

# DAWN



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

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## Irresponsible warning

THE MQM is under tremendous pressure, both in Pakistan and the UK, as allegations of the party's alleged links to RAW have surfaced over the past few weeks, along with developments in the Imran Farooq murder case, putting the Muttahida on the back foot. The party has complained of being put on a media trial; this is partially true, as political opponents have used the allegations to tear into the MQM. However, the issues raised — specifically by the contents of party leader Tariq Mir's reported confessional statement in the UK — are very serious and cannot be brushed aside. On Monday, MQM supremo Altaf Husain, while addressing party cadres over the phone, attempted to answer some of the criticism. He vehemently denied all links to Indian intelligence and trumpeted his party's 'patriotic' credentials. However, one particularly grim warning from the MQM leader is cause for concern for Karachi's people. Referring to perceived attempts to impose a 'minus-one' formula on the Muttahida — ie remove Mr Husain from the leadership — the party chief said that if such developments materialised, there would be "a war" on the streets of the metropolis.

Over the past few decades, Karachi's citizens have witnessed unspeakable bloodshed sparked by political, ethnic and sectarian factors. Periods of brief calm have alternated with violent episodes that have taken a heavy toll on the city, while strikes and forced shutdowns have had a debilitating effect on normal life, as well as Karachi's economy. Hence, this was an irresponsible statement for the MQM chief to make as it only stokes the climate of fear in the city. The Muttahida has every right to clear its name through legitimate channels if it feels it

is being subjected to a witch-hunt. But to publicly predict the outbreak of violence should the party's fortunes tumble is unacceptable. Altaf Husain should be counselling restraint to party cadres while using legal channels to prove the MQM's innocence. Karachi has seen enough bloodletting and certainly does not need to witness any more.

*Published in Dawn, July 1st, 2015*

## Government's row with K-Electric

AN escalating quarrel between the government and K-Electric, the country's only privately owned power distribution company, carries grave risks for everybody. What is making the whole spat even more frustrating is that both parties to the dispute — the government and the management of K-Electric — lack credibility in the eyes of the public. K-Electric has used a slick public relations campaign to present itself as something of a miracle worker in lifting the power utility into profitability. But beneath this claim lurk a series of very serious allegations. They include charges of rapacious recoveries levelled by industrialists, allegations by the regulator that the top management at the utility issued instructions to staff to engage in overbilling, and more sinister accusations of gas theft, abortively touched upon by NAB as part of the investigation into the Ogra scam. It would be premature to conclude that the management's job is done once the balance sheet shows a profit.

On the other hand, the claims and shrill allegations being made by the government against the utility also lack credibility. The government has told the Supreme Court that the power utility owes Rs130bn to the government whereas K-Electric's own documents suggest that the amount owed is Rs72bn, while it in turn is owed Rs194bn by the government under various heads such as the tariff differential subsidy and overdue bills from KWSB and CDGK. The government has also alleged that the utility is not utilising its own sources of generation, preferring instead to rely on easy supply of power from the national grid. But is a reliable supply of gas available to enable own generation at full capacity? And has the government been prompt in paying the tariff differential subsidy it is required to pay in the event of generation using furnace oil?

Thus far the feud is restricted to words but if it should escalate it could rekindle memories of the disastrous episode with Hubco during the last Nawaz Sharif government. That act hobbled private investment in the power sector for years, in addition to playing a major role in causing multilateral inflows to dry up. The government must avoid letting matters escalate to that point in the present feud. Perhaps the best way to move things forward without damaging prospects for further private investment in the power sector would be to make public the implementation agreement of 2009 under which the current management of K-Electric assumed charge. More than the visceral words emanating from the Ministry of Water & Power these days, that document will make clear what benchmarks were set to assess performance of the new management at the onset of their venture. Since both parties to the dispute have gaps in their credibility, perhaps the public can be the best judge of who has a point and who is simply trying to deflect the blame.

## Foiled militant attack

IN what appears to have been another so-called intelligence-based operation, a raid on the outskirts of Lahore this week resulted in the death of at least four militants linked, according to security officials, to the banned groups Al Qaeda and TTP. The militants had allegedly travelled from Wana, South Waziristan, to Lahore to attack multiple targets in Punjab, demonstrating yet again that the long war against militancy is a national war that will ebb and flow until the state has both a winning strategy and the relentless determination to implement it. The basic difference between a long-term winning strategy and the recent successes against militancy — since Operation Zarb-i-Azb began last year, the counter-insurgency campaign in Fata has been actively complemented by counterterrorism operations in the provinces — is that the state has not really gone beyond the disruption and dismantling of terrorist cells. Where the intelligence learns of an imminent terrorist attack or uncovers a cell of militants, action is duly taken — and as a result several attacks have been foiled and many militants captured or eliminated.

Yet, that approach does little to address the militancy threat in its many dimensions. Terrorist networks do not exist in isolation — from funding to transport and from hideouts to indoctrination, any given militant group exists and operates with the help of a number of supporting actors. That much-needed support often comes from various elements of society itself — charitable donations, overnight accommodation, providing space to recruit and indoctrinate and other seemingly ancillary tasks are all often provided by aiders and abettors, who may not strap on a suicide vest themselves but help ensure

that militancy remains the foremost security threat the country faces today. Where, despite rhetorical claims by government and military officials, is the attempt to shut down the infrastructure of jihad, the mosque-madrasah-social welfare network that both sustains and hides militants? True, a declining state in terms of capacity to deal with the scale of the problem and the size of the population is part of the challenge. But there is also the unwillingness to recognise that as once militant groups morphed and overlapped, so they do so today. The raid outside Lahore unsurprisingly found elements of TTP and Al Qaeda collaborating. Few would be surprised if the so-called pro-state militants are secretly collaborating with the TTP and other anti-state militants. Zero tolerance remains the only option.

*Published in Dawn, July 1st, 2015*

## The lone gunman

LAW-ENFORCERS are routinely criticised for failing to crack down on crime, especially in a violent city like Karachi. But at times incidents take place that truly expose the state of unpreparedness of those who are supposed to serve and protect the people.

One such incident transpired in Karachi's DHA area on Tuesday, when a mentally unstable man blocked traffic on a main thoroughfare, started firing into the air and took a girl hostage before he ran out of ammunition and was subdued.

It is a miracle no lives were lost as the suspect was armed with a sub-machine gun and a pistol. It is equally propitious that the shooter ran out of bullets, or else the episode could have continued for much longer, with more lethal consequences.

*Also read: [DHA standoff gunman is 'trained pilot'](#)*

What is also shocking is that while policemen tried to convince him to surrender, the man was overpowered by a TV reporter who was covering the event. It is truly frightening to consider the level of mayhem that could have ensued had the gunman been an actual terrorist. The incident bears a striking similarity to the episode in Islamabad in 2013, in which a lone gunman paralysed the capital for several hours.

The incident highlights two key issues: the proliferation and availability of weapons in Karachi, and the law-enforcers' lack of preparedness. That a mentally unstable individual could

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have access to a sub-machine gun is shocking and reflects the deadly level of weaponisation in society.

Secondly, it is bizarre that in a city with several specialised police units, as well as the paramilitary Rangers, the LEAs were not able to neutralise the suspect until he ran out of ammunition. Of course, there exist non-lethal methods of disarming and disabling suspects in such sensitive situations; the question is, are our LEAs trained in these methods? This incident would suggest otherwise.

The stand-off should serve as a moment of reflection for those who rule Sindh, particularly those managing Karachi's affairs.

Read more: [Lone gunman in DHA road standoff overpowered](#)

*Published in Dawn, July 2nd, 2015*

## The bigger picture

IT is a picture and an accompanying press release meant to send a message of stability and a healthy working relationship: before Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif embarks on any visit with internal security or foreign policy dimensions, there is now the obligatory day-before meeting between the prime minister and the army chief, Gen Raheel Sharif.

So it was this Tuesday that before Prime Minister Sharif travelled down to Karachi, he met Gen Sharif and discussed issues of great import.

There is some sense to the message, given the near obsessive scrutiny by the media and sections of society of the state of the relationship between the leader of parliamentary democracy and the leader of the powerful army.

*Also read: [Nawaz cancels Zardari meeting after anti-military outburst](#)*

Given institutional histories, Prime Minister Sharif can hardly be faulted for wanting to be seen to be close to and working with his generals, while Gen Sharif would equally like to send a message to his rank and file and officer corps that he is lobbying for the military's institutional concerns at the highest levels.

There is though a point where symbolism needs to be matched by substance. And substance ought only to be measured in terms of the constitutional scheme of things and incrementally righting the civil-military imbalance in the country.



Consider, for example, the issue of Karachi. Where, really, is the civilian input today into the handling of the security crackdown in the city?

When the Karachi operation was launched in September 2013, there appeared to be significant civilian ownership and some clear political leadership — Prime Minister Sharif, the interior ministry, the Intelligence Bureau, all seemed to have some sense of purpose and resolve about them.

Today, examining the all-too-familiar picture of Gen Raheel seated on the left and the prime minister on the right during one of the army chief's frequent visits to the prime minister's office, is there any sense other than the military leadership is the one with the initiatives and the ideas and the civilian government simply acquiesces or indicates to what extent it can go along with the military leadership's initiatives and ideas?

*Published in Dawn, July 2nd, 2015*

## Rupture in the Baloch insurgency

THE decade-old insurgency in Balochistan is no longer the monolith that it had so far appeared to be.

Twenty people were killed and several injured in the early hours of Tuesday during a clash between two militant groups belonging to the banned Balochistan Liberation Army and the United Baloch Army that took place near the border of Kohlu and Dera Bugti districts. With both sides using heavy weapons, the skirmish lasted several hours.

Elsewhere in the province on the same day, in the Mashkay area of Awaran district, 13 militants were killed in an encounter with security forces. Reportedly, among the dead are a brother and nephew of Dr Allah Nazar who heads the Baloch Liberation Front, another banned separatist group.

*Take a look: [Profile: Khan of Kalat — king without a crown](#)*

For several years, the unity between the various militant groups has been a distinguishing feature of the Baloch insurgency; areas of their operations even overlapped in many places without reports of friction. That seems to have effectively come to an end with the death of veteran Baloch nationalist Khair Bux Marri in June last year when a rift between his sons Mehran and Hyrbyair — who heads the BLA from self-exile in London — led to the creation of the UBA with other groups also aligning themselves with one side or the other.

Such a rupture was perhaps inevitable at some point: prolonged militant movements become susceptible to internal crises stemming from differences over ideology and/or finances, which can then lead to disagreements about operational strategies.

Where the security forces are concerned, the fracturing of the insurgency offers a tactical advantage for them to comprehensively crush the movement. In 2013, nature afforded them a similar opportunity when a devastating earthquake struck Awaran, a stronghold of the BLF. In its aftermath, the security forces — under the umbrella of providing relief to earthquake victims — managed to access parts of the very volatile district that were hitherto ‘no-go areas’ due to risk of insurgent attacks.

However, in the process they also employed highly questionable tactics such as allowing unfettered leeway to the ultra right’s ‘charity’ wings to establish a presence in the area’s secular and multi-sectarian — if deprived — society.

Extremist forces are part of the problem that bedevils Balochistan, a fact highlighted by Dr Abdul Malik on Tuesday. They can never, in any viable sense, be part of the solution.

Recent events indicate there is, at last, perhaps some realisation that a new approach is needed. There was the announcement of an amnesty for Baloch militants turning their backs on violence, and an initiative to hold talks with the Khan of Kalat in London is in the works as a means of reaching out to hardline separatist leaders.

However, unless the state discards its old proxies and prejudices, and takes the long view that actually addresses legitimate Baloch grievances, the province will remain a powder keg.

*Published in Dawn, July 2nd, 2015*

## Response to heatwave

ALMOST a week after the heatwave in the southern part of the country passed, leaving behind an alarming death toll, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif finally thought it worth his while to pay a quick visit to Karachi and make some inquiries. His visit was abbreviated, and cut short further as he attended one meeting with Sindh government officials and civil society leaders before departing straight for the airport. In the meantime, he offered condolences to the bereaved without finding the time to visit the hospitals where they were being treated, and left behind reports that an inquiry committee had been constituted to affix responsibility on those government departments that were negligent during the tragedy. All through the event itself, the federal government took the line that it was the Sindh government’s responsibility to formulate a response, and deflected charges that power outages that aggravated the death toll had anything to do with the centre since K-Electric is privately owned. But by insisting that the National Disaster Management Authority did indeed fashion a response, the federal government tacitly admitted that there was a role for it to play in such a situation. Nobody has asked whether the Met Department, another federal body, actually issued an alert in

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response to which government departments could have mobilised.

Mr Sharif's visit, and the response of his government more generally, appears almost flippant in the face of a large death toll that crossed 1,200 in Karachi. First by participating in a blame game over who was responsible for the shoddy response, then by making a short and perfunctory visit whose only tangible outcome appears to be another committee, he has reinforced the perception that the city of Karachi has nobody to care for it. Sindh Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah couldn't abort his trip to Larkana as the death toll mounted during the heatwave, while Mr Sharif cut his own visit to Karachi short when he arrived in the city after the crisis had passed. What exactly does accountability mean at this point? What difference does it make that a committee will now be making some inquiries when both the federal and provincial governments are more interested in protecting their own image than sheltering the most vulnerable of lives from a crippling natural event? The residents of Karachi can do without mere lip service being paid to their troubles.

*Published in Dawn, July 3rd, 2015*

## Crossovers from PPP

THE PPP has reached a point where a clutch of trained, skilled members are leaving it and going over to a party that appears to be the counter-force to the PML-N in Punjab. Many PPP stalwarts have crossed over to the Imran Khan camp in recent days. Many others are set to follow suit. Calls from within the PPP to remind them of the merits of loyalty seem to have had little effect on the outward-bound — those who are asked to be faithful to the party have someone closer to be sympathetic to: themselves. There are many explanations for this exodus; the most wanting in reason refers to it as another season of cleansing within the party. But this does not appear to be the usual load-shedding of the unwanted. These departures are a huge, if not fatal, blow to the PPP because at the moment it is struggling to stay relevant.

The situation in Sindh — the last PPP bastion — is an obvious influence on the defections in Punjab. But the truth is this could well have happened a long time ago. The loud, then fading, demands to have a party that at least pretended to stand and work towards a softer cultural milieu went unheard. They were left unaddressed by a PPP leadership which felt no qualms in transforming the party from a people-driven entity to one where decisions were imposed from above. Having quite spectacularly spent its capital, like unworthy heirs to a rich legacy, they are now content to tag along and act as appendages rather than seeking to take the initiative.

In their defence, they may say they had little chance of preventing the large-scale defections in a country where both the militants and the military have shown such a strong dislike

for their politics — which doesn't relieve the pain of witnessing the shrinking of political choices in the country. That erstwhile Bhuttoists can switch to whatever ideology is symbolised by Imran Khan is a reconfirmation — the umpteenth one — of the redundancy in the Pakistani political arena of the brand other than the one that is pursued by both the PML-N and PTI. Mr Khan and Mian Nawaz Sharif have often been described as two sides of the same coin, fighting for the same interest groups and duelling for the mantle of the leadership of a single group. If the PPP once offered a clear or nuanced alternative, now, depleted by the defections, it will find it hard to regain the ground it has lost. It is no coincidence that the defections are being blamed on a policy adopted by Asif Ali Zardari and executed by the likes of Manzoor Wattoo. It is a policy that puts emphasis on what happens not on the streets but inside the drawing rooms — from where Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had once pulled it out to place in the public domain.

*Published in Dawn, July 3rd, 2015*

## Violence in Sinai

IT is a measure of Egypt's political instability that the completion of one year of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's government coincided on Wednesday with one of the biggest attacks by Islamic State militants in the Sinai on the security forces, leading to over 100 deaths. The government declared that the area — Sheikh Zuweid town — was "100pc under control", but the force used by the security apparatus — F-16 jets and Apache helicopters — only highlighted the militants' fighting prowess. Moreover, the government's '100pc' claim appeared dubious when the army declared it would continue the operation until the area had been cleared of "terrorist concentrations". Even though it was the Islamic State's Egyptian affiliate which had launched the attack, the government said among those killed were Muslim Brotherhood members, a claim the Brotherhood denied, saying those "murdered" had been doing relief work.

While Egypt had often witnessed terrorist attacks on foreign tourists and the Coptic minority, organised militancy is a new phenomenon and is obviously a reaction to the regime's unabashed persecution of the opposition, especially of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose government, headed by Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, was removed by the military, followed by bogus trials and the sentencing to death of a number of Brotherhood leaders, including Mr Morsi. In silencing the media and crushing the opposition, Mr Sisi's aim seems to be to give Egypt 'political stability'. However, the ferocious clashes in the Sinai and the murder of the chief prosecutor the other day underline the military-led regime's failure to give peace to the

country. Obviously, Mr Sisi hasn't learnt any lessons from the fate of dictators like Hosni Mubarak, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Muammar Qadhafi whose systems based on patronage and tyranny collapsed like a house of cards at the first whiff of the Arab spring. However, the dictators mentioned above did give stability — no matter how superficial — for decades, but Mr Sisi appears to be having difficulty in consolidating his hold even in the very beginning.

*Published in Dawn, July 3rd, 2015*

## End of Khyber-II

ON the first anniversary of the ongoing Operation Zarb-i-Azb on June 15, the military wrapped up Operation Khyber-II in the Tirah region.

Launched in March, after the military cleared much of the Bara plain in Operation Khyber-I, this follow-on operation in Khyber Agency was meant to clear the fierce Tirah terrain consisting of deep valleys and high mountains.

The principal threat in the Tirah region came from the TTP; the Mangal Bagh-led Lashkar-i-Islam; a breakaway TTP faction, the Jamaatul Ahrar; and sundry foreign militants.

That the military, with its superior power, would eventually prevail over the militants in terms of reclaiming the Tirah region was always clear.

However, there has been a high cost, not least in terms of the more than 50 dead soldiers and over 100 injured.

Yet, with the army chief in North Waziristan yesterday and the military preparing for what is expected to be one of the toughest fights there in the Shawal region, loss of life in military operations is the high price the country sadly must pay for the state to once again reassert its control in the militancy-hit regions.

It should be noted that Operation Khyber-II has not resulted in actual physical control by the military of all three passes from Tirah into Afghanistan — though the unreclaimed valleys of one of the three passes can, according to the military, be controlled by aerial firepower because the military now occupies the peaks over them.

This means two things. One, Operation Khyber-II may require another phase for the total recapture of Tirah. Two, the military may apparently be forced into the continued use of air strikes in the Rajgal and Kachkol valleys to prevent the movement of militants until winter.

