 injured in Shalimar Express accident in Hyderabad](#)

There is a long history of unfortunate train accidents in Pakistan, where rail services remain a popular mode of travel and where much emphasis has been put in recent times on restoring to the national railways its rightful share of goods transportation.

Some positive things have been heard about the Pakistan Railways in recent times, like the increase in the number of locomotives at its disposal.

Another aspect that rekindles hope in some kind of a revival in the country's once grand train system is that there is apparently

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an urge to assemble both the locomotives and the coaches locally, instead of blind reliance on finished items from abroad.

If this indicates mobility, there are areas that have to undergo some speedy improvements to make the railways a viable future option, for its managers as well as passengers and transporters. Security is integral to that must-do list.

Apart from the all-too-frequent accidents, including a series of them this winter at the level crossings, there have been some instances in recent times where militants have targeted the railway tracks in Balochistan.

There were many such attacks in the restive province last year and this year there have already been at least three such incidents — two in January and the third one in the first week of February.

As in the case of the security at the level crossings, Pakistan Railways is dependent on district governments for the safety of the rail tracks in the areas of their jurisdiction.

The railways department employs its maintenance staff to keep vigil on the tracks in the sensitive parts of Balochistan, but there is no denying that in the current circumstances it needs to invest more in the Railways Police, just as it needs to work with responsive local-level administrations to project theirs as a smooth, hassle-free, and equally important, safe travel choice.

Published in Dawn, February 17th, 2015

GB autonomy under threat

THE appointment of the federal minister for Kashmir affairs as governor of Gilgit-Baltistan has been criticised across the political spectrum.

It is being described by political parties as evidence of the PML-N's 'pre-poll rigging' in the region in order to create a tailor-made government in the upcoming legislative assembly elections.

The PPP, which ruled the region under the previous elected set-up, is not happy with the appointment of the caretaker cabinet or the governor, while the PTI has voiced its reservations about GB's chief election commissioner.

Also read: [Minister made GB governor ahead of crucial polls](#)

In fact, on Monday, there were reported protests in GB and Islamabad against the governor's appointment while even some local N-League leaders are said to be unhappy with the governor's appointment by the central leadership in Islamabad.

Among the leading complaints of all parties is why a serving federal minister from outside the region was selected for the post, instead of a local politician.

It is clear that the PML-N's efforts to mould the region's political realities as per its liking are having a divisive effect.

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Not only is the electoral process being made controversial even before the first vote is cast, GB's limited autonomy, which it secured in 2009, is in danger of being usurped by Islamabad.

While nationwide the trend is to grant the provinces and regions greater devolved powers, attempts are being made to go back to ruling GB through fiat from the federal capital.

Change in GB's administrative set-up began during Gen Musharraf's rule, but it was the previous PPP-led federal government that promulgated the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, 2009, altering the region's name from the Northern Areas and giving the local elected leadership a greater degree of power. While these steps helped develop a political culture, local leaders complained that the federal bureaucracy interfered far too much in regional affairs.

But moves like appointing a governor from outside the region, without consulting local stakeholders, smack of an attitude opposed to devolution and autonomy.

Perhaps the key problem here — which allows the centre to manipulate GB's affairs — is the lack of constitutional clarity about the region's status. By linking GB to the Kashmir dispute, the state is denying local people the opportunity to fully participate in national life and to run their own affairs.

The region is frankly neither here nor there constitutionally; technically it is not a part of Pakistan, yet its limited autonomy is usurped at will.

A more long-lasting solution to GB's constitutional dilemma, one that is not dependent on the resolution of the Kashmir question, is needed.

It should either have the powers of a province — as its people have demanded — or it be given a status similar to that of Azad Kashmir.

Moreover, the PML-N needs to ensure the caretaker set-up is acceptable to all political players in order to make the upcoming polls free of controversy.

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Anti-smoking efforts

IN line with the promise made last year on World No-Tobacco Day, the minister of state for health services, Saira Afzal Tarar, announced last week that the pictorial warnings against smoking, which cigarette packets have since 2009 been required by law to carry, would be increased to cover 85pc of the pack on both sides.

The move deserves commendation, for despite the various efforts Pakistan has made to discourage smoking and reduce health burdens associated with tobacco use, the problem remains a perennial one.

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A study prepared in conjunction with the World Health Organisation amongst others last May estimated that over 22 million adults — approximately 19pc of the population — use some form of tobacco; hundreds of thousands of young people take up the habit every year, and the problem is rife even amongst juveniles.

Also read: [Minister surprises tobacco lobby with new regulations](#)

Much more work, therefore, needs to be done. An obvious place to start would be to stringently start applying the law on smoking in public places and on public transport.

Although the issue has been addressed at airports, any efforts to achieve the same at bus stops, railway stations, etc, have clearly not been effective. Similarly, the sale of cigarettes to minors is fairly usual.

A sustained media campaign on both these counts could improve matters somewhat. More urgently, though, Pakistan needs to find a way of clamping down on the entry into the country of smuggled cigarettes.

In shops big and small, in cities and towns and villages, these poison packages — to which the law about pictorial or other warnings does not apply — are sold freely. Since no tax has been paid, the loss this causes to the public exchequer is significant, and led the Directorate Intelligence and Investigation-Inland Revenue to establish an Anti-Illicit Tobacco/Cigarettes Trade cell in February 2012.

Even so, the traffic, particularly over the porous border with Afghanistan, continues. Health warnings on tobacco products notwithstanding, there is little chance of success in the anti-smoking battle while the country is flooded with illegal products.

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Securing the parade

THE interior minister may play down the number of madressahs in the country that have links with terrorism — 10pc he said recently — but the extraordinary measures that are to be taken ahead of the Pakistan Day military parade belie that cautious stance.

Unless of course the military knows or suspects something that the civilian government doesn't. As per the announcement, all 39 of the madressahs and two imambargahs in the two-kilometre vicinity of the venue at Shakarparian in the Islamabad Capital Territory are to be vacated a week in advance of the parade which is being held after a gap of eight years.

Know more: [After 7 year gap, Pakistan Day to see military parade in full glory](#)

The measure was demanded by the intelligence agencies and security forces and conveyed to the interior ministry that issued

instructions to the effect. Meanwhile, the Wafaqul Madaris Al Arabia Pakistan, the umbrella body that oversees the madressahs belonging to the Deobandi sect, has issued a statement denouncing the forcible closure of the seminaries which it said would fuel suspicion against them.

Clearly something is very amiss here. If these are indeed establishments with questionable agendas that could pose a threat to the military parade, why have they been allowed to exist at all in Pakistan's capital, the seat of its government?

And what of the citizenry that has been forced to live in close quarters with such elements?

Moreover, after the parade, once the tanks have rolled away, the marching battalions retreated to their barracks, and the dignitaries been whisked off to the safety of their well-guarded abodes, will these evidently dubious institutions be allowed to return to business as usual?

Religious extremism is hardly a new phenomenon, and such madressahs did not emerge overnight. Islamabad is also the headquarters for a large chunk of the country's vast intelligence apparatus.

One may well ask what it was up to during all these years when such seminaries were proliferating in the city without let or hindrance. For an answer one would have to look to the establishment's duplicitous and short-sighted strategy of using religious militancy as a tool of foreign policy, a game plan that has in recent times imploded spectacularly, exacting a steep price from civilians and soldiers alike.

The only viable way forward is to abjure that ruinous path and regulate madressahs — all madressahs of every persuasion — notwithstanding their protests or the threats by affiliated religious parties. Far more is at stake here than a military parade.

Published in Dawn, February 18th, 2015

A complex battleground

OF all the battlegrounds on which the National Action Plan against terrorism has to play out, none is as complex and fraught with risk as the city of Karachi.

Here the framework created by NAP for combating militancy is likely to prove inadequate for confronting the delicate balance of terror upon which the city's functional peace rests. The reason is as simple as the problem is complex.

For a durable solution to Karachi's problem of organised violence, the city's institutions, including but not limited to the police, need to be depoliticised. But to do this, some measure of politics needs to be part of the operation.

Also read: [Army will go to any extent for Karachi peace: COAS](#)

This careful and subtle balance, between eradicating the influence of political parties while relying on these same

parties to provide the consensus behind the enterprise, is the Gordian knot of Karachi, and it is worthwhile to recall that every government since the early 1990s has tried to tackle this problem — and failed. Care and subtlety are rare virtues in Pakistan's political landscape.

The roots of organised violence in Karachi go into a vast struggle over control of the city's resources — water, land, jobs, transport etc — and the anaemic state of governance in this teeming metropolis of 20m residents owes itself to the fact that informal mechanisms to gain control of these resources serves everybody's purpose better than a formal and rules-based system does.

Eliminating one organised gang has usually done little more than create a vacuum that other actors quickly fill. Lyari provides some evidence of this today, where the leadership of the Amn Committee, created in a sinister move to counter the militarised elements of the MQM, has been eliminated from the locality but a new, younger and possibly more dangerous crop of organised gangs has stepped in instead.

Eliminating violent elements can only be the first step to restoring peace in Karachi. Creating the institutions to maintain peace in the aftermath, and more crucially, freeing up the city's resources from the power struggle, must follow.

The presence of the banned TTP in parts of the city complicates the job further still. It is for this reason that the framework of NAP can prove inadequate in Karachi.

Any operation will need to be carefully calibrated, with a clear end point in sight beyond which the job must pass into the

hands of city administrators, who have to drain the swamp of struggle over urban space that breeds organised violence.

The trick lies in recognising how politics is part of the problem, and part of the solution at the same time. This is the high-wire act necessary for stabilising Karachi. The authorities must learn from the excesses committed in the two security operations conducted in the 1990s, and realise that in Karachi, peace lies in the nebulous middle ground between coercion and consensus.

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Flawed strategy against IS

THE burning to death of 45 people in western Iraq and the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic hostages in Libya should make regional states and world powers revise their pusillanimous strategy if they are serious about destroying the criminal hordes operating as the self-styled Islamic State.

The response by the US-led coalition hasn't served to break the IS militia's strength, for it continues to remain in occupation of large chunks of territory and seems to be expanding its area of influence.

Its stunning advance from western Iraq to Syria as far as the Turkish border has come to a halt, and now, like similar militant groups looking to conquer territory, it will need time to

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consolidate. However, there is no room for complacency, for it would be a great mistake to let IS consolidate its gains and plan for more ‘conquests’.

Egypt has called for UN intervention in Libya, and a military ‘summit’ conference is in session in Riyadh. However, going by media reports the task before the generals is not the drawing up of a new strategy that would turn the tide against the IS but ‘a general reappraisal’ of the situation and ‘what needs to be done’.

Also read: [Kerry says any Iran strikes against IS 'positive'](#)

That only shows that the military chiefs stand circumscribed by their governments’ lack of required political will to wipe out IS.

Turkey, the region’s strongest military power, has shown little or no interest in joining the anti-IS coalition, even though the militant outfit is knocking at its door. Jordan, following the burning to death of one of its pilots, has shown greater zeal for punishing IS for its crimes.

But why regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran are coy about combining forces against a common threat is a question that remains unanswered. The generals can do little unless the political leaderships in the Gulf states,

Tehran and Ankara first put aside their geopolitical differences and paper over the cracks in order to unite on a common strategy for destroying the source of terrorism in the region.

Published in Dawn February 19th , 2015

Corridor of controversy

THE furore has been raging for weeks now and we are still no closer to getting a clear picture on what is happening with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor project.

The multiparty conference convened by the ANP stoked the fires a little more, and yet again dire warnings were sounded that the project could become another Kalabagh dam if the government refused to clarify what it was doing with the route.

The declaration issued at the end of the conference makes clear that the project is as political as it is technical. Part of the purpose is to connect Gwadar with Khunjerab, the high-altitude border crossing with China. But in equal measure, the project has political ends.

Also read: [Corridor furore](#)

The declaration points to the “uneven socioeconomic development in Pakistan” and underlines the importance of rectifying this imbalance through “proactive policies”.

The responsibility of the federal government is to look after the entire federation, not only one province, the declaration points out. It says the CPEC project should be approached with the interests of the underdeveloped provinces as a priority.

This is a powerful narrative that is taking shape around the project. Equally powerful was the line-up of the speakers at the conference. There was Asfandiyar Wali Khan of the ANP, the

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PPP's Khursheed Shah and Shah Mehmood Qureshi of the PTI. These are not lightweights from marginal parties.

They were joined by Rauf Mengal of the BNP, Hasil Bizenjo of the National Party and Aftab Sherpao of the QWP. Between them, these people could mobilise a formidable political challenge to the ruling PML-N, and if for no other reason than a purely pragmatic one, the prime minister would be well advised to take the declaration seriously.

It is surprising to see the government's lack of effort to get its own message out regarding the CPEC project. This is either because they completely underestimate the seriousness of the challenge that is developing, or take their own position for granted. Either way, it is not only folly on their part to continue to ignore the growing protests around the project, it is also highly irresponsible.

The project is an important one and deserves proper stewardship, in both the technical and political spheres. Bland assurances that the route remains unchanged are clearly not enough.

The government needs to release further details about the many projects that are being advanced under the umbrella of CPEC, and collect them all in one place for ease of access.

If it has a case to make, it should step up and make it. But if it has no case in the face of such a serious challenge to such an important venture, then it is inevitable that people will ask whether the government can be trusted at all with its stewardship.

Police lines attack

STOCK-TAKING is under way in the wake of Tuesday's suicide attack in Lahore which ended five precious lives.

The incident was followed by yet another bombing at an imambargah a day later on the outskirts of Islamabad.

Take a look: [Eight dead in attack on Lahore's Police Lines, TTP claims responsibility](#)

In Lahore, a bigger, more devastating incident was avoided since the attacker was apparently unable to reach his target; yet, significantly, the bomber escaped notice and managed to reach the gate of the police lines that should have been one of the most protected places in the city and is a very obvious target.

The recent incidents of terror which have come in quick succession have caused much unease across the country, and are enough reason for law-enforcers brought together by the National Action Plan to review measures, reaffirm their resolve and consolidate their efforts to root out militancy. For the sum to be meaningful, each part must first be fully empowered and committed to the job.

The bombing in the capital of Punjab came not too many days after the passing out of a rapid response special force tasked with tackling militancy.

Given this fact and considering that Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif's government has been credited with leading the drive to

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implement NAP, it is more than discomfoting that the rescue operation at the police lines could not be initiated with the expected level of alacrity.

Reports say there was a gap of some 20 minutes between the time of the blast and the first rescue response. It has also been observed that prompt administration of first aid could, perhaps, have saved some lives, besides sending the right message about the level of official preparedness in a war that must be fought and won.

By far the most important part is where duties and responsibilities are assigned to various components that are then represented in the apex committees dealing with militancy.

From the top leadership down to the basic level, the ideal of harmony and chain of command and national cohesion must not make others totally dependent on the army. Others must be sufficiently chastened by the instance of the army having to come to their rescue, and must strive to perform, now.

Plenty has been said about ensuring and increasing the efficiency of the police to counter militancy. Ways have to be found to give confidence to the police — in all the provinces — and to introduce a culture in the force that is moored in professional command.

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Sectarian scourge

THE juxtaposition between Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan's words uttered to a think tank audience in Washington D.C. and events in his hometown of Rawalpindi on Wednesday demonstrated just how far the state still has to go before the militancy threat can be defeated.

After yet another attack on an imambargah this week a pattern is now undeniable: sectarian strife is being deliberately stoked by militant elements.

Quite why that is so can only be debated at this point. What is well-known is that the militants have a menu of opponents that they wish to attack and, depending on the circumstances, they tend to concentrate on certain categories at any given time.

Also read: [Need to work overtime to end sectarian attacks: Nisar](#)

After the Peshawar school massacre, security has been stepped up around core military and governmental targets, perhaps putting them out of the militants' reach for now.

Or it could be that the wave of arrests, detentions and killings of militants after the Peshawar school attack has shaken the militants and left them unable to mount immediate attacks on anything other than relatively soft targets, such as places of worship, which must remain open to the public and so are always vulnerable to breach by suicide bombers and armed gunmen.

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Finally, there could be an international element to the rise in sectarian attacks here, with sectarian battles growing in various parts of the Middle East — the so-called IS effect, whether real or virtual.

Whatever the case — and it could well be a combination of the above reasons in addition to several others — the basic question remains the same: what is the state doing to combat such forms of terrorism and the extremist environments that help create new militants?

Going by the words of the interior minister in Washington D.C., the answer seems to remain: not much.

In his comments on Wednesday, the interior minister seems to have stuck to a familiar script: glossing over his government's — and his own personal — culpability in long pursuing talks with the people who follow their “animal instinct”, ie the banned TTP; claiming that the December Peshawar school attack was a turning point; and suggesting that the government is serious in pursuing a full-spectrum approach to fighting terrorism — but then failing to really develop or deploy that full-spectrum approach.