At that point, with the onset of the cold season, a new challenge will emerge if the valleys have not been taken over by the military by then — ensuring a military presence in tough and inhospitable terrain while simultaneously guarding against hardened militants slipping in under the cover of extreme temperatures.

Vital as it has been to reclaim the Tirah region, it was clearly left to the last because of the challenge it posed, unlike the Bara plains which were relatively easier to secure in Khyber-I.

From this point onwards, the post-operation challenge is a familiar one: the military can hold and secure terrain, but it will only ever return to some semblance of long-term normality if the civil administration is allowed to function — and if the civilians show some ownership of the project.

Administrative control of the Tirah tehsil has traditionally been done from Bara, a situation that must change if Tirah is to be stabilised.

Perhaps a road-building project into Tirah would also go a long way in creating long-term stability in a region that has been dominated by kidnap gangs, drug traffickers and, of course, militant groups.

*Published in Dawn, July 4th, 2015*

## Bridges to nowhere

THE collapse of Chanawan bridge near Gujranwala, which resulted in the loss of 17 lives when the engine and three carriages of a train passing over it fell into the canal below, is a tragedy whose cause might take a while to determine. What is regrettable to note is the early blame game that has led to tensions between those officials responsible for law enforcement and those responsible for maintenance of the bridge. The former said it was unlikely to be an act of sabotage, whereas the latter said the bridge, which is more than a century old, was in working condition as trains passed over it regularly. This exchange began even as rescue efforts were still under way, and was sparked when unnamed military officials gave informal statements to the media saying they suspected sabotage since the train was carrying troops to participate in a military exercise. Speculations about the causes of such tragedies should wait at least until rescue efforts have been completed.

What is worth bearing in mind, though, is that this is not the first bridge collapse in recent years, although it is the first one involving a railway bridge. Only last month, the collapse of the Old Bara bridge in Peshawar killed three individuals, and in April more than 50 people were injured when a makeshift bridge in an Islamabad slum collapsed as people gathered on it for a funeral service. Then in September last year, another bridge in Attock collapsed while the river below was in high flood, killing three people in a car as they were crossing it. In July 2012, two people died when a pedestrian bridge collapsed in Lahore. Then, of course, the famous Shershah bridge collapse in Karachi, that sparked an epic blame game of its

own in 2007, killed five people. There are many other examples of bridges poorly maintained or makeshift bridges built for pedestrians in rural areas or urban slums collapsing. The death toll in the present tragedy is higher than in any of the other incidents mentioned here, but taken together they all highlight the casual manner in which bridges are treated in our society. Building and using bridges is easier than ensuring they remain safe from wear and tear as well as sabotage. Thus far, our track record in ensuring the upkeep and protection of our infrastructure has inspired little confidence.

*Published in Dawn, July 4th, 2015*

## Injustice averted

HAD it not been for timely action by the police, the horror that was Kot Radha Kishan could have been replayed all over again on Tuesday in Makki, another village in Punjab. The circumstances were similar — a poor Christian couple, a blasphemy allegation, hate-mongering clerics inciting a mob to violence, and a possible underlying motive that had nothing at all to do with religion. The utter lack of reason was, of course, a given: the victims, who were illiterate, had found an old panaflex advertisement for various colleges which they were using to sleep on. Some Arabic inscription, allegedly from the Quran, was part of the text which led two clerics and a barber — who, it is said, coveted the couple's home — to accuse them of committing blasphemy. According to a senior officer of the district police, a mob had dragged the couple out of their home

and was beating them to death when the police intervened and rescued them. One of the clerics who incited the mob has been arrested while the other two instigators are still at large.

It is, unfortunately, rare that law enforcement comes down so assertively on the side of marginalised groups, particularly when faced by mobs baying for blood. Perhaps the Kot Radha Kishan incident last year, in which a young Christian couple was lynched upon being accused of committing blasphemy and burnt in the brick kiln where they worked, was a watershed of sorts. The court has been insistent upon a thorough police investigation into that case, and recently indicted over 100 suspects, including the three clerics who had allegedly incited the mob. In the current instance as well, all those involved must be brought to book, and the victims enabled to return to their home in dignity. While the actions of the police were no more than what their job demands, they must be commended — for such a stand on their part sends a powerful message to those seeking power or pelf by exploiting religion.

*Published in Dawn, July 4th, 2015*

## Forced charity

KARACHI'S business community and its citizens in general have long complained of being shaken down by criminals as well as elements associated with political parties and religious groups in the name of 'donations' and 'charity'. In fact, eliminating extortion in the metropolis has been one of the key aims of the law-enforcement operation currently under way in the city. While extortion is a year-round menace, during religious occasions such as the month of Ramazan or Eidul Azha, citizens are under additional pressure to forcibly cough up dues such as zakat and fitra to decidedly undeserving elements, or to hand over sacrificial hides. This year, the Rangers seem to be displaying extra zeal in order to stop the forced collection of religious dues. On Thursday, members of the paramilitary force picked up several MQM workers from Karachi's Rizvia neighbourhood for 'forcible' collection of fitra. An official told this paper that "the Rangers will not allow any political or religious party to collect Fitrana from residents forcibly". The MQM, meanwhile, has protested the Rangers' action, claiming that the paramilitary force is preventing the party from carrying out "welfare activities".

Forcible collection of charity by any party or organisation cannot be condoned. The very idea behind charity is that it should be a voluntary act. Hence efforts by the state to crack down on forcible collection of funds are positive. However, the campaign must be across the board and should not be directed at a single party. The state should also keep a close watch on extremist outfits that use the mosque and madressah to collect funds in the name of religion. There is very little accountability of these funds, which can very easily end up in the hands of

hate groups or outfits that promote violence and militancy. Pakistanis are known for their philanthropy as it is, and people should be free to decide who they want to give charity or religious dues to, without any sort of duress or coercion.

*Published in Dawn, July 5th, 2015*

## Trauma in Nigeria

A NEW president who vowed to crush terrorism doesn't seem to have made much difference to Nigeria's fortunes, for on Friday, the militant group Boko Haram once again demonstrated its chilling power to spread death and destruction in the land. By a rough estimate it has murdered some 200 people during the last few days, targeting among other places a mosque where a 15-year-old girl blew herself up to kill and maim the faithful at afternoon prayers. That the government is helpless became evident when 50 terrorists on motorcycles made the Mussa village a target for the fourth time, shooting innocent people, burning houses and dragging women from their homes to kill them. Evidently, Boko Haram has stepped up its killing spree, slaughtering more than 450 people since May when President Muhammadu Buhari took over. The overall casualty toll since Boko Haram began its murderous campaign has now reached 15,000, and the Nigerian government seems unable to respond forcefully to the militant group's reprehensible tactics.



The trauma in Nigeria must be seen in the global context, for the last week of June saw an extraordinary rise in acts of terror across the Middle East, Africa and Europe, following incitement to violence by the so-called Islamic State, which asked its supporters to increase attacks in this month of fasting. In Tunisia, a gunman spewed death on a beach, killing 37 tourists; in Kuwait a Saudi suicide bomber caused havoc in a Shia mosque leaving almost 30 people dead, and in the Somali village of Lego, Shabab militants raided an African Union base, massacring 50 people and beheading many. Three agonising facts hit us with force: one, the terrorists are in a position to strike whenever and wherever they wish; two, the international community — the Muslim world especially — has failed to degrade much less crush the monster that is international terrorism; three, the silent majority in the Muslim world seems cowed by a microscopic minority of bloodthirsty extremists, who insist on imposing their concept of Islam through brute terror. The challenge, thus, is not merely the state's military response; the greater task involves countering the extremists through other means. In Kuwait, we see an example that deserves to be emulated by the entire Muslim world, for last Friday saw Shias and Sunnis praying together. The task before Muslim intellectuals is to work for a tolerant, pluralistic polity that accepts and embraces all human beings irrespective of their beliefs.

*Published in Dawn, July 5th, 2015*

## IMF review

THE latest review of progress under the Extended Fund Facility Pakistan signed in 2013 tells us more about the International Monetary Fund than it does about Pakistan. Despite serious weaknesses in the economy, the Fund is content to pronounce that progress is “encouraging, thanks to strong performance under the programme”. Performance has indeed been strong — but only when viewed with one eye. Reserves have gone up, and the fiscal deficit is being brought down to manageable proportions. At this point, though, the good news ends, even if the Fund has found plenty to spin out of this. Macroeconomic indicators are only the headline items in a country's economic performance; the real story lies in how these have been achieved, at what cost, and how things are faring beneath the headlines. Falling exports, industry shutting down, collapsing investment, spiralling consumer spending, rising bank profitability even as advances to the private sector shrivel up, are all unhealthy signs for the real stakeholders in Pakistan's economic health. But for external creditors, the only points of interest are the country's creditworthiness and its capacity to meet debt-service obligations. And that is the only area in which the Fund has given the government's economic performance a clean bill of health, because that is the only area that the Fund really cares about.

Pakistan's case illustrates the dangers of an economic management philosophy whose number one priority is to keep foreign creditors satisfied. Governments, when guided by such a philosophy, will produce absurd actions, such as basking in the approval of international credit rating agencies and multilateral lenders while gnashing their teeth at international

NGOs and being suspicious of their motives. The former are pampered stakeholders for our economic managers, and the government serves to please them, while the latter serve only the poor and vulnerable segments of the population who have little voice in policy circles. Pakistan deserves better economic management than this, but looking to the IMF for support in bringing about any meaningful reform is increasingly appearing as an exercise in futility.

There is little evidence that the government has successfully increased recoveries in the power sector or broadened the base of taxation, but the fiscal house can be declared to be in order simply because the deficit is marginally within control. Likewise with the quality of the growth, which is centred heavily on fly-by-night industries such as services and construction, while employment-generating industries continue to languish. But the real challenge — an economy increasingly geared to serve the rich and offload the costs onto the poor — is the product of Pakistan's own political leadership over the years. The present government is no exception. The Fund review makes clear what to expect in the forthcoming fiscal year: more tariff increases to pay for the inefficiencies of the power sector, heavier taxation on those already within the net, and an anaemic attempt to expand the tax base.

*Published in Dawn, July 5th, 2015*

## Hockey disaster

WITH the national team's ignominious failure to qualify for the Rio de Janeiro Olympics 2016 at the World Hockey League semi-finals in Antwerp, Belgium, Pakistan hockey has reached a dead end. The recent fiasco, which has come on the heels of an equally humiliating disqualification from the Hockey World Cup in 2014, caps a disastrous period spanning some two decades which has been replete with losses and setbacks with only a few laurels coming the players' way. Though the Antwerp humiliation has been termed as Pakistan hockey's darkest hour, there have been countless such occasions in the recent past which clearly put in the shade decades of glory and success achieved by the country in the annals of the game. Bad luck can intrude unexpectedly and play havoc with a player or a team's progress. Still, Pakistan has no such excuses to offer for its defeat to a lowly-ranked Ireland on Friday or to other less-equipped outfits earlier in the tournament that led to this final blow.

But while the players have erred badly, the blame for hockey's overall shambolic state lies squarely with the Pakistan Hockey Federation and its utterly incompetent and, often corrupt, regimes. It is ironic that many of the game's ex-Olympians who once did the country proud by excelling on the field, have been instrumental in blotting the national game's impeccable record by either indulging in needless ego tussles or resorting to selfish gains at the game's expense. It is, indeed, a shocking scenario today where out of the 18 hockey training centres or academies, none can be seen as operational anywhere in the country. An overhaul is imperative, with stringent measures in place to keep the incompetent and corrupt out of the PHF set-

up. However, with politics having saturated the PHF rank and file and with governments overly keen to run the game through their handpicked officials there is little hope that any serious effort for the revival of the national sport will be made in the near future.

*Published in Dawn, July 6th, 2015*

## Tariff increase

POWER consumers in the city of Karachi recently woke up to news that read a little like an electric shock. For a while it appeared that not only were their power tariffs about to be hiked significantly, but that they would also have to pay arrears on elevated tariffs being applied retroactively. But as the day progressed, clarity seeped in that the hike was only applicable for the top two slabs of consumers, and all arrears would be paid by the government. In fact, what had happened was a fairly straightforward matter. Since the summer of 2013, the Sindh High Court had stayed any tariff increases for K-Electric, which are decided on a quarterly basis. That stay was only vacated this June. In the meantime, tariff increases had been effected for consumers in the rest of the country, thereby creating a large differential in what Karachi consumers were paying versus everybody else. Therefore, new tariffs were decided by Nepra, the power regulator, for K-Electric spanning the entire period from the summer of 2013 till the present, finally creating uniform tariffs for all power consumers in the country.

It is important that in the matter of key administered prices such as power, gas and fuel, there be no discriminatory treatment between consumers in different parts of the country. The stay issued by the Sindh High Court appeared to interfere with this principle, and ended up creating two different power tariffs in the country. A similar stay issued by the Peshawar High Court in 2011, and extended in 2013, had much the same effect. Not only did these stays end up creating a highly unfair price framework for power in the country, they also introduced serious distortions in the government's subsidy expenditures and in the case of the PHC order, also wrecked the financial health of the Peshawar Electric Power Company. The exercise of judicial power in the matter of administered prices resulted in hurting consumers, government finances as well as the financial health of the power distribution company. In short, there were no winners. It is true that the government should be dissuaded from passing the cost of inefficiencies in the power sector onto the consumer through regular tariff increases. But the present case illustrates that using the courts to interrupt key policy decisions on administered prices does more harm than good. The courts ought to be more judicious in using their power to grant stays in matters that relate to administered prices.

*Published in Dawn, July 6th, 2015*

## Implementation of NAP

THE controversial remarks attributed to a Supreme Court bench against the government's lacklustre implementation of the National Action Plan are unfortunate. The specific issue before the court in that hearing had to do with NGOs, so it would also appear to be the wrong occasion for seemingly off-the-cuff remarks about NAP. Yet, there is no denying that, unfortunate though the language used may have been, there is a serious problem with NAP: namely, that there is no real progress on many of the clearly defined issues in the plan. Consider just this one, small fact – it took media reports of the criticism in the Supreme Court for the interior ministry to pledge to provide up-to-date details on NAP's implementation. And even in the preliminary numbers of arrests and seizures mentioned by an interior ministry spokesperson, there are some obvious issues. The interior ministry has claimed, for example, that there have been over 60,000 arrests related to the plan since its implementation six months ago. That is a very large number, but is it of any significance? All too often, law-enforcement agencies simply inflate such numbers by rounding up peripheral or even innocent suspects.

What of the extremist and militant groups and their leaderships? The interior ministry has not yet released a detailed list of banned organisations in the country and the specific actions taken against each of them. Which are the groups involved, who leads them, where do they operate, what are their subsidiaries and alternate structures, how are they funded and by whom, and to what extent have specific groups been dismantled or disrupted – none of the facts are known. Without such specifics, few outside government and military

circles could have the confidence that the country is moving towards the shutting down of the militant and extremist infrastructure. What the state appears to want to do is to continue with the selective push against certain kinds of anti-state militants while treating the so-called pro-state and pro-Pakistan militant and extremist organisations as a problem for another day. But that will only delay the inevitable. As years of cutting peace deals and delaying military operations in Fata eventually proved, coexistence of the state and radical Islamist militant groups is simply not possible, let alone advisable.

Finally, there is a problem that the interior ministry, the lead ministry in the NAP structure, itself faces: funding. NAP is grossly underfunded, as is Nacta, the counterterrorism authority, and as are the various programmes for building counterterrorism capabilities in the provinces, especially the urban areas. Surely, it is not the responsibility of the federal government alone to fund the entire National Action Plan. But plans can only be executed to the extent that there are funds made available, whether by the centre, the provinces or through external funding, to do so. At the very least, Nacta should be adequately funded.

*Published in Dawn, July 6th, 2015*

## Greece on the brink

RARELY, in recent times, has the voice of a people echoed so loudly around the world.

The decisive ‘No’ vote served up by the Greek electorate in their historic referendum was unexpected and has created perhaps the biggest crisis the European Union has ever faced.

The crisis has rekindled memories of the German reparation payments of the 1920s, and some have pointed out that Germany itself, which has taken the toughest line demanding full compliance from Greece on its debt service obligations, has been the beneficiary of historic write-downs of its own external debts, most recently in 1953.

The most dramatic invocation of history came from the French economy minister just before the voting began, saying “[i]f the ‘No’ wins, it will be our responsibility not to create the Treaty of Versailles of the eurozone”.

The crippling repayment terms spelled out in that treaty and the stubborn insistence of the creditors — particularly France — that they be met in full led to the collapse of the economy of Weimar Germany and paved the way for the rise of National Socialism.

The present crisis is already stirring atavistic passions across Europe, although the fact that 31pc of the Greek electorate still voted ‘Yes’ shows that many remain mindful of the immense risks they are being asked to take.

In the days to come, some may well ask whether or not Pakistan ought to also engage in similar brinksmanship. Of course, we are not at such a crisis point at the moment, but the underlying realities can change fast in this country, as the financial crisis of November 2008 made clear.

Before any wrong lessons are derived from the events in Greece, it is worth noting a few things about the drama there.

First, the world is growing weary of arranging repeated bailouts, as evidenced by the willingness of Greece’s creditors to walk up to this precipice, even if they are not willing to go over the edge at this point.

Second, the immense strength that it took for the Syriza party to face down its creditors came from its close connection with the electorate, something that nobody in our political arena enjoys.

When facing pressure in any form from the international community, Pakistan’s strength has almost always come from its geopolitical endowments rather than the credibility of its institutions.

These are weak foundations upon which to build our standing in the world community. They are likely to deplete faster than durable institutions. And finally, it is worth bearing in mind that the present mess in Greece is ultimately the result of profound mis-governance by the generation that came before the current youthful leadership of Syriza.

July 2015

We should think harder about leaving our next generation with a mess of similar proportions in a world exhausted from bailing others out.

*Published in Dawn, July 7th, 2015*

## Neglecting history

THE treatment of cultural and historical artefacts by the authorities in Pakistan leaves a lot to be desired. Either the state has been neglectful in preserving historical treasures, or it has looked the other way as artefacts have been smuggled out or sold for profit. An example of this official carelessness was highlighted in a report published in this paper on Sunday: priceless historical relics in Karachi belonging to the Moenjodaro and Mehrgarh periods may be facing the risk of theft as well as damage due to improper handling by the authorities concerned. The artefacts are being transported from private premises to the National Museum of Pakistan in the metropolis. However, the manner in which they are being packed and transported seems to be highly unprofessional. Though Sindh Archaeology Department officials say the shifting is being overseen by qualified technical staff, professional archaeologists told this paper they had serious reservations about the way the objects were being handled. Moreover, they point out that the archaeology officials are not properly keeping track of what is being shifted, which means the objects — some of which date back millennia — can be ‘disappeared’. A photograph published with the news report

clearly shows the artefacts casually placed in boxes, as if they were regular objects of little worth.