Consider the issue of sectarianism. Capturing or killing sectarian militants is a way to bring down the intensity of attacks, but no more.

To truly roll back sectarianism and to do so methodically, the state needs to work on the engines of hate: the preachers, the literature, the extremist mosque-madrasah-social welfare network that urges citizens to consider each other enemies and provides new recruits for the armed groups.

But none of that is happening and it cannot happen until the state is forthright about which groups are involved and names the leadership of these groups directly.

How can an enemy that a state is unwilling to meaningfully define be defeated?

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Trees along the Canal

YEARS and years later, an issue that should have been settled by now continues to fester.

Lahore, which has seen fairly rapid expansion over this decade past, has a traffic flow problem, particularly north to south. A major road artery along this route has always been the Canal Road, running the length of the city from Jallo Park to Thokar Niaz Beg.

In its wisdom, the city government seems to think this road can endlessly be widened, thus solving the traffic problem.

Know more: [SC stops Punjab govt from chopping trees along canal](#)

If this were not evidence enough of the authorities' wrong-headedness and predilection for falling for easy fixes, consider the fact that the road-widening project means the felling of

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hundreds of venerable trees that grace the green belt along the Canal — and which makes this particular road one of the most prominent features of the city, contributing both to beauty and the environment.

The case can be seen as a microcosm of what's happening in cities across the country: a severe lack of planning, the adoption of short-term measures and, above all, administrators' inability to keep in mind sustainability and the city's future.

Whether it is Islamabad, the landscape of which has been scarred by an endless criss-crossing of seemingly overlapping roads, or Karachi which is a sorry mess of mushrooming high-rises and unplanned construction, the story is the same.

In the case of the Canal Road, thankfully, the resistance to the project was enough to land the matter in court, and on Thursday the Supreme Court again stopped the Punjab government from felling any more trees.

The case that had come up relates to some senior government officials being accused of contempt of court for flouting a 2011 judgment on the decimation of vegetation. But such an embargo cannot be expected every time folly takes hold of the city planners' minds.

Pakistan is a rapidly urbanising country and the challenges will only grow; taking the wrong steps now will lead to much tougher circumstances in the years to come.

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NAB censured

NEVER before has the Supreme Court been so candid about what it thought of the honourable National Accountability Bureau.

On Wednesday, two benches of the apex court heard two different cases, and expressed dissatisfaction with the way NAB was operating and failing to protect its own officials under threat.

In the first case, a Supreme Court bench hearing a real estate fraud rejected NAB chairman Qamar Zaman's excuse that the bureau had been hamstrung by financial constraints and human resources when he took over as its chief in 2013.

Also read: [NAB affairs come under scrutiny at Supreme Court](#)

The court was angry over NAB's failure to arrest a proclaimed offender who had been at large for four years and wondered why no disciplinary action had been taken against the seven "delinquent" officers who had failed to arrest the man.

Justice Jawwad Khawaja minced no words and said there was "lawlessness" in NAB, and, even though it had a budget running into billions of rupees, its performance was not worth 1pc of it.

A day earlier, the court had taken notice of a warning by a desperate investigating officer who said he had been threatened with arrest by influential people and that he had informed his bosses about this.

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In the other case, the bench was critical of NAB's decision to close an inquiry against six revenue officials accused of embezzlement.

Changing its nomenclature and headed at least once by a corrupt politician, NAB had been used by successive governments as an instrument of persecution.

Ziaul Haq, the man who began this fraudulent exercise, was so brazen that the word 'accountability' developed a twisted connotation contrary to its professed objective.

The purported aim behind NAB's formation — purging society of corruption by punishing the big fish — was lost when civilian governments, too, continued this hoax.

The cases tried were selective and well-known personalities were shielded. The cases against some prominent personalities lie dormant, and NAB hasn't bothered to take action against the Mehrangate generals held guilty by the Supreme Court judgment of Oct 19, 2012.

The truth is that NAB should have never come into being, for the laws existing on the statute books provide enough of a framework for investigating agencies and the judiciary to punish the corrupt.

Now that we are saddled with it, NAB has no choice but to set its house in order and justify the billions of rupees in its kitty.

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Help the children

THE recent recovery in Lahore of an 11-year-old girl allegedly tortured by her employers is the fifth such case unearthed by the Child Welfare and Protection Bureau since January 2014.

Initial investigations say she had head injuries and the area around her eyes was swollen. A case has been registered against her employers — a government officer and his wife.

Unfortunately, such cases are rampant and socially acceptable in the country. Silent, helpless children working as domestic help is the most convenient way of exploitation here.

Know more: [‘Tortured’ maid rescued, employer arrested](#)

These children are pledged by their guardians in the service of their 'masters', with little hope of escape.

These children are remarkably light on the conscience of employers who often justify their enslavement by proudly claiming that they are extending a helping hand to the 'poor' and 'needy'.

This is an absurd and grim situation. And there is greater irony in this particular case going by reports that the little girl had allegedly been beaten up after she committed the ultimate sin: that of picking up a book meant to make better people out of her employers' children.

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It is unfortunate that thousands of children working as domestic help and doing other jobs remain hidden from society's compromised eye.

There is then an urgent need to widen the escape route that the activists, the media and government agencies such as this protection bureau have created so that this abuse and exploitation becomes increasingly difficult.

A series of recent cases in Lahore is food for thought for the city's inhabitants and minders. The fact that they have come to light is also a reason to applaud the working of the CWPB. The initiative must intensify and it must expand to cover the entire country.

There is a need for people to be more vigilant and they must not be shy about reporting cases of torture and illegal detention of children. We have not been treating our children well. Let us make a new beginning — starting at home.

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Boat saga

ONLY an investigation, conducted with determination and integrity, will reveal the facts.

Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Indian defence ministry's charge that a 'terrorist' crew aboard a 'Pakistani boat' had blown up the vessel on being challenged verges on the absurd.

Different versions coming out of India — as underscored by an Indian Express scoop — show that there is no consensus on the fateful event that took place reportedly in the early hours of Jan 1.

Also read: [Pakistani boat controversy was a drama: FO](#)

A senior Indian Coast Guard official, in fact, claimed that he had given orders for the boat to be blown up, thus contradicting his government's version — even if he later retracted his remarks.

This lack of clarity from the Indian side only lends credence to the stand taken by the Pakistan Foreign Office that "the boat issue was a drama".

Indeed, it cannot be ruled out, as suggested by some, that the boat, far from carrying terrorist paraphernalia, was ferrying contraband items.

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The Indian government's irresponsible claim can only vitiate the atmosphere further when it comes to peace talks between India and Pakistan.

The possibility of a long overdue thaw had been discerned when India announced that its foreign secretary would visit Pakistan as part of a regional tour. But knee-jerk reactions — also seen in the case of the Samjhauta Express — will only prove a setback to any gains.

Having said that, it is not just politicians — Indians and Pakistanis alike — who prevent normal ties from taking shape.

A large section of the media, often taking its cue from the government, also indulges in a similar Pakistan-/India-bashing exercise.

The recent border skirmishes are a case in point. Without trying to verify the facts, or even to balance reporting with the other side's version of events, the media of the two countries cast aside all tenets of professional journalism by restricting coverage of the border incidents to the viewpoints of their respective governments, in fact adding to the tension by giving one-sided opinions.

In all this it is the public that loses out. True, the disputes between India and Pakistan are serious and long-standing. But when frenzy is whipped up, then even the small measures that could be taken to improve the environment — such as an easier visa regime — are in jeopardy.

Politicians and the media on both sides should realise this. They should ensure that challenging assertions from the other side does not automatically translate into jingoism.

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Afghan reconciliation?

A FLURRY of reports, predictably officially denied in some quarters and welcomed in others, has suggested that the Afghan Taliban may once again be willing to return to the negotiating table, either directly with the Afghan government or indirectly with the US.

Promisingly — and there must be a great deal of caution and circumspection here — the Pakistan army leadership has publicly signalled that it will support the renewed push for talks. Is there then a chance for a breakthrough?

Know more: [Afghan Taliban's Doha office revived: Pakistan officials](#)

Events on the ground are not very promising: last year the Afghan security forces suffered record losses in Taliban attacks; the Afghan army and police forces suffer from unsustainable levels of attrition; the government in Kabul has changed the tone and style of governmental business but has yet to prove it can effect necessary reforms or remain a viable entity; and there is no obvious reason why the Afghan Taliban

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should concede at the negotiating table what they have not lost on the battlefield.