This is not the first time ad hoc measures have been applied when dealing with antiquities; in the past there have been reports of similar non-professional methods used to deal with the objects kept in the Taxila museum. With the provinces now firmly in charge of the cultural sphere, they must address these inadequate methods of dealing with our history. In the present case, since the relics had to be moved, experts should have been consulted in order to package and transport them in a professional manner. Instead of applying the usual unfeeling bureaucratic touch, perhaps students with a passion for history and culture could have been engaged to help shift the objects with due care. There is still time to bring in professionals in order to properly shift, list and transport the objects, which are about 35,000 in number, if the Sindh authorities so desire. Looking at the bigger picture, officialdom needs to reconsider its attitude towards handling history for unless things change, very soon there may be very few artefacts left to display. This uncaring and apathetic approach towards dealing with our rich history requires an urgent reset.

*Published in Dawn, July 7th, 2015*

## Punctured ego

OCCASIONALLY, two plus two can equal five. Or, in the world of the PTI, 35 minus 35 can equal 71. And that's why it is possible, occasionally, in the PTI world again, for an apology to be apologised for. For the few who care to remember and the even fewer who grasped the faux-logic, there is the peculiar tale of 35 punctures. Allegedly, once upon a time, two years ago, the PTI believed it was going to give the PML-N a real scare in Punjab. Some in the PTI even believed the party would trounce the PML-N in elections. Then, on election night, when it turned out the trouncing was not done to the PML-N, but by the PML-N, a legend was born: 35 punctures. Somehow, the alleged architect-in-chief, then caretaker chief minister Najam Sethi, decided to gloat about his achievement in scuttling 35 victories of the PTI to the chief beneficiary and incoming prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, over the telephone. Somehow, the alleged conversation was allegedly recorded. And somehow — the alleged chain of conversation would put a game of Chinese whispers to shame — the PTI learned of the Sethi-Sharif conversation and so was born the legend that the PTI obsessed over.

Now, having embarrassingly failed to even bring up the issue of 35 punctures before the judicial commission, Imran Khan has once again stunned the PTI's critics. The PTI didn't bring up 35 punctures because it was actually 71 punctures, Mr Khan claimed on Sunday. Double the punctures should mean double the evidence, but in at least one way the PTI has been consistent with the laws of mathematics. Since originally zero evidence was provided, doubling that zero would also mean zero evidence — which is exactly what Mr Khan or the PTI has

provided. But politics is nothing if not for the brave, or perhaps just the foolhardy. Except no one in the PTI would like to question 71 punctures. After all, Arif Alvi bravely tried to own up to being wrong about 35 punctures and look what trouble that got him in.

*Published in Dawn, July 7th, 2015*

## Sindh CM's accusations

SINDH Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah is suddenly an angry man. The target of Mr Shah's ire are the FIA and NAB — federal organisations that are, according to the Sindh government, busy conducting raids against the provincial authorities without the authorisation or support of Mr Shah's government.

The Sindh chief minister has even vowed to take the matter of granting additional powers to the FIA under federal legislation to the superior courts.

While the centre has claimed that new powers to detain suspects for 90 days have been granted to the FIA are applicable to all provinces and not just Sindh, Mr Shah made it clear that his government believes it has been singled out for punishment.

Unsurprisingly, the MQM has come out in his support and is also concerned by the FIA and NAB investigations. As with

virtually everything else in the growing conflict between the centre and Sindh, there is some truth in what both sides are claiming.

Clearly, for all the federal government's clarifications, there is something Sindh-specific about the FIA and NAB's recent crusades.

Where are similar actions in the other provinces? Have provincial offices in Balochistan or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa been raided? Has Punjab seen an uptick in investigations into financial fraud or corruption by provincial authorities?

The answer is obvious from the media headlines alone: Sindh appears to be the inordinate focus of interest by federal investigators in recent months.

Add to that the fact that a city-specific operation is in place only for Karachi and that the army leadership has expressed some very blunt opinions about the quality of political leadership in Sindh, and the reasons for the siege mentality of the Sindh government become clear.

While the federal government has for the most part tried to suggest that the many facets of the Sindh crackdown are entirely coordinated and led by the PML-N, there are clear and worrying signs that much of what is happening is occurring at the behest of the security establishment behind the scenes.

A Sindh government that is at odds with not just the federal government but the military is a dangerous development in an ostensibly democratic framework.

Yet, the Sindh government will win little sympathy from any quarter so long as it continues with its hapless ways. That there is epic corruption and mis-governance in the province is no longer questioned by even the most ardent of democrats.

That the Sindh government has done nothing to stamp out corruption in its midst is also not seriously questioned by independent observers.

That the province could take the lead and has the powers necessary to fight corruption and mis-governance is also quite clear.

If Sindh won't put its own house in order, is it a surprise that the centre should be attempting to do so itself?

*Published in Dawn, July 8th, 2015*



## Vigilance required

THE absence of large-scale sectarian violence in the last few weeks should be no cause for complacency. The menace of sectarianism is alive and well in Pakistan, as illustrated by the tragic targeted killing of two Hazara Shia brothers in Quetta on Monday, the latest among a series of such murders in the city since April. The men, both in their 20s, were outside a passport office when two assailants gunned them down and also killed a policeman who confronted them. While the operations being carried out by the military in the northern areas and by the Rangers and police in Karachi appear to have disrupted sectarian-jihadi networks to some extent, the massacre of Ismaili Shias on May 13 in Karachi shows that their capacity to unleash mass murder has certainly not been neutralised. That is even more so a cause for concern whenever a religiously significant event in the Muslim calendar — such as Hazrat Ali's death anniversary which will fall tomorrow — comes around and is commemorated with majalis and processions.

By their very definition, processions are relatively difficult to secure. A mass of people moving along a route with potentially multiple points of vulnerability are a security challenge of no mean proportions. And conversely, one that extremists are tempted to exploit. In 2009, the bombing of an Ashura procession in Karachi killed around 50 people, while in early 2012, a similar attack on a Chehlum procession in Rahim Yar Khan left nearly 20 dead. Religious tensions also run high on such occasions: a communal clash in Rawalpindi two years ago, reportedly incited by provocative sermons from a mosque along an Ashura procession route, resulted in a number of deaths. For their part, the authorities have of late pulled out all

the stops — including recourse to aerial surveys — to ensure that peace is maintained on these sensitive days. However, while Ashura and Chehlum processions/gatherings have been targeted most often, the authorities cannot afford to let down their guard on other similar commemorative occasions.

*Published in Dawn, July 8th, 2015*

## Islamabad LG polls

A CLASH of institutions emerging over Islamabad's local government polls, scheduled for July 25, is threatening to overshadow the long-awaited elections in the capital. At the centre of the controversy is the disturbing fact that the Senate is yet to pass the bill that would give the green light for the polls, with the result that the ECP has announced a schedule — under Supreme Court orders — based on draft legislation. On Monday, the ECP came under a barrage of criticism in the Senate, led by Chairman Raza Rabbani. Mr Rabbani said the commission's election-related activities were "without lawful authority". Moreover, the upper house wants LG polls in the capital held on a party basis. In a related development, the attorney general told the Supreme Court on the same day that he did not expect the bill in question to be passed before Eid.

In principle, the Senate's complaint is valid: legislation is purely parliament's domain and it is inadvisable for other state institutions to encroach upon this territory. Yet it is equally true that were it not for the Supreme Court's insistence on holding

LG polls across Pakistan, elections would not have taken place in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and in the cantonment areas. The apex court had in March ordered for polls to be held; thereafter, the National Assembly passed the Islamabad LG bill which went to the Senate in April. We are now well into July. Hence, we fail to realise why the upper house has not fast-tracked the passage of the legislation. If the senators had reservations about the bill and wanted to amend it, they should have gone ahead with their input and sent the legislation back to the lower house to be debated so that it could have become law by now. We can appreciate the Senate's insistence on parliament's sovereignty, but we also realise that the people of the federal capital have a constitutional right to elect their local representatives — a right that has been denied to them for several decades, and which lawmakers have blocked through their tardiness. The Senate needs to give the Islamabad LG bill the attention it deserves and keep the legislative process moving forward. If a slight delay is unavoidable perhaps a brief extension of the election date could be considered. However, there should be no compromise over the holding of LG polls in the capital so that democracy reaches the lowest tiers.

*Published in Dawn, July 8th, 2015*

## Stunning act by Younis

THERE are many remarkable feats woven into Pakistan's victory against Sri Lanka in Pallekele on Tuesday. The win was due, ultimately, to the combination of new talent and the veteran. This not just symbolised continuity but also reconfirmed the merits of perseverance. After the game, Younis Khan praised the effort of Shan Masood, his partner, in the all-important 242-run alliance in the chase for the 377-run target. The compliments reflected brightly on Younis himself, who followed his grand stand with Shan with a final and decisive push towards the target with skipper Misbahul Haq. The unbeaten 171 by Younis ranks among his finest scores. It must be one of the best innings played in a run-chase by Pakistanis who are not exactly renowned for going after targets, however big or small. In rare instances, when they have managed to overcome their tendency to self-destruct in panic, success has often been preceded by hiccups, unlike this one which many could predict 100 runs earlier.

Pakistan's 2-1 series win was contributed to by so many players that the occasion adds to cricket's reputation as a team sport. The happy twist came in the shape of the extraordinary stand between a very determined Asad Shafiq and Sarfraz Ahmed in the first Test, with Yasir Shah, who is hailed by some as the best leg-spinner in the world today, bringing a much-needed air of mystery and guile to the game. The team lost the second Test to the Sri Lankans led by a very gutsy Angelo Mathews. But if the loss in the second game triggered familiar fears about Pakistan's ability to slip after every climb, the urge to stay calm during the chase in the final, series-deciding game offered something that fans of the Pakistanis

would want their team to build upon. There are many aspects the side would want to work on to ensure consistency in performance. However, as they guard against panic, their nemesis, they have a new example in Sri Lanka which they can emulate.

*Published in Dawn, July 9th, 2015*

## Report on corruption

THE report submitted by the National Accountability Bureau to the Supreme Court listing the details of 150 cases being pursued by NAB inspires little confidence. For one, the list appears to be a casual exercise, giving only a broad outline of the cases with names and the “gist of allegation”, with amounts arbitrarily put down. Many of the cases are over a decade old, yet are listed as “inquiry under progress”. The history of pursuing corruption cases in Pakistan is a chequered one mainly because of the repeated compromises struck between parties on account of political interference, the selective nature of the allegations, and political motivations behind many of the charges. It is worth noting the absence of names from the armed forces on the list. Why is it that three generals named in the Asghar Khan case, against whom the Supreme Court ordered legal proceedings, have still not been prosecuted? It is also worth recalling the zeal with which Gen Musharraf promised to pursue corruption cases at the start of his decade in power. Within a few years, he was forced to reach out to the same political class he had vilified in the early stages for being

corrupt, and NAB granted a clean bill of health to the leadership of the PML-Q while continuing to pursue cases against the leaders of the other parties. This ignominious history ended with the NRO that saw Gen Musharraf come full circle in bargaining away his corruption allegations in return for political support.

In fact, one of the main reasons why NAB’s list of pending cases is so long is precisely because corruption has become a political trope in our lexicon, a generic allegation with which to smear political opponents. The selective use of corruption allegations means that the real culprits get away. Everybody knows how large a role corruption plays in the articulation of our politics and distortion of our policy environment, but the only place where the allegations get to stick is in the public perception, rarely ever in a court of law. By not being able to solve the cases before it, NAB proves that corruption is little more than a red herring in our society, used to malign and victimise political opponents. Establishing an independent anti-corruption body is necessary, with appropriate powers to initiate an inquiry and take it all the way to prosecution. But ensuring that such a body is not politicised will be a big challenge.

*Published in Dawn, July 9th, 2015*

## Towards Afghan reconciliation

IT was the sign that perhaps all those on the side of peaceful conflict-resolution were looking for: the Pakistani state getting directly involved in bringing together representatives of the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban to effectively discuss the possibility of a peace and reconciliation process. That the US and China also had observers present at the Murree meeting suggests that it was a concerted, international effort — exactly what Afghanistan needs. To be sure, a peace process needs to be Afghan-owned — without the government and the Taliban leadership fully on board, there is no possibility of stability in Afghanistan — and final terms will have to be negotiated directly between the state and the insurgents. But regional and international support for a peace process is also key. Perhaps until there is a full-fledged peace process, the outside powers can nudge efforts along to produce an Afghan-owned peace process.

Clearly, were it not for Pakistan's willingness to use its influence over the Afghan Taliban, the Murree meeting would not have taken place. Until now, the degree of influence the state here has over the Taliban has been disputed by Pakistan. The claim was that Pakistan's influence has diminished and it never was the master-subordinate relationship that many in the West allege the Pakistan-Taliban relationship to have been. What was perplexing though was quite why Pakistan had not made an obvious effort to reciprocate Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's determined outreach to it. Now, perhaps some of those doubts will dissipate. As the Foreign Office spokesperson

indicated yesterday, the Murree meeting is not expected to be a one-off and that post-Eid another round of dialogue may be hosted by Pakistan. There truly has not been a better moment for Pakistan to take the diplomatic lead on Afghanistan. The American determination to withdraw militarily from Afghanistan, China's willingness to engage more on Afghanistan and Pakistani military operations in Fata having won back a great deal of space for the state here all mean that now is the time to encourage the Afghan Taliban to seek a peaceful compromise that brings stability to the region.

Yet, welcome as it is to see the Pakistani state play a frontline role in a possible peace process, there is still a long, long way to go and much can go wrong. The most obvious challenge is that past apparent breakthroughs have gone nowhere and this time round, a talks process would play out with the Afghan Taliban having the momentum on the battlefield. Much as the world may want a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan, does the Taliban's leadership share that vision? And even if it does, can the leadership convince the rank and file to lay down their arms, especially when the new generation has known nothing but war? There are, as ever, many unanswered questions in Afghanistan.

*Published in Dawn, July 9th, 2015*

## Rangers' stay in Karachi extended

THE renewal of the Sindh Rangers' mandate to stay in Karachi has rarely made the news.

That wasn't surprising, considering that the paramilitary force — whose mandate can be extended for a maximum of four months — has been deployed in Karachi since 1989, in some capacity or the other, to assist the city police in maintaining law and order.

But what was routine once is no longer so, since the Rangers — who were given special powers of policing and arrest in late 2013 — have turned their guns, so to speak, on individuals in the provincial government for their purported misdeeds.

That would explain Sindh Chief Minister Qaim Ali Shah's eleventh-hour recollection about constitutional requirements that needed to be met following the 18th Amendment, which incidentally was passed in April 2010, for extending the Rangers' law-enforcement mandate in Karachi.

In any event, after some hemming and hawing, the extension has been granted, albeit for one month.

Read more: [Sindh CM warns Rangers against acting beyond authority](#)

It was not an unexpected outcome, given the army's support for the Rangers-led operation in Karachi and, apparently, all that it entails.

This was underscored by the corps commander Karachi's high-profile visit to the force's headquarters in the city and his appreciation of its actions just three days after a Rangers' contingent raided the Sindh Building Control Authority's offices.

For a provincial dispensation that along with its erstwhile partner in government, the MQM, increasingly perceives the Rangers' actions as being carried out with overtly political, security establishment-approved objectives — with some justification, we might add — the SBCA raid was the last straw.

It provoked the normally restrained Asif Zardari to lash out against the military, and prompted the chief minister to accuse the Rangers of overstepping their mandate. Strictly speaking, Mr Shah is not far off the mark.

Read more: [Altaf asks CM, Sindh Assembly to 'send back oppressive Rangers'](#)

Corruption of the kind that the paramilitary force has now turned its attention to falls more in the domain of white-collar crime, and while the latter may have an undesirable knock-on effect it cannot in itself be defined as terrorism.

And it was to act against terrorism in Karachi that the Rangers' powers were enhanced.

That said, it does not mean that corruption in high places and abuse of power should not be investigated and prosecuted.

The Sindh government — even in a country where patronage-based politics is the norm — is largely seen as the most brazenly self-serving and corrupt of the provincial dispensations.

The corollary to this is a thoroughly politicised police force that has been fashioned to serve the rulers rather than the ruled.

The question, therefore, is who is going to undertake the cleaning of the stables? There is good reason why the Sindh government's tribulations are being met by the public with either indifference or outright support for the Rangers' actions.

It is thus that the politicians compromise themselves, and undermine democracy in the process.

Read more: [Altaf wants referendum to gauge support for Rangers operation](#)

*Published in Dawn, July 10th, 2015*

## Lack of evidence?

PERHAPS one of the main reasons why militancy continues to thrive in Pakistan is that the government refuses to emerge from its state of denial where certain extremist outfits are concerned. The remarks made by Minister for States and Frontier Regions Abdul Qadir Baloch in the Senate on Tuesday are a reflection of this. Mr Baloch said that as there was no evidence to link Jamaatud Dawa with Lashkar-e-Taiba, it would not be possible to proscribe the former, which he termed a 'charity' outfit. The statement seems to echo the 'good militant, bad militant' line apparently pursued by Pakistan's security establishment. While the minister is yet to discover any solid evidence, and while JuD chief Hafiz Saeed may deny all links, the fact is that Jamaatud Dawa and LeT enjoy a symbiotic relationship. After the latter was banned in 2002, it began operating under the JuD moniker — itself a new take on Jamaatud Dawa wal Irshad formed in the 1980s at the height of the Afghan jihad. Hafiz Saeed was a key figure in LeT and it is no coincidence that both groups' infrastructure and memberships overlap. The minister's remarks in the Senate point to the persistent problem of militant groups rebranding themselves after proscription and carrying on as usual.

This phenomenon is not limited to JuDeT. Jaish-e-Mohammad, Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan and Tehreek-i-Jafariya Pakistan — all supposedly banned— have renamed themselves after proscription. Only the names have changed; the leaderships, infrastructure and activities remain the same. The problem is that despite much outrage, especially after the APS Peshawar tragedy, we do not have a comprehensive counterterrorism plan to neutralise militant actors. Confronting the militants on the

battlefield is one option, but to crack down on groups active in the cities, the best course is to build cases against leaders and workers of militant groups, freeze their funds and prevent them from carrying out propaganda activities, not merely 'ban' them. Unless the National Action Plan is recalibrated towards fully neutralising militant groups our counterterrorism efforts will continue to deliver unsatisfactory results.

*Published in Dawn, July 10th, 2015*

## Withholding tax

AS expected, the government has reached a compromise with the traders' community on the question of a new withholding tax on all bank transactions by non-filers of tax returns. In a large meeting held at the FBR headquarters in Islamabad, representatives of trade bodies from around the country urged the finance minister to withdraw a withholding tax of 0.6pc being charged from non-filers on all bank transactions, whether through paper or electronic instruments. A compromise was struck between the government and the assembled delegates at the meeting. It involves reducing the amount of tax deduction to 0.3pc via an ordinance. In return, the traders will be required to file their returns in the period the ordinance remains in force. If the government feels at the end of the 90-day period during which the ordinance remains in force that the number of returns filed is satisfactory, it will renew the ordinance. Otherwise, it will lapse and the tax will revert to 0.6pc.

The good news here is that the measure itself remains in place, although some scope exists for softening the impact of the withholding tax on those who are inadvertently caught up in it, such as pensioners and students. This measure is exactly the sort of approach that is needed to encourage a culture of tax filing, something that is sorely needed in this country where only 0.9 million people filed their returns last year, and out of 64,000 registered businesses, only 15,000 filed by the deadline. In addition, there is the widespread misuse of bank accounts, where personal and benami accounts are used to conduct business transactions. The scope for additional revenue from registered corporates is very large, and it is important to pursue it through measures that are tough but not coercive. This withholding tax draws that balance appropriately. Having struck a deal with the traders to encourage compliance, the government should now set the bar high. If the delegates gathered at the FBR for the meeting on Wednesday wish to claim that they represent the will of a large number of traders, then they should be required to generate tax returns in the next 90 days on an equally large scale. The government should lay down a target for them, and set it very high, and demand that if returns equal to the target are not filed, the ordinance will be allowed to lapse.

*Published in Dawn, July 10th, 2015*

## KP minister's arrest

IN Pakistan, a cabinet post is the equivalent of a 'get-out-of-jail-free card'; it confers upon the holder a Teflon-like protection against criminal prosecution. At the most, you may be disqualified by the court from holding office, as was former prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani — but little more than that, however brazen the misdeeds. The arrest on Thursday of Ziaullah Afridi, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa minister for mines and minerals, on charges of misusing his authority and allowing illegal mining in several areas is therefore a significant milestone, and for various reasons. For one, aside from being an MPA and a sitting minister, he belongs to the PTI, one of the two parties in the coalition government. Moreover, he was taken into custody by personnel of a provincial body, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Ehtesab Commission which was set up last year by the KP government. An accountability court yesterday sent Mr Afridi on a 13-day physical remand in the KPEC's custody. In his response to the situation, PTI chairman Imran Khan, while acknowledging the minister's work for the party, said that Mr Afridi would have to resign from his post while the charges against him were investigated.

The development is a breath of fresh air in an environment where accountability in the political arena is little more than a buzzword, selectively employed by those in power as a tool — more often than not — of coercion or revenge, and in some cases to give themselves an improbable clean chit. Clearly though, the KPEC is an independent body that has been given the mandate to act without fear or favour, evidence of which will have a sobering effect on anyone else in the KP

government machinery who presumes they are above the law. Further, it goes to illustrate that even in a seemingly entrenched culture of patronage and self-enrichment — one that is not limited to political circles alone but extends across various power structures — mechanisms for real accountability can be put in place. If replicated elsewhere, they would certainly have their work cut out for them. From multibillion-rupee development funds that make virtually no impact on human development indicators in Balochistan, to innocent civilians being gunned down in the streets of Lahore, to VVIPs flagrantly violating rules of business to carry out mega construction projects in Karachi, the list is long and shameful. Which begs the question; who will kill the goose that lays the golden egg?

*Published in Dawn, July 11th, 2015*



## Sharif-Modi meeting

THE low expectations betrayed a relationship that appears to be either in further decline or frozen in mutual mistrust.

But yesterday's meeting between prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Narendra Modi in Ufa, Russia, produced several specific breakthroughs that must surely be welcomed in the context of a deteriorating regional security and diplomatic climate.

The headlines will focus on Mr Modi accepting the Pakistani premier's invitation to attend next year's Saarc summit in Islamabad and if the visit does take place, it would be worth a great deal of symbolism at least, given that Mr Modi's predecessor Manmohan Singh was unable to visit in his 10 years as prime minister despite ardently wanting to.

There is reason to hope the visit will actually take place because Mr Modi has made furthering regional relationships, especially with Saarc countries, a foreign policy priority, even if that approach has thus far tended to exclude Pakistan.

A refusal to attend the Saarc summit would also deal a significant blow to the organisation, setting it back even further. Yet, there is, as always, many a slip between cup and lip in the India-Pakistan relationship.

Much though may depend on what progress is made on at least three of the steps announced yesterday in the joint statement.

Read more: [Indian PM Modi accepts invite for first Pakistan visit: joint statement](#)

Sartaj Aziz's trip to New Delhi to discuss matters related to terrorism has the potential to end in acrimony and finger-pointing — or it could produce a change in tone and tenor on regional security affairs and terrorism.

Pakistan has rightly been alarmed by increasing Indian verbal aggression and there is much to be discussed in terms of state-sponsored and non-state actors creating trouble for the two countries and indeed Afghanistan.

The decision to focus on how to further the Mumbai-related anti-terrorism trial in Rawalpindi and the mention of specific potential evidence such as the provision of voice samples is also a positive shift from the status quo, which has essentially involved India demanding that Pakistan do more and Pakistan claiming that the trials are in limbo because of India's non-cooperative approach.

Finally, the 'early meetings' between the DG Pakistan Rangers and DG Border Security Force followed by a meeting of the two countries' DGMOs could help ratchet down the tensions along the Working Boundary and the LoC. The ongoing tit-for-tat violence along the Working Boundary in particular has gone on for too long and needs to be dealt with sensibly.

As ever, progress in the India-Pakistan relationship depends on whether the political leadership is invested in it.

Prime Minister Sharif clearly is, but has not demonstrated the ability to convince other institutions, particularly the army, of

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the imperative to improve ties. Meanwhile, Mr Modi has actually done the opposite of seeking to improve ties.

Both sides need to demonstrate they aren't talking just to show the outside world that they are.

Read more: [Back in Pakistan, opposition leaders unimpressed with Modi-Nawaz icebreaker](#)

*Published in Dawn, July 11th, 2015*

## Missing WHO tag

THERE is yet more proof that health is not an area where the priorities of this country lie. A news item in this paper has discussed why the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan is not recognised by the World Health Organisation and the consequences of this absence of international approval. Simply put, whatever ambitions the Pakistani drug manufacturers might have had of selling to developed countries will not be realised until there is a WHO safety tag attached to the drugs produced here.

This recognition is prevented by the fact that Drap does not have a laboratory of international standard to oversee drug manufacturing here. The Federal Drug Surveillance Laboratory that should have been in place sometime ago is not functional as yet. There is a building which was meant to house the facility and where some of the equipment meant for the lab was

lodged. In a disappointing illustration of how some necessary projects suffer from the paucity of financial resources — and official attention — the same building was converted into the Federal Medical and Dental College. It has fallen on the shoulders of the national health services minister to try and get it vacated for the original purpose of having a laboratory there. The minister is confident that Drap will win the much-desired approval of WHO within months of setting up the laboratory. Local drug firms and the people here at large would be hoping that this is how it turns out. Such recognition would encourage earnest Pakistani manufacturers to explore rich markets in the developed world. At the same time, it would add the required vibrancy to drug research and manufacturing in the country. Unfortunately, people here are often exposed to substandard drugs or find themselves dependent on expensive drug options offered to them by foreign firms working under more efficient surveillance. They would be beneficiaries of a process that needs 'just a decent lab' to be set in motion.

*Published in Dawn, July 11th, 2015*

## LHWs protests

LADY Health Workers have been featuring in the news every now and then. Several months back, they were out on the streets of Lahore, getting beaten up by the police for demanding better pay and job security. Not very long ago, they were being tear-gassed on the roads of Peshawar for organising demonstrations to press the KP government to move them to higher pay scales. When they are not protesting on the streets they are fighting a legal battle for their rights in courts. A few days ago, they again made headlines when hundreds of them came out to agitate in cities in Sindh and south Punjab to pressure the two provincial governments to give them the promised raise in their salaries, and other dues.

Unfortunately, neither the centre nor the provincial governments appear willing to bear the expense of their services after the 18th Amendment to the Constitution that devolved many federal functions and programmes to the provinces. Or is it a case where the provincial governments have decided to turn their backs on this crucial community programme because Ecnec this summer formally stopped federal funding for it and transferred its 'financial burden' to the provinces? But despite the shabby treatment they suffer at the hands of the authorities, LHWs are responsible for saving the lives of mothers and newborns in areas where no other medical service is available and are at the forefront of the dangerous fight against polio. External evaluations of the LHW programme have shown that the communities or areas served by them enjoy substantially better health indicators than those where their services are not available. The programme has also led to the development of a well-placed cadre whose outreach

is crucial to the improvement of primary healthcare services and accessibility. The success and trust it has earned from the community is unprecedented. Therefore, the provincial governments would be doing a great service to the people if they removed the problems facing the workers rather than refusing to listen to their grievances.

*Published in Dawn, July 12th, 2015*

## Vulnerable NGO sector

THERE is a point at which legitimate national security concerns tip over into paranoia, xenophobia and insularity. The Pakistani state, including the civilian government, appears to be dangerously close to that point. Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan's ongoing war on INGOs and local NGOs with external funding and links increasingly appears to be about some misguided sense of nationalism as opposed to anything to do with genuine security. Thousands — thousands — of foreigners have over the years come to Pakistan in the guise of NGO workers to undermine the national interest and harm the country's security, the interior minister told the Senate on Thursday. That is preposterous. The interior minister's aggressive rhetoric has deliberately and very provocatively equated virtually anyone in the NGO sector, though especially those linked to the West, with a threat to this country. The NGO community may well be wondering if Chaudhry Nisar's rhetoric has crossed the line into incitement — after all, NGOs often operate in insecure areas at great personal threat to their

employees from all manner of violent elements in society. Should the interior minister not feel a sense of responsibility towards the many good, decent, hardworking and honourable men and women who have dedicated their professional lives to improving the lot of Pakistan's most vulnerable citizens?

The problem though goes far beyond the interior minister and his crusade. A narrow, security-centric worldview was once upon a time something that mostly existed in the security establishment. Over the years, however, politicians have increasingly begun to mimic their military counterparts in terms of viewing the Western world with suspicion. The public at large too appears to have increasingly conspiratorial views about an international plot, devised by the West of course, to undermine the security and stability of Pakistan. Anyone who hails from a Western country is viewed as a potential enemy out to destabilise the state. Contrast that with the regional experience — whether in South Asia or the Gulf. Foreigners are welcomed, indeed eagerly recruited, for their productivity and skill sets. Those countries have security concerns of their own, but they aren't allowed to overwhelm all other considerations. Why is Pakistan so bent on being the exception? The political leadership could have tried to shape public opinion in a responsible way. Instead, it appears to be content with pandering to fear and paranoia — and maligning a sector that fills many of the gaps left by the state.

*Published in Dawn, July 12th, 2015*

## Flood season begins

AS the first monsoon showers get under way, it is time to remind ourselves that the past five monsoon seasons have all brought large-scale flooding with them. We can hope that this time things will be different, but, in any case, we must prepare for any eventuality. Given the delays in finalising the fourth National Flood Protection Plan, it can be easily surmised that we are far from prepared. Key to our lack of preparation is the fact that no single government department is tasked with the responsibility of developing a response to flood alerts. In response to a Supreme Court directive, the government has decided to set up a committee consisting of more than a dozen departments, but it is still not clear how the committee will help to coordinate in the midst of a rapidly unfolding situation. Numerous attempts have been made in the past to set up committees and other bodies to develop a flood-response strategy, but sadly, hardly anybody takes these responsibilities seriously until the inundating waters are upon us.

The annual reports put out by the Federal Flood Commission make for depressing reading, primarily because they all read the same year after year, indicating they are more an exercise in formality than anything else. Flood alerts have been issued only 48 hours prior to the arrival of the flood peak in each case, and little has been done to lengthen this time. A better signalling system also needs to be in place by sending SMS messages to alert affected populations along the route of the approaching flood peak. In the past, the affected populations have often been the last to be informed, mainly because there is no SOP about how the alert will be sent out and who will send it. Once an alert is issued, there are no SOPs to fashion a

response, which in the past has been developed in the hours leading up to the arrival of the flood peak. Once the latter is approaching, decisions such as where breaches need to be made in the irrigation system are arrived at on the spur of the moment, usually with the heavy involvement of local notables who seek to protect their own areas and push the floodwaters towards others.

This ad hoc and haphazard management of floods must not be repeated. Five consecutive years of flooding have not taught us a lesson, and in many cases, Pakistan has ended up asking for international assistance to cope with the aftermath. This year there is ample warning, coupled with years of experience, for us to ensure that should conditions leading to floods materialise, the response should not be hastily cobbled together. If there are floods this year, it would be a failure of epic proportions were the government to be caught by surprise again.

*Published in Dawn, July 12th, 2015*

## Guns vs books

THE challenge that Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai has thrown down for us deserves to be taken seriously. The young and courageous campaigner for education said at a UN-sponsored education summit in Oslo that \$39bn is all that is required to give 12 years of free education to every child in the world.

To put the number in context, she placed it next to global military expenditures, showing only eight days of military spending could pay for the education of every child in the world. This is a staggering comparison, and becomes even more important when one considers the growing role of child soldiers in conflicts in Africa and many other parts of the world.

Global military expenditures have been showing very slight declines in the past three years, coming in at \$1.776tr last year according to the Stockholm Peace Research Institute. But these declines hide a fundamental reality: the centre of gravity of military expenditure is moving away from the Americas towards the Middle East and Asia.

Countries in our neighbourhood are arming themselves at an alarming rate. The US remains the world's leading arms spender, but the list of the top 15 countries with the highest military expenditures today includes India, China, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

It is heartening that Pakistan does not feature on this list — we can hardly afford to. But each of these countries has a special

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responsibility to ensure their growing military expenditures are matched by equally robust increases in their education spending.

Pakistan too, as a rival of one of these countries and a strategic partner of the remaining three, shares a special responsibility to ensure that the competition it chooses to pursue does not come at the cost of educating our future generations.

The young Malala took enormous risks to underline some very obvious facts: that education is necessary, that girls are as entitled to it as boys. Now she is once again reminding us of our tragically misplaced priorities in which our hatred and thirst for power today trumps our investment in our children's future.

If even eight days of military spending sounds too much of a sacrifice for the sake of educating every child in the world for 12 years, then our grip on humanity has withered to a great extent. The least we owe our children is to think about how we got to this point, and more importantly, how we might extricate ourselves from the situation.

*Published in Dawn ,July 13th, 2015*

## Pensioners' lot

A RECENT picture in this newspaper shows an elderly woman pensioner being helped out of the bank by her son and grandson. Frail, and in obvious discomfort, she had just been told to come another day to collect her pension. The image may be worth a thousand words and more, but the indications are that, yet again, such telling signs have been ignored by those who can help these senior citizens by introducing a respectable method whereby they can receive the monthly allowance they are entitled to. We have written previously on the subject, but comments and news items pointing to their lot have failed to have any kind of an impact. Pensioners in the country do get much sympathy — especially during the first few days of the month when they are seen lining up outside banks to receive their dues. But what they and their more conscientious backers from among the well-meaning have been unable to get is official notice and consequent steps towards relief.

What more prompting does a government need than a senior citizen telling a reporter to not bother with his lost cause? Another explains the link between his appearance and the pension that he is so grudgingly provided after a painful, prolonged process every month: he is forced to come in person — at least once every three months — to prove he is still alive. That is quite a remarkable standard to maintain. The attitude towards senior citizens is generally insulting and is one that makes them feel as if they are unwanted by society and the state. That is a terrible feeling and the remedy requires much more than the improvement of facilities at banks that at the moment so begrudgingly give pensioners their entitlement. There has to be a campaign led by the government aimed at

restoring to the elderly the respect which was thought to be their due before they were made to suffer the ignominy of standing, waiting for ‘favours’, in these ‘dole-out’ queues.

*Published in Dawn ,July 13th, 2015*

## Resistance to accountability

POLITICIANS have long been wary of accountability because it has so often been used to stunt the democratic process in the past. But there is a line that separates legitimate concerns from the desire to be above the law and that line appears to have been crossed by the present political leadership of the country. Consider the reaction by politicians, and especially leaders of the PML-N, to the National Accountability Bureau informing the Supreme Court of inquiries and investigations under way and references that have been filed against senior politicians, bureaucrats and sundry well-connected businessmen and public figures in scams involving billions of rupees. Instead of a sensible and measured response to what is effectively NAB doing a part of its job by inquiring into alleged fraud and scams, the political class has taken it upon itself to attack the integrity and professionalism of the accountability bureau itself. Curiously, Speaker of the National Assembly Ayaz Sadiq, who has demonstrated much equanimity in the long-running personal saga of Imran Khan and the PTI contesting the result of the seat they lost to Mr Sadiq in May 2013, appears to have been flustered on the PML-N’s behalf and has even threatened to file a reference against NAB chairman

Qamar Zaman Chaudhry. Earlier, Information Minister Pervaiz Rashid had launched his own attack against NAB and its working.

There is no real doubt about what has provoked the outrage of parliamentarians: they seem to be allergic to the very idea of accountability. There also appears to be a sense of entitlement at work here, that somehow anything that attracts public and media criticism is unjustified when it comes to the reputation of politicians. In fact, it should be the other way round: politicians ought to be able to respond to every allegation of misconduct or corruption by proving that the allegations are without merit. But the trend is not new. In the last parliament, the PPP and PML-N feigned interest in a new accountability body, but then created an impasse over who should lead the organisation. Now, with the PPP still the largest single party in the Senate and the PML-N having a majority in the National Assembly, there ought to be no reason at all for delaying what the last parliament was unable to do – and yet there is no hint that the legislators are interested in taking up the matter anytime. Indeed, Speaker Ayaz Sadiq should be more concerned by the legislative disinterest of the house he presides over.

A basic point needs to be reiterated here: corruption — and the public’s perception of corruption — damages the democratic process. Few, if any, would argue that the political process is cleaner today than what it was at the start of the transition to democracy. An empowered, independent and professional accountability body is needed. NAB has many flaws, but so do many politicians have much to hide.

*Published in Dawn ,July 13th, 2015*

## Development vs nature

THE link between development and the environment is a delicate one. In Pakistan's context, even if there is no culture of respecting and conserving our natural surroundings, it is possible to simply respect the law to guard as much as possible against harm to the environment, even as development work is carried out. It is unfortunate, then, that environment assessment before the launch of a development project is a requirement that our decision-makers are not quite keen on fulfilling. Apparently, they are in too much of a hurry to provide relief to the people, and do little to address the complaints of civil society groups or to heed the reprimands of the courts — or to pay attention to the bigger picture. The PML-N government has quite often been warned against rushing through its pet road-related schemes in Lahore. And in recent times, eyebrows have been raised about the hasty manner in which it has gone about improving the road and transport system in Islamabad.