There is though one good reason why talks may materialise and some kind of breakthrough may finally be achieved: the non-Taliban powers-that-be inside and outside Afghanistan appear to be coming to the realisation that in fact only an ‘Afghan-led and Afghan-owned’ reconciliation process can work.

The term — ‘Afghan-led and Afghan-owned’ — has been around for a while, but few observers were really convinced that the US would be willing to let talks truly be along those lines.

Whether because of domestic compulsions or national-security perceptions — and perhaps both — the US has long had a habit of trying to shape what an acceptable deal in Afghanistan could look like.

Whether the so-called red lines were rooted in good principles — protecting the rights of women, access to education, status of minorities, division of power, etc — was almost a moot point given that the overarching impression was that the US not only had a veto over the talks process, it was also willing to use it.

That was enough to make a settlement with the Afghan Taliban all but impossible. If — and it is a very big if — the US is willing to not dictate outcomes, there could be a chance for a settlement.

The other side is Pakistan. Once again, it is not immediately obvious why a change in leadership in Kabul and in

Rawalpindi should automatically mean a change in Pakistan’s policy on Afghanistan — it is after all a very old policy and an even older relationship between the two countries. What has changed though is the problem of cross-border militancy.

Just as Afghanistan has long chafed against Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network sanctuaries in Pakistan, now Pakistan is chafing against TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan. But is that enough to make Pakistan see the folly of its old policy?

The months ahead will reveal much, in the spring battles and in the willingness of the Afghan Taliban to really negotiate.

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Property investment in Dubai

RECENT data from the Dubai Land Department shows that Pakistanis have purchased property worth more than Rs445bn in the years 2013 and 2014. This is a staggering number, although it is worth bearing in mind that there is no evidence yet that it is all ill-gotten gains.

Nevertheless, considering the economy has been sluggish at best during these years, with growth rates remaining below 4pc and large-scale manufacturing coming in at a dismal 2pc or lower, it is hard to understand where this large sum of money came from.

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Read: [Pakistanis share 8pc in Dubai property market](#)

The same years saw spiralling inflows into other speculative trades well. Market cap in the Karachi Stock Exchange, for example, increased by 42pc in the same years and the local property market too, going by anecdotal evidence, has been booming. In fact, market cap in the KSE between January 2011 and February 2015 has increased by a staggering 161pc even as the number of listed companies has shrunk.

Also read: [Pakistanis bought property worth 16bn dirhams in Dubai](#)

Such outsize sums of money flowing into the speculative trades as the rest of the economy languishes in low growth points towards a key dysfunction. It indicates that for a certain segment of the population, incomes have continued to grow. It also indicates that these incomes find no profitable avenue for reinvestment within the country and are therefore diverted into speculative trades where returns are the result of increasing sums of money landing into the trade every year.

Questions need to be raised on both counts therefore. Where are the incomes that produce these flows being generated? And why are they opting out of acquiring productive stakes in the economy, opting for speculative returns instead?

Also read: [KSE index breaches 35,000-point barrier](#)

More specifically, it is worth asking if money that leaves Pakistan for investment in Dubai property is asked to furnish answers as to its source at any point. Source of funds questions need to be asked at some point, not only to detect ill-gotten

gains, but also to curb tax evasion. The sums flowing into Dubai property will use formal channels and can, therefore, be detected. For a country known for its lack of tax compliance, tapping into this stream should be an important priority. But it stands to reason that a large number of individuals engaging in this trade have a powerful incentive to keep their funds hidden from the authorities. It equally stands to reason that these individuals would have the means to thwart the hand of the state, should it even contemplate the prospect of laying a finger on their funds. But numbers give away the reality. If the speculative trades can boom in years when the economy is going down, the most obvious conclusion suggests itself automatically. It is party time for some irrespective of what is happening to the rest of us. The tragedy writes itself from here on.

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Fingerprint challenge

THE letters that people send in to newspapers to be published often bring to light issues that have escaped the attention of the authorities. In recent weeks, there have been a fair number of comments on the process of the verification of SIMs — an exercise that has been launched by mobile phone companies as part of the effort to crack down on illegal activities and that involves ensuring that all phone chips are registered in the names of their actual users.

The verification process involves the matching of the data on a client held by the mobile phone company with that compiled by the National Database and Registration Authority, which has developed a commendable cross-referenced bank of details about individuals and families.

Read: [SIM verification drive may suffer, PTA warns interior ministry](#)

On the whole, there have been few glitches in the process since the matchup is achieved through a scanned thumbprint, as a result of which anomalies between the two databases can be identified.

But glitches are inevitable. Some senior citizens have been severely inconvenienced — and the clerks manning the desks left at a loss — because they have found that as a result of advanced age, their skin loses elasticity so that the machines can either not read their thumbprints, or these cannot definitively be matched with Nadra's record.

These people have no option but to approach Nadra, where a system does exist to bypass the thumbprint verification procedure but that is convoluted and requires special permission since the number of times this problem crops up is not high.

Also read: [SIMs' biometric verification blues](#)

Few in number though they may be, these citizens are worthy of facilitation — not just in the SIM verification instance but as a permanent provision in Nadra's procedures. One method that immediately suggests itself is that instead of merely the thumbprint being recorded, the fingerprints of one hand, or all 10 digits of both hands, be put on the record. Surely people that already suffer much because of their advanced years should not be further harassed on account of bureaucratic requirements.

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Confronting extremism

HOW to effectively counter violent extremism is a dilemma that bedevils leaders and policymakers the world over. In this country, as elsewhere, we have seen that military force alone is insufficient to uproot militancy; the battle to counter terrorism must be a multifaceted one. Participants from over 60 countries, as well as the UN, EU and OIC, reached a similar conclusion at a summit to counter violent extremism, organised by the White House, which ended on Friday in Washington.

The point was driven home by none other than Barack Obama. It is indeed welcome that world leaders are adopting a nuanced view of global militancy and taking pains not to link terrorism with “any religion, nationality [or] civilisation”. Yet, perhaps there needs to be a greater realisation and acknowledgement in Western capitals, especially Washington, that force, particularly interventions directed at ‘unfriendly’ regimes, as well as the use of extremist proxies, has played a major role in fuelling modern global militancy. For example, removing strongmen in Iraq and Libya through force has resulted in the meltdown of the state, paving the way for extremists to create space for themselves.

The use of militant proxies has also not been abandoned; while the mujahideen were supported by the West together with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to block the Soviets’ onward march during the Afghan jihad, the use of fundamentalist fighters in Syria to topple Bashar al-Assad’s regime remains an instrument of policy. Hence when critics say the rise of the self-styled Islamic State owes much to the Western plan to remove Assad through Syrian ‘rebels’, there is indeed an

element of truth in this. Where the use of extremist proxies is concerned, Pakistan itself has experienced the painful blowback of such policies.

Muslim governments share equal responsibility for creating the conditions that breed extremism. Many Muslim states are either absolute monarchies or sham democracies, which disallow their people political and social rights. Hence when forces — including violent Islamists — challenge autocratic rulers, they find support within the populace. Also, when Western states support Muslim dictators who crush internal dissent, Muslim populations’ mistrust of the West grows. For efforts against militancy to succeed, some principles must be acknowledged: that democracy cannot be imposed through regime change; that extremist proxies must not be used against geopolitical rivals; and that autocrats in Muslim states must not be aided in their efforts to counter popular calls for democracy.

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Challenging the extremist camp

PERHAPS it was a camera and microphone too many for the voluble interior minister. After avoiding controversy and speaking relatively forthrightly in his many engagements in the US, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan has ended his trip on a most peculiar note.

He told the media that Abdul Aziz, the extremist leader of Lal Masjid in Islamabad, has submitted a written apology to the capital police for his implied defence of the Dec 16 school attack in Peshawar.

Know more: [Aziz has apologised for defending APS attack, says Nisar](#)

Those words of Maulana Aziz, spoken openly and brazenly to the national media, caused a wave of revulsion at a time when the country was still mourning the mass killings of schoolchildren.

However, the principal problem with Lal Masjid and its extremist leaders has never been simply the words of comfort they offer to militants and terrorists, but the repeated allegation the mosque is very much part of the network that the state is meant to be fighting.