The government had no time to get done the mandatory environment assessment report before initiating the Rawalpindi-Islamabad metro bus service. Now reports say, they've ignored it again as they seek a quick expansion of the expressway that connects Rawat with Zero-Point in the capital. A lament is being written for the 300 trees which are set to join their comrades that have fallen victim to the ongoing development spree. There are, on the other hand, voices that hail the broadening of the Islamabad Highway, saying this would facilitate smooth traffic. As is always the case with similar projects, the debate is once again focused on finding the right balance between expansion and conservation. The discussion in Pakistan has been dominated by the agents of

expansion. There is clearly room for those who speak in favour of containment and finding more innovative ways to help the search for a compromise between the imperatives of boosting development and protecting nature. Expansion and encroachment should not be beyond a point.

*Published in Dawn ,July 14th, 2015*

## IS in Afghanistan

A SERIES of drone strikes in Afghanistan over the past few days have killed large groups of militants belong to the self-styled Islamic State; reportedly, some high-ranking Pakistani fighters formerly associated with the banned TTP were among the casualties. It was reported on Sunday, quoting NDS, the Afghan intelligence agency, that Hafiz Saeed Khan, the head of IS in 'Khorasan', as the Pakistan-Afghanistan region has been dubbed by the so-called caliphate, was among 30 fighters killed in Nangarhar province. However, on Monday, IS claimed Saeed was alive and released a purported audio recording of the militant. Such situations are not unusual in war zones; in the past militants have emerged hale and hearty after the reported news of their deaths broke. Only solid proof in the days to come will establish whether Saeed is indeed alive or dead. In another drone strike last week, Shahidullah Shahid was reportedly killed. For long, the militant had been the 'voice' of the banned TTP, serving as the terrorist group's chief spokesman, until he shifted allegiance to IS last year.



The reported drone strikes are perhaps the first clear indication that IS is organising itself in Afghanistan, particularly in Nangarhar, which borders Pakistan. They also indicate that Pakistani militants are trying to convince their Afghan counterparts to adopt a more pan-Islamist stance by joining the ranks of IS. For traditionally, Afghan fighters — from the Mujahideen down to the Taliban — have had a nationalist orientation, taking up arms to drive out foreigners from their country. The timing of the drone strikes is also significant. They came around the time when the Kabul government and the Taliban were talking peace in Murree. This could be another sweetener to push forward the Afghan reconciliation process as both Kabul and the Taliban have a common enemy in the shape of IS. Should IS try and increase its footprint in Afghanistan, it will undoubtedly create problems for the Taliban as the former tries and wins over foot soldiers to fight for the ‘caliphate’. In fact, it has been reported that the Taliban had written to ‘caliph’ Baghdadi basically warning him to stay out of Afghanistan. One thing is for sure: if IS were to consolidate itself in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area, it would create additional problems for the governments in Kabul and Islamabad, which is why it is imperative for both capitals to work closely against this potential threat.

*Published in Dawn ,July 14th, 2015*

## Cooperation in Sindh

TENSIONS between the Sindh government and the army high command in the province had spiralled out of control, a fact that the two sides appear to have belatedly realised and are now attempting to possibly redress. The apex committee meeting and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari’s meeting with Karachi Corps Commander Lt Gen Naveed Mukhtar may not amount to resetting ties, but it could mark a turning point for the better. The primary goal in Karachi in particular, but also the rest of Sindh, is to restore law and order and defeat terrorism. That simply cannot be achieved by the civilian government and military institutions acting independently of each other. Cooperation is really the only way any meaningful success can be had. Yet, it is also clear that the mistrust runs deep and the suspicions are acute — can meetings and emollient words by spokespersons of both sides really heal wounds that are still fresh?

If there is a path towards sense and cooperation, it must begin with clarity on the role of the Rangers in the province. The mandate should be specific and it should be public — there is really no reason why that cannot be done. By keeping the Rangers focused on fighting organised crime and terrorism in Karachi and having a clear understanding that they will not exceed their mandate, there may be a greater chance of cooperation by the civilian government. After all, there is really no one in Sindh on either the civilian or military side who is interested in allowing Karachi’s troubles to continue unabated. The problem — and that is the second aspect that needs to be clarified — is really the sense among politicians that the military-run campaign in the province is targeted at

specific political parties and their leaderships. When raids are lopsided and media leaks target just a few political figures, it is inevitable that the political leadership will fear that they are being equated with terror groups for potentially political reasons. Across-the-board actions will help rebuild trust across the board.

Yet, there is much that the civilians must do too. There has not been a sense in Sindh for years now that the civilians are interested in governance issues or are serious about fighting crime and re-establishing law and order in the province. In that regard, it was encouraging to see the apex committee seek to improve the abysmal criminal conviction rate. It is patently obvious that when the criminal justice system is broken, one of the principal tools in fighting crime and terrorism is rendered useless. But the civilians need to go beyond ad hoc measures to improve the justice system in the short term. Where are the ideas and initiatives of the civilians when it comes to improving law-enforcement and intelligence-gathering? Where indeed is the idea of governance in Sindh?

*Published in Dawn ,July 14th, 2015*

## Bail for Ayyan Ali

THE show is over, at least for now, and none too soon.

After four months behind bars and many court appearances, Ayyan Ali has finally been granted bail by the Lahore High Court after two previous unsuccessful petitions.

Just a day earlier, the judicial remand of Adiala jail's most famous inmate had been extended for another two weeks — the 16th time this had happened in the case.

The young woman, one of the most recognisable faces on Pakistan's modelling circuit, was arrested on March 14 from Islamabad's international airport on charges of money laundering after being caught by customs officials with over half a million dollars in her luggage while boarding a flight to Dubai.

Although Ms Ali claimed that the money was legitimate proceeds from the sale of her property, the case took on a life of its own when alleged links with some prominent political personalities came to light.

The Ayyan Ali saga illustrates some of the least endearing aspects about Pakistan, and its society.

By that we do not mean the rampant criminality that is eating away at this country's vitals; on the contrary, this 21-year-old is but a cog in the wheel of a well-oiled system in which the big fish can get away with murder until it suits the state to reel them in.

She is scarcely a candidate for Pakistan's gallery of rogues.

However, the manner in which she was kept languishing in jail under judicial remand on suspicion of a crime for which others similarly detained would have been granted bail a long time ago is regrettable, and raises some uncomfortable questions.

Certainly the case against Ayyan Ali must be investigated, but the process must be scrupulously fair and seen as such.

There is also the matter of the salacious reporting of the story in sections of the media, which is symptomatic of the misogyny that emerges whenever an independent, and attractive, young woman is either a victim or alleged perpetrator of a crime.

*Published in Dawn, July 15th, 2015*

## Back-channel talks

THERE may be some confusion over the nomenclature used — back-channel talks have been dubbed Track II dialogue by the Sharif government — but the intention is relatively clear: the Pakistani and Indian governments will once again appoint special representatives reporting directly to their respective prime ministers in a bid to talk about a framework for resolving some of the most intractable problems between the two countries. As Sartaj Aziz suggested on Monday, while some issues, such as tensions along the LoC and Working Boundary and confronting the regional terror threat are of immediate concern, there are longer-term issues, usually code for the Kashmir dispute — that unfortunately found no mention in the India-Pakistan joint statement in Ufa — that must be addressed. It is certainly a good idea. The respective political environments and public sensitivities make the public discussion of possible paths to achieving a lasting and durable peace between the two countries an extremely difficult exercise. Even the hint of possible compromises elicits the strongest condemnations and accusations of betrayal by hawkish elements in both countries, rendering it difficult for either government to broach the issue.

Yet, there are reasons to be only very cautiously optimistic here. There is no hint at all from the Indian government that it is looking for ways to establish a durable peace with Pakistan. There is also little recognition that Pakistan has legitimate grievances and security concerns. The only way a back channel could be productive is if it is accompanied by a front-channel attempt to shape the public narratives in both countries. Would, for example, Prime Minister Narendra Modi be willing to rein

in the hawkish elements in his own party and work across the aisle with India's political leadership to make it clear that peace is a priority and necessity? Similarly, in Pakistan, would Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif be able to establish a degree of cooperation and trust between the civilian and military institutions of the state to allow a civilian back channel to meaningfully discuss issues and possible solutions? Without the political commitment in both countries, little will change. Perhaps in the beginning, much will depend on who is appointed to conduct the back-channel talks by both countries. Skilled negotiators with a deep understanding of the details of the Pakistan-India relationship in all its complexity will be a necessity. There are several candidates in both countries. Hopefully, the governments will choose well.

*Published in Dawn, July 15th, 2015*

## Finally, a deal with Iran

OVER the past few days, as marathon talks continued in Vienna between the P5+1 and Iran to resolve the latter's nuclear question, there were moments where it seemed both sides were refusing to budge, thereby threatening to scuttle the talks. However, a much more positive vibe emerged from the Austrian capital on Tuesday as the news finally broke: a deal had been reached. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini termed it "a historic day" where "a good deal" had been reached, while Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was equally upbeat. Indeed, what had seemed to be an intractable dispute, which took many twists and turns over the last decade, had been resolved. Diplomacy, instead of more confrontation, had carried the day.

However, as the euphoria wears off, much will depend on how the deal is implemented. Iran has pledged to keep its nuclear programme peaceful and to open up its facilities to international inspectors. It must live up to its promise while the P5+1 must also stick to their end of the deal and not impose any new terms after the negotiations have been finalised. In return for compliance, the Islamic Republic will have the debilitating UN, EU and US nuclear-related sanctions lifted, freeing up billions of dollars in funds, while opening up key Iranian sectors such as petrochemicals, aviation and finance for trade and investment. Looking at the bigger picture, the deal will serve as Iran's re-entry point into the international order after years in the wilderness. Yet reactions to the deal have not all been positive. For example, going against prevalent international opinion, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu has termed the breakthrough “a historic mistake”. Israel, with its atrocious human rights record, is widely believed to possess a clandestine nuclear arsenal, and as such should be the last to find fault with the deal. Moreover, the deal is likely to receive a cold response from Iran’s Arab neighbours across the Gulf.

It must be realised that the nuclear breakthrough reflects the new, changed ground realities in the Middle East and has been influenced by a heavy dose of realpolitik. The West realises that in a Middle East ravaged by war and Islamist militancy, Iran is a relatively stable power. Also, Tehran may well hold the key to resolving conflicts in Syria and Yemen, while its footprint in Iraq is considerable. And both the West and the Gulf Arabs know that without Iran’s military and logistical help, defeating the self-styled Islamic State — which is a common foe for all — will be much more difficult. Hence the feeling is that a cooperative Iran is a much better option for stabilising the Middle East as opposed to an antagonistic Iran. There is much good the nuclear deal holds for all sides, should everyone involved keep their end of the bargain and continue to work in an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual respect.

*Published in Dawn, July 15th, 2015*

## Not a drop to drink

THERE are not many statistics that evoke the pathos of the following: every minute, somewhere in the world, a child dies of a waterborne disease. This stark reality, which illustrates that governments are failing their people in very fundamental ways in many parts of the globe, is included in a report by three senior IMF staffers in the latest issue of the organisation’s Finance and Development magazine. It looks at various water-related issues, from lack of water for basic needs, to the consequences of such scarcity and different options for improving water-management policies. It is not surprising that Pakistan, as the third most water-stressed country in the world, finds a mention. The report suggests that we are squandering this precious resource by not placing a commensurate price on it: although agriculture consumes 95pc of annual surface available water, accounts for 20pc of GDP and employs 40pc of the workforce, the agricultural sector remains largely untaxed. In short, we are rushing headlong towards catastrophe unless we devise rational, well-considered policies for water usage.

The disproportionate diversion of surface water towards agriculture leaves Pakistanis highly dependent on groundwater for basic needs, including water for drinking. However, several studies have shown that the water tables in the country are plummeting at a potentially calamitous rate. In parts of Lahore, for example, they had fallen by up to 65 feet over a five-year period. Moreover, in that same city, the practice of injecting industrial discharge into deep wells with the use of pumping machines by factories situated far from the main disposal drains is polluting the aquifer itself. All over the country, the

dumping of untreated sewage and industrial effluent into rivers and watercourses continues unchecked. All of which means that about a third of Pakistanis do not have access to potable water, and 200,000 under-fives die every year due to waterborne diseases. Without taking stock of these figures, and comprehensively addressing the looming water crisis, we as a people have no viable future.

*Published in Dawn, July 16th, 2015*

## Charges against Altaf

THE Muttahida chief is no stranger to making impolitic remarks. With legal troubles in the UK and a barely hidden confrontation with the government and security establishment in Pakistan, the party is under pressure, which has led to a number of unguarded, ill-advised public outbursts from Altaf Hussain. In its defence, the party has pointed out on several occasions that the ongoing security operation in Karachi is unfairly and lopsidedly targeting its cadres. Indeed, this is a valid complaint, judging by the law enforcers' actions against the party of late. The most recent manifestation of this has been the registration of a number of cases against Mr Hussain in several cities across the country, after the MQM supremo passed biting comments critical of the Sindh Rangers' director general. The charges include waging war against Pakistan and committing acts of terrorism. Adding to the pressure, some of the MQM's political rivals, too, have jumped into the fray; the PTI filed an application at a Karachi police station against Mr

Hussain for 'hate speech' against the armed forces, while on Wednesday both the PTI and MQM moved rival resolutions in the Sindh Assembly against each other's leadership.

The MQM's alleged links with militancy are no secret: it has been accused of a variety of crimes, ranging from extortion to targeted killings, to the murder of its own leaders. As such, all criminal elements affiliated with the party must be apprehended and brought to justice — and the same must be done to all militant actors, regardless of their political and religious affiliations, whose violent tactics have spread fear in Karachi. But angry statements do not fall into the same category as militancy. They must be handled deftly and the response to them should not give the impression of a state-orchestrated action against a political party. This is not for the first time that attempts have been made, apparently by state-backed elements, to create difficulties for a particular political party. Our history is full of similar instances, but such efforts have largely backfired, often causing a rise in the popularity of the targeted politicians. If the state's actions strengthen the perception that the MQM is being victimised, it will only add to the ethnic and political divide within the province and hamper efforts to comprehensively tackle all types of militancy in Karachi and beyond. The state must stick to a broad-based strategy while conducting the operation, and refrain from demonising any one party.

*Published in Dawn, July 16th, 2015*

## Iranian opportunities

NOW that the historic deal to remove nuclear sanctions against Iran has been reached, it is time for the government of Pakistan to get serious about expanding economic cooperation with its important neighbour. The scope for such ties is immense. We should now look forward to seeing greater overland linkages, including upgraded road links from the border crossing at Taftan, as well as a customs post and facilities for handling containerised cargo and oil depots at the border check post. We should also start moving towards the commencement of talks for a bilateral free trade agreement between Pakistan and Iran. And we can think seriously about the establishment of a rail link as well as commercial flights between Pakistani and Iranian cities along with an expedited visa regime. There should also be an accelerated push to lay down our section of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline using funds from the PSDP.

There may be tremendous scope for building ties of economic cooperation with Iran, but it is sad to see the anaemic and half-hearted effort that the PML-N government has put into this opportunity. The statement issued by the Foreign Office welcoming the deal is an example of this manifest reluctance since it made no mention of the economic opportunities that are now opening up for the two neighbours. The statement restricts itself to saying that Pakistan will “look forward to the expeditious and smooth implementation of the provisions” of the agreement. In fact, Pakistan has a lot more to look forward to, and the reluctance of the Foreign Office to spell that out is striking. The allocations in the latest PSDP provide another example of this manifest hesitancy to expand cooperative ties with Iran. There are only two entries for projects dealing with

Iran — both to do with power transmission. The list of projects to promote regional connectivity with Iran needs to be far longer than this. But one gets the impression that the government has been using the sanctions as an excuse to drag its feet when it comes to expanding its interaction with Iran.

That excuse is now on weak ground as the agreement moves towards ratification by September. The government should use this window to step into action and draw up a comprehensive plan to expand ties with Iran in all areas beyond just power and gas. Continued foot-dragging on this crucial opportunity opening up on our western border will only lend further credence to the lurking suspicion that the PML-N government is wary of expanding its ties with Iran because it is beholden to the government of Saudi Arabia, that remains wary of Tehran, for past favours extended to Nawaz Sharif. Such suspicions must be dispelled. The country’s economic destiny in the region is far too important a matter to be held hostage to the personal preferences of the government’s leadership.

*Published in Dawn, July 16th, 2015*

## Sania's win

THE brilliant win by India's Sania Mirza in the women's doubles championships at Wimbledon recently should be a moment of pride for Asian sportswomen, scores of whom are now making a name for themselves in international sports along with their male counterparts. For Sania, though, the recent grand slam win is yet another feather in a crowded cap after her victories in the US Open, the French Open and the Australian Open during the past five years. It is significant to note that since her pairing with former world number one Martina Hingis of Switzerland, Sania has scaled new heights in the game which besides seeing her win several titles has bestowed on her the world's top doubles player position in April this year.

That said, Sania's rise in tennis and that of India's badminton queen Saina Nehwal and boxer Mary Kom are mainly on the dint of their extraordinary hard work and skill and not because of the sports infrastructure in India which does not quite meet world standards. In fact, some critics across the border have gone to the extent of praising Pakistan's sports facilities for its women athletes, comparing them to those available in India. Pakistan can indeed boast of its Naseem Hameeds, Lianna Swans, Palwasha Bashirs and Ushna Suhails who have performed admirably in athletics, swimming, badminton and tennis respectively. But opportunities for our sportswomen to showcase their talents in this country are far less compared to those available in India, Sri Lanka or even Nepal. Besides, several social problems and the challenges of training are a major concern for those Pakistani women who want to excel in sports. Despite the infrastructure in place, sportswomen in

Pakistan have often found themselves bogged down due to the dearth of competent female coaches who could train them for bigger arenas. Pakistan has a long history of women athletes competing at the national and international level but in order to emulate the likes of Sania Mirza they need encouragement and government patronage to compete with the best.

*Published in Dawn, July 17th, 2015*

## Mullah Omar's approval

IT was a familiar missive before Eid, though the contents were anything but. Mullah Omar, the reclusive, powerful leader of the Afghan Taliban, appears to have chimed in with his support for talks with the Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani. Consider the several ways in which the Taliban supremo's cautious, almost veiled endorsement of talks — the statement attributed to Mullah Omar made no mention of the Murree meeting — is still an important milestone. For one, there has been persistent speculation, especially in the IS camp and among Taliban hardline field commanders, that Mullah Omar may not be alive. For another, the recent Taliban-Afghan government interaction in Urumqi was dismissed forcefully by a Taliban spokesperson. In addition, the Afghan Taliban had long rejected the idea of talks with the Afghan government, demanding instead to speak to the American-led occupation force. There is, therefore, at the very minimum, a great deal of interest in Mullah Omar's statement of support for the idea of talks — this being a radical break from the past.



What could have nudged the Taliban supreme leader to lend his tacit support to talks? There appear to be at least three reasons. One, the Pakistani security establishment has seemingly decided to up the ante and put further pressure on the Afghan Taliban to come to the negotiating table. Two, the Afghan Taliban appear to be wary of ingress by IS, which while it has not yet demonstrated a meaningful capability inside Afghanistan, does continue to seemingly chip away at the monolithic Afghan Taliban. The US drone strikes in Afghanistan that have targeted militants who have aligned themselves with IS suggest a common enemy of the US and the Afghan Taliban that perhaps could be used to help lower tensions between the two. Third, the Afghan Taliban appear to, at the very least, have internal tensions, if not divisions, about the way ahead. Mullah Omar, in lending his support to the idea of talks, has indicated on which side of the hardliner-moderate divide he would prefer the Taliban to be. From here on, it should begin to become clear on which side of that divide the various field commanders stand. It is difficult to imagine many turning against the leader who has dominated the Afghan Taliban for over 20 years, but there is a new generation to contend with. The months ahead should be very interesting, and possibly crucial.

*Published in Dawn, July 17th, 2015*

## Square one, again?

BARELY days, or perhaps just hours, after the Ufa meeting, Pakistan and India are back at it again. Tensions along the Working Boundary have flared once more and once again there have been deaths and near-ridiculous claims of spying. Had the stakes not been so high and the possible repercussions so dangerous, it would be worthy of a bad action movie. Unhappily, this is the state of India-Pakistan relations: when the politicians find some common ground, the respective security establishments find a way to throw a spanner in the works. Post-Ufa, there was already a great deal of pressure on the PML-N government. Most, perhaps all, of that pressure centred on the non-inclusion of Kashmir in the joint statement. Inside Pakistan, the ire of the mainstream opposition and religious right was unmistakable: how could a political government refer generically to all issues, but specifically refer to terrorism and the Mumbai attacks, without including an unambiguous reference to the Kashmir dispute? A crisis, before the violence along the Working Boundary in which reportedly three Pakistanis died in Indian firing and shelling, was already visible.

As ever, and sadly in the India-Pakistan context, the first goal of the two governments needs to be damage limitation. Part of the problem with the Ufa joint statement was the lack of mention of specific dates. The DG Rangers and DG BSF meeting should have had a specific date mentioned in the joint statement. Equally important, regular meetings between the respective DGMOs of Pakistan and India should have been determined in Ufa. Similarly, why was there no timeline on when Sartaj Aziz and Ajit Doval, the national security advisers

of Pakistan and India respectively, are to meet? Neither of the two prime ministers meeting in Ufa appear to have prepared for the obvious or had any plan for dealing with the inevitable pushback by hawks in the two countries. Does that suggest that the real intentions, especially when it comes to the Indian side, was simply to placate the international powers alarmed at the escalating tensions between Pakistan and India?

If there is a silver lining — and in the India-Pakistan context that often amounts to clutching at straws — it is the signal that neither India nor Pakistan wants a further escalation along the Working Boundary or the LoC. Reports from India indicate that the escalatory ladder the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi had been committed to will be ratcheted down to like-for-like responses along the Working Boundary. That, sadly, counts as progress. On the Pakistani side, where is the public diplomacy by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his foreign policy team? Where also is the explanation of why the Ufa joint statement was necessary, in fact a good and positive development in the bilateral relationship? Surely, the Pakistani government can do better.

*Published in Dawn, July 17th, 2015*

## Violence against journalists

A JOURNALIST'S life in Pakistan is often a perilous one, and never more so than when those in the profession work in small towns or remote areas.

On Wednesday, a large number of media-persons held a six-hour sit-in on the Indus Highway to protest against an attack on four journalists in Dadu district and the police's inaction in apprehending the culprits.

The victims were allegedly abducted and detained by a feudal lord and his henchmen and subjected to such a brutal assault that they were left with grievous injuries; they were also paraded in their hometown of Johi so as to publicly shame them.

The local influential, whose family is well-represented in the provincial assembly, was apparently enraged when he found the journalists reporting on illegal tree felling in the area.

District correspondents have to contend with multidimensional problems in places where the feudal set-up, often reinforced by powerful political connections and a pliant, corrupt police, is unwilling to countenance any challenge to its clout and authority.

Moreover, unless they work for one of the larger media groups, outstation reporters are often poorly paid and sometimes not paid at all — which leads to problems of ethics — and are thus easily disowned by their parent organisations when they run afoul of local pressure groups.

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However, in a country deemed one of the world's most dangerous for journalists, especially since militant groups began to proliferate here, Balochistan presents the most high-risk scenario of all.

More than 30 journalists have been killed over the last five years in the province, where all manner of threats menace them: feuding tribals, religious extremists, insurgent groups and security forces, all of whom try to use the media to further their own agendas and sometimes, silence its practitioners.

In all these years, the murder of only one Pakistani journalist — Wali Khan Babar — has been successfully prosecuted.

Only a media that stops pandering to various interest groups and transcends its internal divisions can effectively counter this outrageous impunity.

*Published in Dawn, July 18th, 2015*

## Intimidatory tactics

In extraordinary times will inevitably come extraordinary measures — but the costs are piling up and perhaps now unacceptably from a civil rights perspective.

That an ex-minister belonging to the MQM, Rauf Siddiqui, has to approach the Sindh High Court to obtain protective bail after the police booked him under anti-terrorism laws for listening to a speech by his party leader Altaf Hussain is mind-boggling.

So too are the arrests of senior MQM leaders for allegedly facilitating and arranging the broadcast of Mr Hussain's recent speech in which he lambasted the military leadership.

Surely, inadvisable as Mr Hussain's tirade may have been, there is no justification for arresting and intimidating MQM leaders for having simply listened to or arranged a political speech by the leader of their party.

The actions are being explained away on the grounds that what Mr Hussain said amounts to hate speech and an incitement to violence. But this is patently false.

Consider the extraordinary contrast between the repression of the MQM and the space once again being afforded to a banned group like the ASWJ, which is no stranger to hate speech and that yesterday held public rallies rather incredibly in defence of the military.

It is truly alarming that the law-enforcement and criminal justice systems are being used to shut down vocal dissent by a

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mainstream political party, howsoever controversial its actions, while banned militant groups are being allowed to preach in favour of the state and military.

Could there be a worse indictment of all that is wrong with the state's approach to fighting crime and terrorism in Karachi and beyond?

To be sure, Altaf Hussain is only attacking the military leadership because his own party is under siege by the security apparatus.

It was only recently that his party still seemed to regard the military as a panacea and urged it to intervene in national politics.

Still, while there may be objections to the tone and tenor and some of the impolitic language used, what Mr Hussain has said now on several occasions against the military is no different to what politicians routinely say about each other or other institutions of the state, particularly the bureaucracy.

It is troubling that such a blatant double standard is being enforced, one for what can be said about any political leader and most state institutions and another for what can be said about the military.

Yet, the pressure on the MQM at least is not about to abate — the extension of the Rangers' mandate in the province for a year suggests the PPP government in Sindh has also been convinced of the need to continue the Karachi operation.

That a wide-ranging operation is needed in the province cannot be disputed. That it should focus on crime and terrorism, including atrocities committed by MQM militants, and be mindful of civil liberties is very clear too.

*Published in Dawn, July 18th, 2015*

## SBP report card

THE State Bank's latest report on the health of the economy glitters on the outside, but the caveats buried inside tell the story. The press release begins by talking about "a visible improvement in the country's macroeconomic environment", but in the detailed report the caveats are enough to take the shine off this assessment. Inflation may indeed have moderated, the budget deficit has certainly narrowed, and reserves have also risen. But a deeper look shows there's little room for celebration. The same day as the report was released, export data showed a drop of 4.9pc from last year, making this the worst year since 2012. Much of the decline appears to be the result of slow demand for Pakistan's low-value-added exports from China and Bangladesh, as well as growing competition from Indian basmati rice in UAE markets. The report points out that "it has become critical to design an industrial policy that clearly spells out the country's strategic objectives". Comfort in the real sector, evidenced by rising foreign exchange reserves, is largely temporary and the State Bank cautions that "the burden of external debt servicing is

increasing” because much of the reserve accumulation has been via debt.

On the fiscal side too, after noting a narrowing of the deficit, the report notes “low growth in tax revenues and high share of non-discretionary spending” as key drags in the fiscal framework. The increase in direct taxes was large — 17.2pc — but much of it came from withholding taxes and not from a broadening of the tax base. In expenditures, the bulk of the increase came from development spending, both provincial and federal, which is a good sign. Overall growth was heavily driven by construction and automobiles, hardly bellwether industries. The State Bank feels far more comfortable criticising the performance of the provincial governments than the centre. Except for Sindh, much vilified for many other failures, the revenue effort mounted by the provinces was unimpressive, which “is a source of concern for overall resource mobilisation in the country”. Overall, the State Bank has tried its best to put a smile on an oddly shaped economic situation, marked by high levels of consumption and speculation and low levels of investment and output growth. Nevertheless, a closer reading of the report vindicates the sceptics by laying out the weak foundations upon which the government’s claims of having turned the economy around are built.

*Published in Dawn, July 18th, 2015*

## K-Electric: some questions

The most striking revelation emerging from Nepra’s investigation into the affairs of K-Electric is that the transmission and distribution system of the utility is not capable of handling much more than 2,200MW.

This is striking because the utility’s management repeatedly points out that it has invested in new generation capacity of more than 1,000MW since taking over.

They also point out that the utility’s future potential as an investment opportunity comes from its growing consumer base. But if the transmission and distribution system has not been upgraded to meet this additional demand, or carry the power from the additional generation capacity, then what exactly has the management been doing?

*Also read: [Federal govt asks K-Electric to address deteriorating performance](#)*

It is critical for the management to answer this claim made by Nepra’s fact-finding team.

If the claim is true, and the recent experience during Karachi’s heatwave suggests it is, it then implies the management has been investing more in tangible assets to build the balance sheet of the company and increase its sale price, than in its transmission and distribution capacity whose impact would be less tangible but more beneficial.

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The regulator is clearly struggling to find some leverage over the power utility's private management. Given the difficulties Nepra is having in exercising any sway over K-Electric, perhaps it is worth asking if the regulator is ready for the privatisation of more distribution companies scheduled for later this year.

Moreover, has the water and power ministry used every lever in its control to influence the decisions made by K-Electric's management?

For instance, of the three places on the board of the company, how many strong and senior people have been placed on these seats?

And what has been their attendance record at board meetings?

If the management has failed to uphold its promises, the government for its part has also not lived up to its obligations. The sad part is that it is the poorest consumers of Karachi who have paid the price for these failures.

*Published in Dawn, July 21st, 2015*

## Missing foreign minister

FOREIGN affairs is a complicated business, but there are occasionally simple truths too. One of those truths is this: every country needs a full-time, cabinet-level, officially appointed foreign minister.

Pakistan does not have one. Instead, the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has a foreign adviser who doubles as national security adviser and a close Sharif aide who serves as the special adviser to the prime minister on foreign affairs. That is a wholly unsatisfactory state of affairs.

For one, the international diplomatic network is built around foreign ministries led by foreign ministers — there are protocol and coordination elements that simply cannot be well executed by ad hoc appointments.

For another, the Foreign Office structure inside Pakistan is hierarchical and designed to be led by a foreign minister who coordinates with the Prime Minister's Office.

The flow of information, the interaction between the bureaucratic layers and political leadership, the drumming up of ideas and exchange of points of view — all of that and more are interrupted when there is no full-time foreign minister. And all of that adds up to harming the country's diplomacy and interactions with the outside world.

There was a relatively straightforward solution to the problem: to use the Senate elections in March to elevate Mr Aziz or Mr

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Fatemi to parliament and hence be eligible to become a full cabinet member.

For reasons best known to Mr Sharif, that opportunity was declined. Worse yet, the prime minister has done nothing to try and resolve the turf war in the foreign ministry that has hamstrung its functioning.

While kept largely out of the public domain, there is nevertheless a sense that the bureaucracy is being pulled in different directions and the political appointees are unable to present a unified opinion to the prime minister.

None of that is good for the government. Yet, the ministerial problems go well beyond the foreign ministry.

Consider that the information minister is still moonlighting as the law minister, while the supervision of the law ministry has effectively been outsourced to a prime ministerial aide. Then, rather extraordinarily, the water and power minister is also serving as the defence minister.

Both those ministries have heavy workloads — but what sense is there in having a water and power minister during an epic and continuing electricity crisis who also serves as the defence minister at a time of massive internal military operations and significant military-related activity with major regional and international powers?

Ultimately, it appears that Mr Sharif's instinct to not trust anyone beyond the smallest circle of aides and then to have ministries staffed with multiple principals who are loyal to the prime minister but at odds with their intra-ministerial

counterparts is undoing many of the government's policy initiatives.

A prime minister with a dysfunctional and incomplete cabinet is a prime minister with his policy hands tied.

*Published in Dawn, July 21st, 2015*

## No end to 'encounters'

THE use of 'encounters' by our law enforcers to neutralise suspects is an unfortunate, widespread reality in Pakistan. Due process is bypassed in order to get rid of 'troublesome' suspects or to settle scores.

Figures recently released by the HRCP show that in the first six months of the current year, 255 suspects were killed in police encounters in Karachi, which marks a 64pc increase over the corresponding period in 2014.

Interestingly, a drop in the number of overall killings in the metropolis has also been witnessed between January and June.

*Know more: [Analysis: 'Encounter policy' unsustainable](#)*

From this, it can be inferred that while violent crime may indeed be down, police are increasingly using extrajudicial methods to bring down the crime rate.

In fact, a high number of suspects have been killed in encounters ever since the security operation commenced in Karachi in September 2013. As per official figures, around 925 suspects were killed extrajudicially in the city by the police and Rangers in 2014.

Though the problem may be particularly acute in the Sindh capital, encounters are also routine in Lahore and other Punjab districts, as are incidents of custodial deaths.

One estimate suggests that in the Punjab capital alone, there have been over 100 encounters since December 2014, with both suspected criminals and militants being eliminated.

There seems to be a feeling amongst some sections of the police hierarchy that encounters and similar extralegal methods are acceptable tools of law enforcement: they believe such methods send a 'strong' message to criminals and militants.

However, killing a suspect without resorting to due process is a clear violation of that individual's fundamental rights, and rightly condemned by civil society groups and political parties.

Without doubt there are violent criminals and terrorists operating in our cities and towns, and these have become increasingly insecure for the common citizens. But the way to deal with such elements is through invoking the law, not by circumventing it.

The criminal justice system is indeed broken, yet instead of fixing it by strengthening the investigation and prosecution systems law-enforcement agencies prefer to look the other way as suspected criminals are eliminated through encounters.

This creates a system open to massive abuse, without any regard whatsoever for the judicial process. Unless the police authorities engender a change of thinking within the ranks, such brutal methods will continue to remain in vogue and make a mockery of fundamental rights in this country.

*Published in Dawn, July 21st, 2015*

## Chowkandi's plight

A RECENT description of Chowkandi, published in this paper on Tuesday, makes for depressing reading, for the necropolis on Karachi's outskirts appears to be completely neglected by the state.

Some of the exquisitely carved tombs in the graveyard are centuries old, yet their historical and cultural worth seems to have no value in the eyes of the Sindh administration.

The site is threatened by the land mafia as well as unscrupulous tomb raiders, who have illegally made off with gravestones.

*Also read: [Chowkandi graveyard fast losing its authenticity](#)*

Additionally, fresh burials at Chowkandi are threatening the historical necropolis. Perhaps the biggest impediment to protecting the site is the fact that it has no defined boundary and a lack of security personnel, leaving the grounds



vulnerable to the forays of grave robbers and other criminal elements.

The situation of Makli, a Unesco-designated World Heritage site in Thatta, is not much better. While that necropolis suffered damage during the 2010 floods when people took shelter on high ground on the premises, parts of the site have also been illegally occupied.

Surely the government's apathy must be causing the dead to turn in their graves. Not only that, it is also allowing vandals and looters to permanently disfigure the graves and mausolea that populate Chowkandi and Makli.

Perhaps in more sensitive societies there would have been an uproar over this criminal neglect of history, but not so in Pakistan.

The voices calling for the preservation and protection of historical heritage are few and barely audible. This is strange, as many political and nationalist groups in Sindh take pains to highlight the cultural richness of the province, and yet there is barely anyone speaking up against the neglect of these historical treasures.

As a first step, the Sindh government needs to demarcate the boundaries of Chowkandi and deploy watchmen to save what is left of its relics from the clutches of grave robbers.

Moreover, those elements that damage the monuments or attempt to steal the relics — as well as encroachers — must be caught and punished.

## Conflict resolution

AN increasingly chaotic, seemingly strife-ridden world does not — should not — mean giving up on peace.

Consider that while the administration of US President Barack Obama has struggled to contain the self-styled Islamic State or have a coherent policy on Syria and Iraq, it has nevertheless pushed ahead with a historic, path-breaking nuclear deal with Iran — one supported by all the major powers of the world, including Russia and China, who are outright rivals of the US.

Then, there is the other historic breakthrough effected by the Obama White House: moving to resume diplomatic ties between the US and Cuba.

*Also read: [Pakistan, India border guards abandon customary Eid greeting](#)*

All of this suggests that even in the midst of disorder, opportunities for peace and the peaceful resolution of conflict should never be given up on. Are Pakistan and India listening? Perhaps in peripheral terms they are.

Pakistan has finally showed some resolve in its attempt to nudge the Afghan Taliban towards the negotiating table.

Meanwhile, the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sought to sidestep old disputes with China and Bangladesh, among others, in a bid to focus on common benefits via trade and development.

Yet, there is no escaping the elephant in the room: neither India nor Pakistan are particularly concerned about genuinely moving towards the normalisation of ties, let alone a full-fledged peace.

As reiterated and lamented in these columns on numerous occasions, much of that comes down to political will.

Until the political leadership of the two countries decide that peace is not just a priority but a necessity too, the most that will happen is the ad hoc management of tensions.

In truth, however, the political leaderships need help from other constituencies — in particular, the respective security establishments of Pakistan and India.

Here in Pakistan, while it is relatively clear that the military leadership is not spoiling for a fight with India, particularly as it struggles to contend with massive and sprawling domestic security concerns, there is a sense that it is unwilling to consider the full dividends of a comprehensive peace.