In fact, in his words spoken at the end of a three-day trip to Washington D.C., the interior minister himself hinted at that very connection when he claimed that “if we arrest him [Abdul

Aziz] and it leads to yet another tragic incident, it will have very negative consequences”.

The interior minister also referenced the attempt by the Pervez Musharraf regime to move against Maulana Aziz after the Lal Masjid assault in the summer of 2007 and suggested that the present PML-N government was keen to avoid a similarly embarrassing U-turn.

Also read/ [Lal Masjid protest: FIR registered against Maulana Aziz](#)

Taken together then, the interior minister was essentially saying this: arresting, prosecuting or in any way taking on Abdul Aziz could trigger acts of violence and terrorism in the country while the government is keen not to get distracted at the moment from its core mission of taking on terrorists and militants in the country.

So, according to the so-called sequential approach of the government, sponsors, affiliates and allies of terrorists and militants are to be taken on at some unspecified later stage, after the hardcore militants have been taken out.

If that sounds bizarre — and incoherent — then it is. Nobody expects the state to militarily take on every militant group operating on Pakistani soil. Common sense dictates that a phased, methodical approach be deployed in challenging militancy, terrorism and extremism on Pakistani soil. But what is Maulana Aziz if not a direct challenge to the state and an impediment in the immediate fight against militancy? Keeping the lines of communication open with a leader who is explicitly in the extremist camp serves what purpose? Surely, others are

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right to wonder if that is just an excuse to indefinitely delay action against ideological allies.

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Meaning of tsunami

IT is a good thing that the PTI government in KP is launching a programme to take on the timber mafia and preserve the tree cover of the province. Much depends on how they carry out this campaign, but a strong focus on ecological issues from the provincial government is a welcome step.

However, it would be better if the party abandoned its cavalier use of the word tsunami. It is important to understand that this word refers to an event of tremendous destruction that brings in its wake large-scale loss of life.

For instance, Japanese sensitivities are clearly offended by the way this word — which is from the Japanese language — is bandied about by the party which seems to think that it represents a force for positive change, of renewal.

Also read: [PTI declares war against timber smugglers in KP](#)

For the Japanese, a tsunami is the harbinger of indiscriminate death and destruction. It is associated with terrible calamities such as the March 2011 earthquake in the Pacific Ocean that sent a 15-metre-high wall of water crashing ashore, inundating

two nuclear power plants that went into meltdown immediately and started releasing radiation into their surroundings.

Within days, as workers struggled to contain the meltdown and leakage from the stricken plants, the prospect of evacuating Tokyo had to be discussed by the government.

For many, the event revived memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, adding to the pain of the moment. Almost 16,000 people died from the consequences of the tsunami that struck in March 2011.

Similarly, a few years before, the 2004 tsunami had left a large number of nations in Asia shattered, with the term coming to denote a terrible event for millions of affected people.

Using the word tsunami to describe a government initiative aimed at ecological preservation shows profound ignorance.

Not only is it awkward imagery to invoke for this programme, it is hard to imagine what a tsunami of trees might look like. All it shows is a callous disregard for the sensitivities of those for whom a tsunami is a terrible reality.

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Rise in kidnappings

THE rise of kidnap-for-ransom cases in the country in recent years is perhaps one of the most vexing law-and-order problems for the security and intelligence apparatus to deal with. That the Supreme Court has now issued notices to the relevant provincial and federal government officials to advise the court on contending with the problem indicates how an originally localised phenomenon has grown to national proportions with multiple strands and multiple players.

The most fraught cases remain the ones connected to militant groups who have turned to kidnapping for ransom as an easy, and relatively lucrative, way to raise funds.

Also read: [Low convictions in kidnapping cases shock Senate committee](#)

In some cases, as with the sons of a former prime minister and governor, the attempt is also to wrest other concessions from the state, such as the release of militants in custody.

In others, as in the major urban centres, the rise of instances of ‘flash kidnapping’ where even non-wealthy individuals are kidnapped for a few hours and released upon payment of relatively small sums has come to haunt many neighbourhoods.

At its root, the problem remains one of a declining state and an overstretched law-enforcement and intelligence apparatus that is overburdened, lacks specialised training and tends to treat the problem as serious only when connected to the issue of militancy.

Where civilian-led infrastructure was created and had the capacity to specifically deal with such problems — for example, the Citizen Police Liaison Committee’s anti-kidnapping cell in Karachi — the capacity has either been gutted or not nurtured.

Institution-building, as ever, remains far too low down on the scale of priorities of the nation’s leadership. Yet, there are more dimensions to this than purely curative — recovering kidnapped victims and capturing the kidnappers.

The entire spectrum of the criminal justice system is broken and failures across the board have allowed for the rise of kidnap-for-ransom cases.

In some notorious cases, parts of the security and political leadership of the country themselves have been accused of aiding and abetting kidnappers — or sometimes even sponsoring rings of their own. Moreover, it is difficult to overlook the problem in the courts themselves: the petitions that led to the notifications issued to government officials on Friday by the Supreme Court date back to 1992.

Surely, no criminal justice system can function in any reasonably efficient manner if it takes decades to bring closure to cases. There are many ills — only a full-spectrum response will help improve law and order nationally.

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Brazen impunity

THAT many security officials in Pakistan — civilian as well as military — use torture and other extralegal methods to ‘punish’ suspects is no secret. But some instances are so brazen that not only do they make a complete mockery of the law, they also demonstrate the alarming extent of the scourge.

The recent ‘kidnapping’ of a medico-legal officer in Karachi is just one such incident. Dr Shahzad Butt, an MLO at the Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre, told a news conference on Sunday that he was picked up by men in plain clothes, taken away in a police van, tortured, and forced to delete data related to the autopsies of suspects killed in police ‘encounters’ from his laptop and phone.

Know more: [JPMC doctor forced to delete encounter autopsy reports after being ‘kidnapped’](#)

Though the city police chief has denied his men were involved in the incident, a senior government doctor has said that earlier on, there was an argument between Dr Butt and police officials when the latter pressured him to change an autopsy report and the MLO refused to oblige.

This ugly incident is a clear example of the law-enforcers’ high-handedness. It is welcome that the MLO has gone public with his ordeal and we hope the case is investigated and those responsible for this outrage are punished.

Conventional wisdom suggests that MLOs in Karachi are usually under pressure to doctor reports as per the wishes of the law-enforcement authorities.

The difference in this case is that the MLO refused to comply and, on being subjected to alleged abuse, made his ordeal publicly known.

In fact, such impunity on part of the security forces is not limited to Sindh alone. Whether it is the intractable problem of missing persons in Balochistan, the killings of suspected militants in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or bogus police ‘encounters’ in Punjab, security forces across the country are known to use extrajudicial methods to dispense ‘justice’.

The list of victims includes religiously inspired militants, as well as nationalists and political activists. This state of affairs continues even while the highest court of the land has censured these abhorrent practices.

There’s no doubt that there is much that is wrong with our criminal justice system, but employing extralegal methods is hardly the way to fix it.

In Karachi’s context, encounters have been tried as an antidote to violent crime and militancy particularly since the 1990s. That such tactics have failed to pacify the city is abundantly clear.

Not only are such methods illegal, they are ineffective. The use of encounters and torture needs to end, while those who raise a voice against such brutality employed by the law-enforcers must be protected by the law, not victimised.

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If such methods are not phased out, there will be serious doubts about the legal and ethical underpinnings of the Karachi operation.

The trend must be discouraged and efforts put in to install a strong criminal justice system, supported by scientific investigation methods and effective prosecution services.

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‘Charter of economy’

WHEN in power, all political parties resort to similar tactics to deal with the economic problems they face. They all approach the IMF and miscellaneous donor agencies for help in shoring up the balance of payments.

They all rely on ad hoc revenue measures to prevent the fiscal framework from veering too far from its moorings. They all rely on expensive and short-term commitments to bring in additional power-generation capacity into the country.

They all struggle, vainly in many cases, to prevent subsidies from eating the entire budget. They all talk of rolling back the size of the public sector. And the opposition does everything it can to stymie the government’s efforts.

Know more: [EAC endorses proposal on ‘charter of economy’](#)

They drag the courts into the realm of economic policy and create noise around initiatives that they themselves tried to undertake in the past.

If a serious push is to be made to address Pakistan’s growing and critical economic dysfunction, then this pattern of politicising economic policy must be broken. The only question is how.

The finance minister believes there should be a ‘charter of economy’, similar to the Charter of Democracy that the two main political parties signed in 2006.