Instead, the military's approach seems largely rooted in the past — a perhaps rightful insistence on the resolution of decades-old disputes with a wrongheaded resistance to proposing new ideas and avenues to achieve peace.

Meanwhile, the Indian government and its security establishment appears to think that Pakistan can either be isolated or bullied into submission. Where is the vision in that?

Pakistan and India deserve more than what their respective leaderships are providing at the moment.

## Floods once again

WITH five consecutive years of flooding since 2010 one would have thought that by now some basic lessons would have been learned.

But going by the experience of Chitral and Alipur and parts of Layyah in the past few days, it seems that no effort has been made to increase preparedness.

Flash floods have devastated most of Chitral, and large parts of Alipur were submerged with locals having little to no warning about the impending disaster.

\*Know more: [Most of Chitral paralysed by flash floods\\*](#)

Technologies exist that can provide up to three hours of warning of an impending flash flood for mountainous regions, and have been deployed in places such as Bangladesh.

Likewise, alerting local populations in the plains of a breach in the embankment and the imminent arrival of floodwaters is possible using SMS technologies. But nothing of the sort happened.

The most important aspects of flood preparedness, it seems, have not been addressed despite disasters year after year every monsoon season.

Flood preparedness is not so much about building brick-and-mortar infrastructure as it is about putting in place systems to lengthen lead times in weather forecasts, accurately model

river flows and generate targeted alerts for affected populations so that they can move to higher ground before the arrival of the floodwaters. But in Chitral, and again in Alipur, no warnings were issued, except in a few isolated cases using mosque loudspeakers, which is a woefully inadequate method in this era of mobile communications.

And despite the passage of more than five years now, a model to accurately forecast river flows is only just getting ready for deployment as the monsoon season brings with it its first large-scale flooding.

Unfortunately, the government insists on repeating the same mistake year after year: getting caught by surprise, then rushing to announce compensation after the floodwaters have already inflicted much damage.

The Met department remains stubbornly wedded to its hopelessly outdated forecasting techniques, and other departments, such as irrigation and revenue and the myriad different disaster management agencies, all become spectators, while the district management struggles to run relief centres and arrange boats. But the key tasks of managing any disaster — forecasting where it will occur — continue to languish.

It is high time we saw streamlined systems put in place to increase our capacity to manage floods. It is also about time the conversation about flood management moved beyond outdated notions of building more dams.

Without a proper signalling system and lead times, there is little point in issuing fresh instructions to the district management each year to remain alert.

Developing proper signalling is clearly the domain of the provincial administrations, whereas getting superior forecasts with longer lead times is the job of the federal government. But our experience thus far shows there is little we can do this year other than pray for kinder weather.

*Published in Dawn, July 22nd, 2015*

## Dangerous toys

IN a society filled with brutality, not enough is done to shield the younger generation from violence. And one key way in which youngsters are exposed to violence is through the use of toy guns.

Indeed, children have been playing with toy weapons for ages, and many adults today would fondly recall playing ‘cowboys and Indians’ or ‘cops and robbers’ in their younger days.

But whereas in earlier decades, children would stomp around with toy models of six-shooters or cap guns, today many badger their parents to purchase replicas of assault rifles and machine guns — some of which look perilously close to the real thing.

In light of the changed times and rampant violence, society needs to reassess the sale of toy guns.

Afghanistan — a nation which has suffered for decades due to violence and where a whole generation has grown up knowing nothing but war — has taken a step in this direction.

*Know more: [Afghanistan bans toy guns to curb culture of violence](#)*

As reported on Wednesday, the country has banned the sale of toy guns after over 100 people were injured because of these during the Eid holidays.

Closer to home, media reports say a number of children were injured while playing with toy weapons in Karachi over the Eid break, while the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government banned the sale of imitation weapons over the holidays.

While it may appear excessive to completely ban the sale of all toy guns, the state should consider preventing the sale of those that resemble actual firearms.

For example, a clear distinction can be made between plastic-coloured guns and water pistols and toys that look like actual weapons.

Society as a whole should discourage the sale and purchase of these questionable toys — indeed, civil society in some parts of the country such as Swat has raised its voice against such sales.

Parents should guide their children towards taking up healthier, non-violent pastimes, because fears that a child who grows up clutching a toy weapon will one day graduate to the real thing are not completely unfounded.

## PPP in Dubai

FOR every political misstep or transgression by the military in Sindh, the PPP led by former president Asif Ali Zardari appears willing and able to outdo its uniformed counterparts.

The capital of Sindh, where the PPP has been in power for the last seven years, is Karachi.

Karachi is the seat of the provincial government; Karachi is the principal political office of the PPP; Karachi is where Mr Zardari has an enormous and thoroughly fortified home; and Karachi is where the PPP-led government should meet to take decisions concerning the province of Sindh. Not Dubai.

*Know more: [Shah, 3 ministers attend PPP meeting in Dubai](#)*

But Mr Zardari and the PPP appear oblivious to the accepted laws of politics and seem determined to make up their own rules.

What else can explain the Sindh chief minister, Qaim Ali Shah, and several senior ministers flying out to Dubai — on whose expense? — to hold a PPP summit with Mr Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari?

Perhaps it was to discuss the cabinet reshuffle in Sindh. Or perhaps it was to discuss the recent administrative changes in the province, the decisions taken by the apex committee, the upcoming Sindh local government elections or steps taken to prepare for potential flooding in the rural parts of the province.

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Nothing explains why any of these issues had to be discussed in Dubai.

Is Asif Ali Zardari apprehensive? Is he hiding something? Surely, for a leader who often talks about his years in jail and his supposed fearlessness, this is the wrong time to be outside Pakistan.

Should the public and the media interpret that Mr Zardari is in self-exile, rattled by the recent military-led push against alleged corruption in Sindh? Or is the PPP's real message that governing Sindh is so easy and problem-free that it can be done remotely from ultra-luxurious Dubai?

It may have seemed impossible, but the PPP government in Sindh appears to be on the verge of outdoing the Aslam Raisani-led previous provincial government in Balochistan in its indifference — and its indifference to its tragically terrible reputation.

Distressing as it may be from a democratic point of view, the juxtaposition between an alert military and disinterested civilians is there for all to see. When a security tragedy strikes, such as the Safoora Goth carnage, the military is seen to go into overdrive.

When a human crisis hits, such as the heatwave-related deaths, the civilians are seen decamping to Dubai. Truly, what is the PPP thinking?

*Published in Dawn, July 23rd, 2015*

## Talks with Khan of Kalat a non-starter

THERE can be no doubt the situation in Balochistan is dire and after decades of ruinous policies by the state, any attempt at conflict resolution needs a fresh approach.

That is why the Balochistan government's decision to make overtures to the Khan of Kalat, Mir Suleman Dawood Jan, to end his self-exile in London and return to Pakistan to help establish peace in the province seemed a step in the right direction.

*Know more: [Khan of Kalat turns down govt's request to end his exile](#)*

It was, at the very least, a tacit acknowledgement that the measures pursued so far to address the recurring turmoil in Balochistan have not achieved the desired results.

However, the recent meeting in London between the Khan and a delegation of Balochistan government ministers and notables yielded little by way of forward movement.

There were, from the outset, some question marks over the viability of an approach to the Khan of Kalat.

For one, it was basically premised on the weight of history and tradition. The Khan has a lofty status in the region's tribal hierarchy and in pre-Partition days the rulers of the erstwhile

princely state of Kalat presided over a complex tribal confederacy that stretched across much of Balochistan.

Tellingly enough, the delegation to London was led not by the chief executive of the province — who was part of the group — but by a prominent tribal chief, Nawab Mohamed Khan Shahwani.

However, one can argue that more recent events militate against tapping into this archaic socio-historical construct. The current insurgency derives much of its support from educated youth, particularly in Balochistan's non-sardari southern belt where tribal affiliations do not inspire the same deference.

In fact, many Baloch with separatist leanings consider the accession to Pakistan by the present Khan's grandfather as an act of treason and his successors as the establishment's collaborators.

That said, by going into exile after the death of Nawab Akbar Bugti, the Khan had demonstrated his aversion to the state's actions.

There may have thus been some promise in the tactic of seeking his return had there been a properly thought-out strategy underlying it, with all stakeholders on board. But in the present situation, how much leverage will the Khan have with the current crop of insurgents?

The state has done little to strengthen his negotiating position. Even as the civilian government attempts a political solution to the impasse, the security establishment is carrying out undeclared military operations in Balochistan and, as the Khan

himself noted at the recent meeting, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings of Baloch continue as before.

This particular 'two-pronged' approach cannot yield results. Given that the Khan left Pakistan at the urging of the grand Baloch jirga and has said that his return is contingent upon their decision, perhaps its members — many of whom are in government — should consider holding another such assembly to discuss the way forward.

*Published in Dawn, July 23rd, 2015*

## Brutal 'justice'

FOR Israel, the maxim that the punishment should fit the crime obviously does not apply. As reported, on Monday the Israeli parliament voted to increase the penalty for stone-throwing: Palestinians who dare to throw rocks Israel's way could now be jailed for up to 20 years as well as be declared terrorists.

The justification for this draconian measure is that since 2011, reportedly three Israelis have been killed in the occupied West Bank after rocks were hurled at their vehicles.

While this loss of life is regrettable, these developments need to be put in perspective. After all, Israel may well want to prosecute stone-throwing Palestinians and hand them stiff jail terms.

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*Also read: [Israel declares stone-throwers terrorist, approves 20 years prison](#)*

But who will seek justice for the thousands of Palestinian civilians murdered by the Israeli war machine in numerous blitzes?

The most recent of these bloody forays was in 2014, when Tel Aviv unleashed death and destruction upon the hapless inhabitants of Gaza. Over 2,200 Palestinians were killed — hundreds of them civilians — in that episode, while Israel had no qualms about targeting densely populated neighbourhoods and homes.

In fact, a UN inquiry report released recently mostly castigates Israel (as well as Hamas) for committing suspected war crimes during the 2014 Gaza war.

Israel, in line with its usual arrogance and contempt for international law, did not cooperate with the probe. The report also observes that Gaza's civilian population faced "massive firepower" from Israel.

The excessively harsh punishment that will be meted out to Palestinian stone-throwers is reflective of the mindset of an oppressive occupying state that treats Arabs worse than chattel.

In fact, the Israeli establishment rarely loses an opportunity to humiliate and brutalise the Palestinian sons of the soil, who have become prisoners on their own land.

Unless Tel Aviv sheds this colonial mentality and starts treating the Palestinian people as human beings with the same

fundamental rights as its own citizens, there are slim chances of an equitable solution to the Arab-Israeli problem.

*Published in Dawn, July 24th, 2015*

## Nepra's verdict

FOR Karachi's citizens, enduring frequent power breakdowns, there is little solace in the report released by Nepra's fact-finding team.

The federal government, it turns out, is equally responsible for the fact that K-Electric's system cannot handle loads commensurate with the city's demands. Up until now, the only story that was being heard was that the private management of the country's only privately owned power utility had not made the investment to meet the growing demands of the city.

But now the regulator tells us, after a detailed fact-finding mission, that investments have indeed been made, but were mostly focussed on power generation capacity; and even that only for replacing much of the older generation that was no longer feasible to operate.

*Take a look: [Nepra report assails KE over violations, deficiencies](#)*

Net increase in power generation capacity has, therefore, been just over a third of what the company management has been

claiming. For its part, the federal government has not followed up on how the funds released under the Financial Improvement Plan were utilised.

The consumers are, therefore, stuck in a bewildering situation. A powerful blame game played out in the aftermath of the heatwave, when the city saw large-scale power breakdowns.

During that episode the federal minister for water and power proclaimed in the National Assembly that the provision of electricity in the city of Karachi was not his responsibility.

The management of K-Electric went on a public relations offensive of their own, touting their investment and hard work. Now it turns out both of them were misleading the city's residents.

The federal government has powerful oversight obligations — through mechanisms detailed in the Implementation Agreement of the FIP as well as three seats on the K-Electric board.

The management, for its part, has not made their investments with an eye to the consumers' interest. The net result is a somewhat chaotic governance structure for private utilities, with a hapless regulator, a disinterested ministry, and an investor more interested in returns than in serving the consumers' needs.

The wrangling between K-Electric and the federal government has been an unseemly sight for a long time now, but at last there is some metric by which to gauge performance.

Unfortunately, the metric reveals a lackadaisical government and a management focussed more on the shareholder than the consumer, not a good sign considering that three more privatisations of public utilities are scheduled for later this year.

*Published in Dawn, July 24th, 2015*

## Election inquiry report

AT long last, two years and two months on from May 2013, the country can put to rest doubts about the credibility and acceptability of the last general election.

The three-member General Elections-2013 Inquiry Commission 2015 led by Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Nasirul Mulk has given its verdict: the elections were in large part organised and conducted fairly and lawfully; no plan or design to manipulate or influence the election was found; and — simplifying the use of a double negative by the Commission — the elections were a true and fair reflection of the mandate given by the electorate.

In sum, the PTI's claims have been dismissed and the PML-N government declared legitimate and lawfully elected.

In this hour of victory for the PML-N — and relief for the electorate that its will was not materially distorted in May 2013 — there was a predictable, though thoroughly unnecessary,



controversy: instead of immediately releasing the report to the public, the PML-N chose to overnight crow about its content and first spin the conclusions of the report rather than allow the media and the people to read it for themselves.

Fortunately, better sense prevailed and the whole report was released yesterday afternoon before a full-fledged controversy erupted.

*Know more: [JC finds 2013 elections 'fair and in accordance with law'](#)*

While vindication for the PML-N is here and the PTI is left to reflect on how and why it dragged the country through the dangerous and destabilising times that was the months-long dharna in Islamabad, the Commission's report does underscore that there is a great deal of work to be done before Pakistan can traverse the ground between credible and acceptable and free and fair. In particular, the report amounts to an indictment of the Election Commission of Pakistan and its ability to conduct and organise elections.

The ECP, while constitutionally empowered, has proved to be very feeble in practice. It is unable to train and monitor the massive election machine that reports to it. It has not provided the kind of dynamism and sense of purpose that the vast administrative exercise that is a general elections needs.

As rightly suggested by the Commission, it was the many failures of the ECP that combined to produce a sense of injustice and even conspiracy theories in the minds of many of the electoral losers in May 2013.

There is surely no reason why the ECP should continue to be so listless in the performance of its constitutional duties.

Yet, much will depend on the government — and parliament — if the ECP is to be re-energised and re-tooled to meet the needs of elections in the 21st century.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif struck a conciliatory note in his address to the nation yesterday and referred to the work of the parliamentary committee of electoral reforms.

But the proposed reforms have largely and long been finalised. All that's required is the political will to turn recommendations into law.

*Published in Dawn, July 24th, 2015*

## Pakistan victory

PAKISTAN'S magnificent series win over Sri Lanka in the five-match ODI series has, indeed, come as a breath of fresh air.

While the national cricket team has been performing admirably at the Test level over the past few years, success in the limited-over games has sadly eluded them, a fact that can be gauged by their poor ranking in the ICC world charts.

However, they seem to have emerged from the quagmire with their convincing victory over the Islanders, who no doubt remain formidable opposition in their home conditions.

*Also read: [4th ODI: Sublime Pakistan down Sri Lanka, win series](#)*

For critics and keen followers of the game, Pakistan owe their recent win primarily to the change in leadership and the induction of quite a few newcomers that appear to have infused a fighting spirit hitherto missing among the green-shirts in international ODI contests.

Foremost, credit must be given to skipper Azhar Ali who, since taking over the ODI reins early this year, has led his charges with aplomb. His decisions to elevate himself as opener and to encourage the team to chase targets rather than setting them have instilled confidence in the players.

Another key factor has been the emphatic return of giant pacer Mohammad Irfan and veteran Shoaib Malik to the ODI format.

*Know more: ['Pakistan does not belong at the bottom of the ICC table'](#)*

The two players fired on all cylinders in the Sri Lanka matches and were instrumental in taking the tourists ashore. Besides, the induction of young guns such as Mohammad Rizwan and Imad Wasim has been a boost as well.

Their brilliant expression of talent and self-belief has clearly rubbed off on the players, which is why fielding — which has long been the team's Achilles heel — has met the required standards in the recent contests.

More importantly, the victory has boosted Pakistan's chances of qualifying for the ICC Champions Trophy, set to be played in England in 2017.

It is imperative for the Pakistan Cricket Board and the team management to now show consistency in their selection policies in order to keep the current momentum going.

*Published in Dawn, July 25th, 2015*

## Political dilemma

MQM chief Altaf Hussain is known to make emotional appeals to his followers in Pakistan over the telephone. But this time, perhaps reflecting the pressure the party is facing from the security establishment in Pakistan, combined with the Muttahida's legal issues in the UK, Mr Hussain gave the ultimate call: the party was to be disbanded.

On Wednesday night he ordered the party's cadres to close all MQM offices "to protest [the] Rangers' atrocities". Yet expectedly, the decision was short-lived. The following morning Mr Hussain told the party faithful to reopen offices after supporters promised they would "face all consequences".

*Know more: [Altaf takes back directive, MQM offices reopen: reports](#)*

The MQM supremo has quit the party leadership several times in the past over various issues, mostly to express displeasure with his subordinates. Yet these dramatic decisions would be reversed within hours after party loyalists — some in tears — would plead with him not to abandon the Muttahida ship.

Such melodramatic actions have been dubbed comical by the party's opponents, yet they show the influence Altaf Hussain exercises over his workers. However, while the crises the MQM has been facing are very real, and while the Rangers have targeted the party excessively, the senior leadership seems to be missing in action.

Signs that the Muttahida is in disarray internally have manifested themselves in the erratic policies the party has pursued ever since the security establishment turned up the heat over the past few months.

There seems to be no plan on display to democratically struggle for the party's rights. Yet if this state of affairs continues, managing the MQM's campaign for the Sindh local government polls — scheduled for September — will be a very difficult task.

If the party does not organise itself, fielding candidates and reaching out to voters will be affected.

Clearly, the MQM has a vote bank in urban Sindh — despite the state's intimidatory tactics the party secured a decisive victory in Karachi's NA-246 by-election in April. But securing this vote bank in the LG polls will be challenging if the party fails to get its act together.

To counter its not entirely unearned reputation for strong-arm tactics and to shore up its political credentials the Muttahida must focus on the LG elections.

This will require solid canvassing and campaigning amongst the people to show the electorate that the party has a plan for effective local government in Sindh. The campaign, and the party, will hardly benefit from melodramatic announcements and bizarre policies.