On the surface this sounds like a good idea, but is it workable? Can politics really be removed from economic policy? At a more philosophical level, it is possible to have an agreement amongst the parties over broad directional matters, like privatisation, energy and normalisation of trade ties with neighbouring countries.

But in each case, questions will continue to be raised over how the directional goals are being pursued, questions such as: are valuations of state-owned assets being done transparently?

Are upfront tariffs being offered on a competitive basis? Are trade deals being pursued with an eye to their impact on local producers?

Unlike the Charter of Democracy, drawing red lines within which the parties agree to operate is next to impossible in the case of economic policy.

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Clearly, the implementation of any such charter will depend on the credibility the government can put into its own efforts, and this will depend in significant measure on the government's own performance.

Strengthening the governance framework, for instance, by strengthening regulatory bodies, can add to this credibility.

Otherwise, the effort to create a 'charter of economy' could end up looking like an attempt to mute the opposition — an effort that will surely be destined for failure.

Published in Dawn, February 24th, 2015

World Cup woes

THE Pakistan cricket team's woeful start to the ICC Cricket World Cup has seriously jeopardised their chances of making it to the quarterfinal stage and has dampened hopes across the country.

True, Misbah-ul-Haq's men were never touted as leading contenders at the World Cup. But the appalling display put up by them in the opening two matches against India and the West Indies goes well beyond the realm of humiliation — it was no less than a nightmare.

Take a look: [Don't have high expectations from Pakistan in World Cup, says Sethi](#)

Our players have appeared overtly keen to press the self-destruct button and seem to be grossly ill-prepared for the competitive event played every four years.

In fact, the manner of the team's defeats compelled skipper Misbah to admit that Pakistan had indeed flopped in all three departments of the game — batting, bowling and fielding.

The skipper's brutally frank assessment of his team comes as little surprise after the Greenshirts earned the dubious distinction of making the worst start to a one-day international innings by losing four wickets for just one run against the West Indies.

For followers of the game, though, it is the same old story that is being repeated. If reports filtering in from New Zealand are to be believed, the players' wrangling and the countless ego clashes among the 10-man coaching staff are taking a toll on the team, and this is clearly reflected in the latter's performance on the field.

Needless to say, the ineptitude of the Pakistan Cricket Board officials at home has only compounded these woes.

As things stand today, each of Pakistan's next four games against Zimbabwe, the UAE, Ireland and South Africa are being awaited with a degree of trepidation by both fans and critics.

Though Pakistan's 1992 World Cup winning team also confronted a series of defeats in the initial stages, Imran Khan's men had the determination and the firepower to

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regroup and improve their performance — qualities that the current team lacks.

It will take nothing short of a miracle to turn things around at this point.

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Turmoil in Bangladesh

EVEN though the Bangladesh army has denied it is planning to seize power, the very fact that the media is abuzz with such rumours shows the gravity of the crisis.

So far 100 people have been killed this month alone in violence that began last month when opposition leader Khaleda Zia called for a transport shutdown to coincide with the anniversary of last year's controversial elections.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed made the electoral exercise dubious by amending the constitution and doing away with a neutral government to conduct the polls.

Know more: [Bangladesh unrest toll tops 100 as more bodies found](#)

No wonder Ms Zia's Bangladesh National Party and 17 other parties boycotted the vote. Since then, Bangladesh has lurched from crisis to crisis — with widespread violence in evidence.

At least 1,000 vehicles have been torched, nearly 10,000 people arrested and security forces have shot dead a dozen people, causing the opposition to allege that the government is following a 'shoot to kill' strategy.

Even though both of them have shown lack of restraint in what is billed as the 'battle of the begums', the prime minister hasn't helped matters by pursuing a vindictive policy, which has left other parties with virtually no choice but to join hands with the BNP.

A perverse decision by her was to start the so-called war crimes trial and to hang Jamaat-i-Islami leaders for alleged atrocities committed more than four decades ago. This has served to sharpen the polarisation, added to national discord and precipitated conditions resembling a civil war.

Ms Zia's motive behind the countrywide strike is to overthrow the government and force a new election. Given the prime minister's track record it is highly unlikely that she will accept this.

Should the countrywide turmoil continue, not only will the economy suffer, Bangladesh's democracy could be the loser. The army's official denial is of no value for a country which has seen repeated military coups since its foundation in 1971.

The only choice the two leaders have is to talk and strike a modus vivendi.

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Energy plans

THE government has been rightly emphasising new investments in the power sector, but evidence continues to come in that it might have underestimated the extent of the planning required to get large-scale energy investments off the ground.

The latest case is the hearing held by Nepra to decide an upfront tariff for LNG power plants in Punjab. The project seeks to attract private investments to generate up to 3,600MW of electricity using regasified LNG in three districts of southern Punjab.

Many of the private investors who have shown an interest in the project pointed out during the hearing that fuel supply remains a problem and a key source of uncertainty.

Also read: [Investors shying away from setting up larger LNG power plants](#)

Given the large fuel requirements for a power plant, it was inevitable that this question would be raised during the hearing.

Many of the investors said that they would need to see a viable gas supply framework before they could commit or even decide on what upfront tariff would be workable for them.

Investors asked what arrangements had been put in place for movement of LNG from the port in Karachi to the plants in southern Punjab, and particularly what storage facilities might

exist since expecting a continuous supply of LNG via a pipeline from the port would be unrealistic.

Initiating tariff hearings before having decided on a fuel supply framework might have been a little premature, and it indicates that the government, in its haste to show progress on the energy front, is perhaps gliding over important questions simply to keep matters moving along.

Something similar happened in the case of the coal-fired power plants, also to be set up in southern Punjab. Earlier this month, at least two power plants scheduled to run on coal were abandoned in favour of gas-based plants.

Difficulties in coal transport from the port to the plant were cited as the main reason for the move. Significant enhancements will be required in the railways' coal-handling capacity, and port handling as well, to meet the gigantic requirements for coal for so many power plants.

An impression is created by these mid-course corrections that the government is moving too fast down the road to commissioning new power plants, and neglecting to carry out a proper feasibility study of all the requirements that will need to be in place before such a large burst of privately owned power-generation capacity can be viable in southern Punjab.

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PML-N's vote-buying fears

AT least the PML-N has proven one thing: when the party leadership is keen enough, electoral reforms can be mooted overnight. Out of the blue, a cabinet meeting on Monday threw out the idea of changing the procedure by which senators are to be elected in a matter of days.

The ostensible problem that a sudden constitutional amendment was proposed to resolve? Vote-buying in the provincial assemblies that has jeopardised what the PML-N believes is its rightful share of seats in the Senate.

Know more: [PML-N for Senate polls by show of hands](#)

Consider that for a moment: PML-N MPAs are distrusted by the PML-N central leadership to vote for PML-N candidates in a secret ballot and the only solution the PML-N central leadership can come up with is to amend the Constitution to have a public vote by a show of hands.

If that is not a damning indictment of all that is wrong with the electoral and political process in the country, then what else possibly could be? Rightfully, the PML-N's desperate plan has been rejected by the Election Commission of Pakistan and even otherwise, other political parties, while semi-welcoming the PML-N's idea for similar reasons, have pointed out the problem of converting the single transferrable vote into a vote by a show of hands.

Why though did the PML-N even have to dream up such a scheme? Having fought consecutive general elections and

having had every opportunity to select its preferred candidates in the last general election, could not the party have picked candidates who were above vote-selling and tawdry electoral shenanigans?

The party may well point out that in several cases, especially in Balochistan, the present cohort of PML-N provincial representatives has individuals who were elected as independents and chose to join the party after it swept to power at the centre.

But then, the party would simply be admitting that it opened the door to opportunists in one election and is now trying to bolt the door to keep those opportunists from cashing in on a fresh opportunity at the next election.

The PML-N is, in effect, trying to have it both ways: welcoming opportunists when they vote in the PML-N's favour and then trying to appeal to higher principles when the electoral winds turn against them.

Belated as the PML-N's recognition of vote-buying and the unwelcome role of money in politics is, it would have been far better if the party had sought to introduce the Senate electoral reforms as part of the much-awaited and long-promised general election reforms. But those latter reforms still appear to be something the PML-N is not really interested in.

Also, it would have helped if the PML-N had proposed internal party reforms to improve the quality of party members and encourage a financially cleaner, more professional and less parochial type of candidate. As ever though, the PML-N remains mired in the narrowest, most parochial of approaches.

Halal food authority?

IT is really a task cut out for the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Taking a decision on which food is forbidden and which is halal should not be the responsibility of the Ministry of Science and Technology.

Yet, the latter ministry is now seeking the creation of a ‘halal food authority’ that would be empowered to ban the import and sale of foods it believes may contain ingredients prohibited by religion.

The fact that the ministry took the matter before a National Assembly standing committee is evidence that the officers running its affairs are completely out of ideas when it comes to the promotion of science and technology in the country.

Know more: [Haram ingredients in most of imported food items](#)

Surely, it would have made far more sense for them to have pointed out the deficiencies in science education in Pakistan, or to have discussed the absence of research.

Even if the ministry preferred to focus on food quality, there are areas where its input would have been appreciated. For example, it could have concerned itself with food safety.

The country’s waterways are heavily contaminated with pollutants of various kinds. Industrial effluent and raw sewage are used for irrigation purposes in many parts of the country, and negatively affect agricultural produce.

Then, there are entire districts that have a high incidence of hepatitis from contaminated water. Any government would be alarmed at the potential health risk to its citizens.

Not so the officers of the science and technology ministry; along with some parliamentarians, they have chosen not to dwell on such unpalatable truths.

Once again, the question of halal food should be left to the religious affairs ministry, with their peers in commerce being empowered to take action. It is strange that the matter was referred by the National Assembly speaker to the Standing Committee on Science and Technology.

The ministry concerned would be doing everyone a favour by focusing on its mandate to promote research and technology in the country, instead of delving into faith-based issues.

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Vaccine management

THE challenges to success in the battle against polio are significant, well-known and have landed the country at the centre of international concern.

Under fire, state functionaries tend to cite in their own defence the resistance to the vaccine by certain quarters, the violence visited on polio teams, etc.

To an extent, they are right. But if that was the whole picture — if the poor showing in the effort to vaccinate children was not due also to the entrenched incapacities of the state and its health programmes — then there would be visible success in the push against other diseases, particularly the nine childhood diseases covered under the government-run Expanded Programme on Immunisation.

Take a look: [UN concerned over weak vaccine management in Pakistan](#)

Sadly enough, that is not the case. Between 2013 and 2014, the World Health Organisation and Unicef jointly conducted a survey of 151 vaccine sites, including a national store, sub-national stores, lowest distribution levels and service points.

The report presents a dismal picture: improvements are needed in most areas of the vaccine and supply management system, and only in one area — vaccine and commodity arrival procedures — does the country meet the required standards.

In all other areas of an effective vaccination management programme, from storage temperatures to capacity, from buildings and equipment to stock management and effective distribution, performance is weak enough to raise concern. According to the report, vaccine distribution, stock management and information management are areas in which the country's showing is especially poor.

This is hardly surprising. In almost every department, the government is struggling to effectively manage its meagre resources and the health sector is no different.

Yet, perhaps more than several other areas of endeavour, this in particular merits urgent attention. With public-sector hospitals and infirmaries woefully inadequate to meet the needs of the population, there can simply be no excuse to not be making all-out efforts to ensure that children do not fall sick as a result of preventable diseases.

The going won't be easy, but measures can be taken, such as the suggestion made by the WHO-Unicef report that solar power systems be instituted where necessary to maintain the cold chain for vaccines.

It is not too much to say that the issue goes right to the heart of the country's future. That children now go to school under the shadow of guns makes for dismal enough projections; but ill health and death through preventable diseases stalk millions more.

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Protection for military courts

IN a strange, mostly unexplained twist, President Mamnoon Hussain has promulgated an ordinance further revising the recently amended Army Act to ostensibly aid the functioning of military courts by allowing for trials in camera, ie without the presence of the public or the media, and over video link if necessary.

The idea, according to a special assistant of the prime minister who handles legal matters, is to enhance security for presiding officers, military prosecutors, witnesses and defence lawyers by shielding their identity from the public and the media.

Take a look: [Security for military court judges and prosecutors](#)

While that may seem like a sensible idea — and only at first blush — it is quite incredible that already the law dealing with military courts is being amended in such a clandestine manner and without any debate.

The need for a presidential ordinance — a legislative tool that has been used in the past to undermine parliamentary democracy — points to either one of two problems.

Military courts were either mooted in haste and only now are the real-world impediments to their functioning becoming apparent, hence the need to tweak the law.

Or the government and the military which demanded such courts do not feel obliged to maintain any level of transparency in the operation of these courts and are now confident enough

to introduce changes that essentially seal off their functioning from any kind of public and media scrutiny.

Consider the great irony of this latest presidential ordinance: if special courts and anti-terrorism courts had been given the same protections (in-camera proceedings and video links to protect identities of prosecutors, judges and witnesses), the same urgent resources and the same level of attention by the senior-most state functionaries, perhaps the need for military courts would not have been felt in the first place.

With this latest presidential ordinance, it appears that the government and military officials ultimately do want to create a parallel judicial system — a closed-off system of courts where public scrutiny is minimal, or even non-existent, and everything is justified in the name of the national interest and protecting the people.

That criticism is not unjustified. Military courts were mooted as a very narrow and very limited solution to a very serious problem: hardcore terrorists and terrorist masterminds who needed to be convicted and remain convicts in a broken criminal justice system.

Already though there are suggestions in various quarters, usually in response to an unforeseen and undesirable event, that the scope of military courts be expanded. Perhaps the senator who suggested getting military courts involved in the World Cup cricketing debacle of the Pakistani team was only being facetious or spoke in mock frustration, but it has already been seen how voices have called for military courts to deal with Karachi law-and-order woes.

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Military courts must not become the new normal — and clandestine, unexplained changes to the law must be resisted.

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Felling trees

BANNING the sale of timber in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is one of the most laudable steps taken by the PTI government.

Pakistan's rate of deforestation has been rated by various environmental bodies as being amongst the highest in the world, and already the country looks set to miss the MDG goal of 6pc forest cover by 2015.

According to official numbers, forests constitute 5.2pc of the land area of Pakistan, although some dispute that figure, arguing it is in fact much lower.

Know more: [PTI declares war against timber smugglers in KP](#)

Even by official figures, if Pakistan were to meet its MDG target for forest cover, it would need to create forests on an area six times the size of the city of Lahore in the next 10 months. Clearly, the scale of our deforestation problem is massive.

One consequence of the ban on the sale of timber in KP has been the smoking out of those elements who are connected with the timber mafia.

One legislator belonging to the Qaumi Watan Party has spoken out angrily against the ban, arguing that sale of timber is an important source of revenue for the provincial government, and provides jobs for “thousands” of people.

This reasoning is absurd. Forests play a crucial role in our ecology. They are the lungs of the atmosphere, help renew arable land, inhibit landslides and provide an ecosystem that sustains life and biodiversity on a huge scale.

The ban on timber sales should be replicated in other provinces, particularly Sindh where the depletion of mangrove forests accounts for the largest share of total deforestation taking place in the country.

Furthermore, the ban should be extended to cover the allocation of forest lands for non-forest uses, such as housing colonies, an issue in which Punjab tops the list. Elements such as the QWP legislator deserve to be ignored in the process.

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Anti-rape bill

FEW would argue that Pakistan's societal realities are such that render it a deeply hostile place for women and children in particular.

Nevertheless, slow though it may be, in terms of legislation some progress is being made to address this concern. Forward-looking legislation is, in fact, a first step towards changing norms and reducing rights violations.

In recent years, several laws have been passed and procedures laid down that offer extra and targeted protections, such as those against honour killings and underage marriage.

Know more: [Gang-rape victim lives life of isolation after viral video](#)

Others bring into the ambit of the law those transgressions that otherwise tend to remain in the shadows, such as sexual harassment at the workplace. And last week, the Senate's Standing Committee on Law and Justice approved the Anti-Rape Laws (Criminal Laws Amendment) Bill of 2014.

This is meant to amend sections of the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860, the Code of Criminal Procedures, 1898, and the Qanoon-i-Shahadat Order, 1984 in order to improve the chances of rape victims getting justice.

The bill may be a slim document, but the changes it envisages are significant. A clause is inserted, for example, in Section 218 of the PPC making defective investigations worthy of

punishment, and in Section 344 of the CrPc requiring that once a rape case has been taken cognisance of by a court, it shall be decided upon within six months.

The new bill gives added protections to victims. For instance, disclosing through the media or via some other route the identity of a victim without the latter's consent would be deemed an offence. It also provides for in-camera trials.

An insertion in the Qanoon-i-Shahadat law says that if the question of consent comes up and the victim claims that she did not, "the court shall presume that she did not consent".

Article 151, clause 4 of the same legislation currently reads: "When a man is prosecuted for rape or an attempt to ravish, it may be shown that the prosecutrix was of generally immoral character." The new bill requires that this clause be omitted.

These are all welcome changes, and the bill deserves smooth passage through the Senate and the National Assembly.

Past this will come the real challenge: that of ensuring implementation. Too often, notwithstanding the laws on the books, victims of various crimes, and in particular of rape, find the path to justice impeded by entrenched prejudice and a lack of sympathy at even the level of the police station.

In addition to the laws, the whole culture surrounding rape needs to change.

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Curricular concerns

THE curricula taught in Pakistani schools, especially over the last few decades, have been criticised for being exclusivist and helping promote rigidity and intolerance in society.

In fact, it would not be wrong to point out that more than the material taught in many madressahs, it is the content of public school textbooks that has contributed largely to the acceptance or condoning of terrorism by a large section of the population. That is why curriculum reform is a key area in the struggle to reclaim the anti-extremism narrative in Pakistan and point it in a more moderate direction.

Know more: [Punjab to reform syllabus, map seminaries, says CM](#)

In this regard, the Punjab chief minister's remarks on Wednesday, in which he said that the syllabi of schools, colleges and seminaries in his province would be reformed as part of counterterrorism efforts, should be welcomed. Shahbaz Sharif said the steps would be in tandem with other efforts, such as cracking down on hate speech and the misuse of loudspeakers.

For a holistic, integrated counterterrorism and anti-extremism effort, it is essential that the curricula taught throughout Pakistan are carefully examined to root out any references or biases that may promote hatred of or belittle different sects, religions, communities or nations.

After the 18th Amendment, the onus is on the provincial governments to shape their respective curricula. The provinces have used their devolved powers differently where textbooks are concerned; for example, Sindh, especially in the lower grades, has made progress in removing gender bias and hate material from books.

The previous ANP-led Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government had made similar changes, also guided by Musharraf-era curriculum reform guidelines. But in the recent past, the PTI administration of KP — apparently under Jamaat-i-Islami pressure — has tried to revert to the old lessons or reverse the changes.

Hence clearly, more efforts are required at the national level to produce curricula that are progressive and provide genuine learning opportunities to young students.

The Punjab chief minister mentioned that material on religious tolerance and restraint will be included in textbooks. While education is now a provincial subject — and should remain so — there are certain themes which all federating units may want to adopt in their respective course books.

These include tolerance, compassion and other humanistic values. What must clearly be avoided are the glorification of war, overt religiosity and excessive militarism, as well as the 'othering' of minorities that has long been a mainstay of our children's textbooks.

Indeed, several generations have been brought up on myopic curricula, and the damage done over decades will not be undone overnight.

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However, for a clean break from extremism and to help create a more tolerant polity, curriculum reform efforts must be long-lasting and overseen by academics of repute.

The stress must be on learning, not imparting ideology. Most of all, the state must resist pressure from obscurantist quarters that are bound to resist any educational reform initiatives for their own selfish interests.

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Expressway blocked

THE government of Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif has a knack of sneaking up on the people of Lahore. When the Lahorites are least suspecting it, out comes a grand scheme for their betterment — even if they are unable to see the benefits immediately and even if they continue to debate the merits of a project long after it has been executed.

The people are expected to firmly believe the chief minister's resolve to turn his hometown into a modern metropolis at par with the most advanced in the world. There are occasionally problems, however, such as the recent hurdle created by the Lahore High Court — to the relief of many.

The high court has ordered the scrapping of an elevated expressway aimed at fast-forwarding the city towards development. A divisional bench of the court that came up with

the ruling on Thursday was unable to share the urgency the government had displayed in pressing for the raised road.

Know more: [High court scraps elevated expressway project](#)

Hundreds of petitions had been filed seeking to block the expressway. The ruling, which may now be challenged in the Supreme Court, bars the government from acquiring land for the project.

Not only that, the court has questioned the priorities of the Shahbaz Sharif set-up and has gone as far as to advise it to focus, instead, on issues related to health and education.

One important aspect of the court's censure is where it pointedly asked the government why it failed to have the necessary environmental impact assessment before taking up the project.

That is a clear signal for those in a hurry to turn Lahore into Paris or Istanbul or any other city to follow procedure.

For anyone who cares to listen, let it be said for the umpteenth time that such development schemes are the right of an elected city administration, undertaken after consultation with the people who make up the city.

The whims weigh heavy on the people the government is so obsessively looking to catapult to higher standards of living.

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Afghan refugee concerns

IN the wake of the Peshawar APS tragedy, there is a justifiable desire to zero in on militants in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa capital as well as elsewhere in the province. But while such actions are being taken, it must be ensured that law-abiding and registered Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan are not scooped up by the dragnet.

As reported on Thursday, the KP administration has decided to expel around 300 Afghan clerics residing illegally in the province for their apparent links to acts of terrorism.

On the surface, this is a perfectly acceptable move: individuals — foreign or local — involved in facilitating terrorism or fanning extremism must be dealt with as per the law of the land. Even the UNHCR has said that it does not support Afghan refugees involved in militancy.

Yet there are signs that under the cover of such counterterrorism efforts, Afghan refugees who have broken no law are also being harassed. For example, in Sindh, refugees have accused police of picking up men and children and thereafter releasing them upon payment. Some human rights groups have also raised concerns about the reported forced repatriation of refugees.

In the aftermath of national tragedies, it is easy to get swept away by emotion and blame the ‘other’ for our woes. While foreigners involved in militancy in Pakistan must be dealt with, it is totally unacceptable to hound law-abiding refugees or force them to leave.

Of course, dealing with the refugee question has been a daunting task for Pakistan for several decades; even today, there are said to be around 1.6 million registered Afghans in the country, with up to a million illegal refugees.

As per the tripartite agreement between Pakistan, Afghanistan and the UNHCR, the refugees can stay in this country till the end of this year. Until there is a permanent solution to their plight, legally registered refugees must not be harassed or forced out, and must be allowed to live with dignity in Pakistan.

The KP chief minister has said the legal Afghans should not be hassled; all provincial administrations must ensure there are clear guidelines against the harassment of these displaced people. Ultimately, it is hoped that conditions in Afghanistan improve to such a level that the millions of refugees living outside their war-battered homeland feel confident enough to return to their country. Ensuring such conditions is, of course, the primary responsibility of the government in Kabul.

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Disarray in LNG imports

THE fact that the country's first consignment of liquefied natural gas is now weeks away from landing would have been cause for cheer, had it not been for the many little glitches that still remain.

The LNG project has been almost a decade in the works — far too long considering it is a very basic technology. Equally basic, unfortunately, are the issues that still mire prospects for the arrival of the first cargo. The construction of the terminal and its smooth operation are not in doubt.

A long-term arrangement for the supply of LNG also appears to be taking shape, although it is not as yet a reality. In the meantime, there are a few rather basic questions, such as who will pay for the first consignment that will have to be ordered soon. One would think such an elementary matter would have been sorted out by now. After all, the government had been going on about the project for months while construction of the terminal was hustled along its timeline.

But all that trumpeting of the project, it turns out, was more air and less music. Construction of the terminal was never part of the government's portfolio of responsibilities. Perhaps that is why it has proceeded smoothly.

The government's job was to put in place the policy framework under which parties, public and private, could contract cargoes and have them transmitted up to the point of consumption. Very little of that work has been done.

Today, we have a situation where PSO, the party that blew a trumpet or two of its own back in September when it declared "record high profits" in its quarterly results, is not keen to pay for the first consignment of imported LNG. The buck, therefore, passed to the two distribution companies — SSGCL and SNGPL — both of which are also reluctant to pick up the tab.

Further, no agreement exists on the profits each of these three parties will be allowed to make for their part in the chain, with implications for end-user pricing.

Meanwhile, without a proper third-party framework for use of the transmission companies' pipeline infrastructure, private parties, such as the CNG sector, are also unable to import their own cargoes.

Power plants that are interested in importing LNG are discovering that there is no agreement on what mechanism will govern the payments they receive from the finance ministry to pay for these imports.

You would think that all this work would have been done by now and at this stage orders would be placed for the first consignments. But it turns out that the petroleum ministry has not worked through much of the policy software required for making LNG imports work.

Either they are too busy, or are living up to the reputation of ineptitude they acquired during the recent petrol crisis.

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