*Published in Dawn, July 25th, 2015*

## Lessons to learn

THE PML-N won and the PTI lost — that is rather unhappily the dominant narrative following the release of what is formally titled The Final Report of the General Elections-2013 Inquiry Commission 2015.

Unhappily, because the commission's work was never really to settle a private dispute between the PTI and the PML-N, but to determine whether the will of the people had been reflected in the results of the 2013 general election.

*Know more: [JC finds 2013 elections 'fair and in accordance with law'](#)*

And in that regard the commission has identified enough flaws in the electoral process to suggest that it is a very long road indeed from credible and acceptable election results to truly free and fair elections.

Principally, in the estimation of the commission, the fault lies with the Election Commission of Pakistan. The main deficiencies identified are lack of planning by the ECP and lack of training; overload of returning officers and polling officers; and failure to comply with the electoral laws.

*Also read: [Judicial commission report nullifies all allegations, says Iftikhar Chaudhry](#)*

The commission then goes on to cite some of the results of the lack of planning by the ECP.

To begin with, there was the confusion — pounced on by the PTI as evidence of wrongdoing and manipulation — over the formula calculating excess ballots, particularly in Punjab.

There was a specific formula to be used that was laid out in the Action Plan of the ECP, but none of the provinces followed it.

In Punjab, the calculation was, as prescribed in the ECP Action Plan, left to the returning officers, but it wasn't made clear to the ROs that excess ballots had to be rounded off to the next hundred on the basis of polling stations and not polling booths, which some ROs used as the basis for excess ballot requests.

Moreover, the ECP did not make adequate arrangements for printing the ballots required, leading to last-minute arrangements and the drafting in of ad hoc help.

As the commission notes, the ECP had enough time to prepare, but failed at virtually every step. Even the Action Plan of the ECP itself was contradictory in some places and in other places appeared to be in disregard of the usual electoral practices.

For example, the prescribed formula for calculating excess ballots was in previous elections done at the polling-booth level, but the ECP seemed unaware of this.

Yet, for all the failings of the ECP, the problem may be structural and not just administrative.

The commission has recommended that the ECP “build its own capacity in terms of human resources and recruit and train more officers who can both act as master trainers and play an active, effective and informed role during the election process.”

But can the ECP do that on its own? Would the ECP not need parliamentary assistance to reform itself? As ever, the onus is ultimately on parliament. Political will is needed if elections are ever to be free and fair in Pakistan.

*Published in Dawn, July 25th, 2015*

## Unnecessary burden

WHEN it comes to children, especially their education, our attitudes seem to be incredibly regressive. For example, it is not unusual in Pakistan's cities and towns — as in many other countries — to see little boys and girls lugging around oversized school bags that are obviously much heavier than what they should be carrying. While some schools ask parents to purchase stationery and books and deposit them at school, not all institutions follow this practice, which means children have to trudge to and fro every day with an unnecessary burden on their backs. But the Indian state of Maharashtra has taken a progressive step to address this issue. As reported on Saturday, the state government has passed a resolution which says that children will not be allowed to carry bags that exceed 10pc of their body weight. As a local education official pointed out, youngsters were carrying loads that were 20pc to 30pc of their weight. This, he observed, was harmful to the children's health and caused "stress and fatigue".

Perhaps similar steps are needed to lighten the load of Pakistan's schoolchildren. The 10pc-of-body-weight rule is a

standard backed by health professionals, hence provincial education departments need to look into ways to discourage the carrying of heavy bags. Both schools and parents have a responsibility. Educational institutions — both public and private — must ensure kids are not made to bring unnecessary books or stationery every day, while parents should also monitor the weight of their children's bags. Lockers and drawers should be used within schoolhouses to store books while in the digital age, technology-led solutions must be employed to impart lessons and reduce the physical load children have to carry. Overall our attitudes towards educating children — and their safety — are uncaring. For instance, look at the way we stuff children inside overcrowded and rickety school vans. Reducing the weight of school bags can be one small step in making the educational process more enjoyable and less of an ordeal for the younger generation.

*Published in Dawn, July 26th, 2015*

## Turkey's shift

THIS newspaper has argued that to defeat the self-styled Islamic State, regional powers must combine forces in order to dislodge the extremist outfit from the territory it has occupied in Syria and Iraq, and to bring its leaders and fighters to justice. The fact that Turkey has decided to take a more active role where countering IS is concerned may be a major step towards realising this goal. On Friday, Turkish jets reportedly targeted IS positions inside Syria, killing a number of militants. It is likely the strikes were motivated by the recent deadly suicide bombing in the Turkish town of Suruc on the Syrian border; over 30 mostly Kurdish civilians were killed in that atrocity, which Ankara believes was carried out by a bomber with IS links. Along with the air strikes, Turkey has also given the US-led coalition access to its airbases in order to target the extremist group, while police have also launched swoops inside the country, picking up hundreds of suspects believed to have sympathies for the 'caliphate'.

Though Ankara's change of heart has come late in the day, it is nonetheless welcome. After all, media reports have suggested that "thousands" of foreign "volunteers" have made their way to the battlefields of Syria via Turkey, while IS and al-Nusra fighters have also allegedly taken refuge on Turkish soil. While officially the Recep Erdogan-led government opposes IS, it also has no love lost for the Assad regime, which is why it has been accused of looking the other way as extremists use its territory to dislodge the Damascus government. But supporting or even ignoring the activities of militant groups can have adverse effects, particularly for Turkey's internal security, as the Suruc bombing has painfully illustrated. That is why all

regional states must review their policies and stop any support for extremist groups. At the same time, world powers must work towards bringing about a negotiated settlement to the Syrian civil war, which is now in its fifth year and has cost over 200,000 lives. Similarly, the government in Baghdad must be supported by regional players in its fight against IS. It is clear that should countries of the region ignore the IS threat and continue to fight proxy wars against each other, the security situation in the Middle East will become increasingly precarious. Should Turkey — a Nato member — take a firm stand, its anti-IS campaign could be a game-changer.

*Published in Dawn, July 26th, 2015*

## More flooding lessons

ONE more time the monsoon season finds us struggling to cope with widespread inundation, flooding and the attendant destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods. Although the scale of the devastation does not compare with what previous monsoon seasons have left behind, it is important to keep in mind that the rainy season has just begun. What is already apparent is the proliferation of threats that the climate presents. Previous monsoon seasons have seen large-scale flooding from overflowing rivers as well as breaches in the embankments. In 2010 there were serious fears that the barrages on the main stem of the Indus river could be swept away, something that thankfully did not happen. This year we add Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (Glof) to the list.

It is not clear yet how many Glof events occurred in Chitral, and what triggered them. Reports from the ground deny that Glof events created the floods, pointing instead towards rains as the trigger. They point out that the most heavily impacted region has no glaciers nearby. The Provincial Disaster Management Authority of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, in its situation reports, first reported that the floods were caused by Glof events, then later added torrential rains from a cloudburst to the causes too. In any case, what is clear is that the Met department failed to issue any kind of an alert. If the flooding was caused entirely by a series of large-scale, simultaneously occurring Glof events, then the Met department would be largely powerless to forecast. But if the rains served as a trigger for the Glof events, and the timing would suggest it did, then an alert should have been issued.

According to KP government authorities, the Met department is not equipped to issue proper forecasts for the mountainous regions, and all of KP province does not have any functioning weather radars. This is a dangerous situation because the mountains are particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather, and water run-off from the mountains will always find its way into the rivers, just like it did in 2010. The past five years have taught us that the monsoon season is turning into a dangerous season, and only luck has ensured that thus far no major breaches of large hydrological infrastructure have occurred. Not only that, the nature of the threat is also multiplying. The many emergencies arising out of a changing climate are now knocking at our door with increasing ferocity. It is high time to realise that meeting this challenge is a critical priority. Investment needs to be made in upgrading forecasting capabilities, building on our current capability which relies almost exclusively on empirically observing weather patterns

towards forecasts that use climatic models, and thereby providing longer lead times. We cannot afford to drive blind into the coming storms.

*Published in Dawn, July 26th, 2015*

## Resumption of executions

IN the week ahead, hangings are to resume in Pakistan as the federal government's month-long moratorium on executions has expired with the end of Ramazan.

The hangings should not resume and the government should urgently reinstate its moratorium on all executions. That would not only be the principled thing to do, but also a humane and moral stance – given the gross irregularities that have almost come to define a broken criminal justice system.

Even then, the death penalty does not have a place in a modern and democratic society. But advocates of the death penalty here tend to rely on two lines of defence.

*Take a look: [Hangings to resume after Eid](#)*

First, there are occasions where there is reasonable doubt that the accused has committed the crime. In such scenarios, the broader failures of the criminal justice system should not be used to shield criminals, according to the pro-death penalty camp.

Second, what about the victims' families – do they not deserve justice for their relatives, in the cases where the death penalty is handed down for murder? Both those arguments are specious, however.

To begin with, to deny the death penalty to any convict is not the same as setting him free. At no point does opposing the death penalty translate into setting criminals free – death-row convicts ought to remain in jail until a system is in place to determine fairly and impartially if any of them deserve to be released at some point before their natural lives come to an end.

A life spent behind bars, cut off from society and deprived of one's freedom, is a significant and, where applicable, a deterrent-inducing punishment. That also helps address the issue of the rights of the victims' families – there is certainly punishment involved where a murder has been convicted, but a punishment determined by the state and not based on bloody notions of vengeance and retributive justice. That, though, is only a lopsided debate.

The criminal justice system is not about merely the exceptions and the perceived rights of some individuals – it is about the totality of society and balancing multiple needs in the most sensible way possible.

In Pakistan, where the criminal justice system routinely convicts roughly 10pc of the accused, there is extreme disparity in the kind of legal representation rich and poor accused can access.

It is well known that the prison population is skewed towards the less well-off segments of society. Therefore, even when courts find beyond reasonable doubt that an accused is guilty of a crime that attracts the death penalty, there is a great deal of doubt about whether the legal representation of the accused put forward the best possible defence.

Finally, there is the tragic reality that a wide range of crimes attract the death penalty in Pakistan – not just terrorism, murder and extreme sexual violence. Extending the death-penalty moratorium is necessary.

*Published in Dawn, July 27th, 2015*

## Polio and Pakistan

ONLY two names now remain on the list: Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nigeria is the latest country to exit the ignominious company of countries where polio is considered endemic.

No new polio cases have been reported there for the last one year, and while it has some time to go before officially being declared polio-free, it should be really proud given the odds it once faced.

A decade or so ago, Muslim clerics in Nigeria declared war on the anti-polio campaigners. These clerics, quite like their counterparts in Pakistan, had decried the vaccination drive as an attempt to sterilise young Muslim girls.



*Also read: [Nigeria marks polio-free year, raising global eradication hopes](#)*

In more recent times, the hardcore militant group Boko Haram went after polio workers in Nigeria earlier this year, killing nine of them. But the anti-polio battle had enough momentum to bring the global front against the crippling disease victory after years of committed, relentless effort.

Nigeria and the world must celebrate the moment. According to figures available in media reports, only 27 years ago – in 1988 – there were 128 countries staked by endemic polio.

This is what makes the indictment for the two countries that are still not clear of polio easier and stronger.

There has been a drop in the number of cases of late, but with 28 reported cases in Pakistan this year as against five in Afghanistan, Pakistan has to be the most serious challenge for the anti-polio coalition.

Nigeria's example tells us that it has to be cohesive, efficient process involving everyone from the government health machinery to the NGOs to political parties and social motivators, including the clerics.

There is a general realisation here that the network is essential to the job and the application of the successful Nigerian formula in Pakistan could well be one of the major reasons behind the fall in polio cases in the country in 2015 over previous years. The need is to press on with single-minded urgency towards achieving a polio-free world.

## Monetary policy

THE State Bank decided to keep interests steady in its latest monetary policy announcement after a year of continuous decreases. The decision reflects prudence in face of a divided outlook on inflation.

International factors such as oil prices have a relatively benign outlook, but domestic pressures on food prices could emanate from factors such as floods and an upward revision of power tariffs, both of which are highly sensitive elements in the CPI basket.

The decision is a cautious one, and the caution is indeed warranted.

*Take a look: [SBP announces monetary policy, discount rate stays at 6.5pc](#)*

This is the first monetary policy statement of the new fiscal year, and what it has to say about the budget and the new fiscal framework is important. The fiscal deficit for the last fiscal year ended July 2015 came in at 5pc, according to the statement, which is appreciably higher than the target set at the start.

More significantly, the statement adds that liquidity support provided to banks rose sharply, with outstanding Open Market Operations going to an "all time high" of Rs 1.03 trillion.

For next year, meeting the deficit target depends critically on collections under the controversial Gas Infrastructure

Development Cess says the SBP, pointing out that next year could be equally challenging.

On the external front too, the SBP appears to applaud the growing import coverage but cautions that revival of private inflows and exports remains critical. The quality of growth registered in the previous year looks less edifying on a closer look, since much of it appears to have centred around construction, mining and quarrying. Private-sector credit growth as well as investment declined compared to the previous year.

The statement contains a line that is beginning to look like a ritual incantation more than a statement of economic merit, saying “decline in lending rates is expected to revive private investment going forward”.

This hope has been invoked for a long time now by the SBP and it’s time that we started hearing more about why the hoped for revival in private investment is not materialising in spite of sustained interest rate declines.

At the end of the day, the SBP performs a high-wire act by noting the weaknesses in the economy without going into any detail about their causes and nature.

Sentiments in the economy remain positive and upbeat, but sentiments are a poor foundation for growth. The SBP can still do more to help point that out.

*Published in Dawn, July 27th, 2015*

## Taxing non-filers

THE government is doing the right thing to hold out against continuing pressure from some groups against the withholding tax imposed on banking transactions of non-filers of income tax.

The tax itself is meagre — 0.3pc of all transactions above Rs50,000 in a single day — and the measure is non-coercive in the sense that the government is not saying it will pursue and penalise non-filers beyond imposing this tax.

The measure impacts the business community more than individuals since the size of daily transactions is very large amongst businesses, and many business owners have grown accustomed to using personal accounts to settle their transactions.

The government has already reached an understanding with a large section of the trader community, which has been at the forefront of opposing this measure, to reduce the size of the liability in return for an assurance that the community will enter the tax net and file their returns before September.

Another section of the trader community, as well as cotton ginners, are continuing to protest the measure, thereby revealing their hand as non-filers and parties opposed to documentation of their transactions.

One argument made against the measure is that it will serve as a disincentive to bring money into the banking system, and

people will simply opt to carry out their transactions in cash. If this is true, it will be a short-lived phenomenon.

It is true that Pakistan has a large cash economy, but at some point or the other, this cash does touch the banking system and cannot permanently divorce itself from formal systems of payment, especially given the volume of the turnover in wholesale markets.

The government should remain steadfast in its resolve to penalise money that refuses to be documented with the tax authorities. Eventually those protesting must realise the futility of their efforts and resolve to file their returns like many other businesses do. That is the way of civilised countries, and Pakistan cannot be an exception for ever.

*Published in Dawn, July 28th, 2015*

## Urban flooding

FOR a number of years now, the same water drain in Peshawar has overflowed every time rain hits the city, and causes widespread urban floods and loss of life as well.

Last year too, the same drain — Budhni Nullah — overflowed heavily, and this year it has done so again. More than 300 people have had to be evacuated due to the flooding drain, which passes through densely populated areas.

The provincial minister has attributed the problem to encroachment along the drain's banks, although others point out that the size of the drain is also inadequate to deal with the kinds of water flows that it has been seeing in recent years.

*Take a look: [Govt machinery put on alert after rain, 'urban flooding' warning](#)*

In Lahore too, urban flooding happens with painful regularity in the same localities, like the Gaddafi stadium or Qurtaba Chowk areas, year after year in even mild rains.

Again the problem is caused by the lack of proper drainage which commands far less significance in the eyes of the city's patrons than grand, visible schemes. Rawalpindi also sees widespread inundation whenever the central drain — Leh Nullah, which runs through the heart of the city — overflows.

Smaller towns like Oghi have also seen a flood surge in their stormwater drains in the latest round of rains, causing the central market to be washed away.

In city after city, the same pattern repeats itself. The rains come, the drains overflow, roads, markets and homes are flooded and the district administration struggles to cope with the aftermath and in some cases calls the army for assistance.

The fact that the source of the problem is the same every year begs one important question: why is remedial action not taken before the onset of the monsoon season?

About Karachi too, which has avoided heavy rains and urban flooding so far this year, the met authorities have been issuing flood alerts for almost a week now, but the chief minister only visited the sites of storm drains on Saturday, a week after the first alerts were issued; he “noted” that encroachments have blocked the stormwater drains.

The fact that it has taken the chief minister this long to notice such an obvious fact, and even that on the eve of a fresh flood alert shows the casual attitude with which the authorities treat climate-related challenges. This wait-and-see attitude must change.

Drainage in urban areas is a crucial obligation of the government, and it must be discharged with more seriousness.

*Published in Dawn, July 28th, 2015*

## Politics of maturity

THE end of the PTI’s long, distressing saga to dispute the overall result of the May 2013 general and knock the PML-N out of power has brought to the fore the next question, and this one centres on the PTI itself: what can and what does the party want to achieve in politics from here?

The PTI has perfected the politics of protest on the streets and in press conferences, but the party does not appear to have a clear idea or vision for practising parliamentary politics.

Yesterday, Imran Khan should have been in parliament and faced squarely whatever it was that Mr Khan and his party had anticipated and sought to avoid in the National Assembly.

*Know more: [As NA meets, time for a PTI remorse](#)*

If it was embarrassment that the PTI feared at the hands of the PML-N, then it’s about time the party learned the up-and-down nature of representative democracy. If it was to avoid the opportunist attacks of the MQM and JUI-F, then the PTI had a duty to defend publicly why its members were and remain legitimate members of parliament – which the PTI MNAs are, whatever the MQM and JUI-F may say.

Yet, the PTI’s ambivalent relationship with representative democracy goes much deeper than a single, closely watched session of parliament. In Islamabad, the party had demonstrated that it either does not understand or does not care for playing the role of a meaningful and effective opposition.

The PTI in general and Mr Khan in particular appear to only see a role for themselves when the party is running the affairs of the state. But then what to make of the anaemic record in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the PTI leads the governing coalition in the provincial assembly?

It is in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that the party has really struggled with translating into action its mantra of change and anti-status quo politics.

How meaningfully different are the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assembly and government when compared to the Punjab assembly and government in terms of legislation, oversight, administration, reforms and improvement in the quality of public service?

Surely, even the most ardent of PTI supporters would accept that the party has failed to meet its own expectations in the only province it has ever governed.

Perhaps the PTI would argue that what the party wants to achieve can only be done through the centre. But that would ignore the transformative 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which devolved many of the basic services the state is obliged to provide to the provincial level.

Even then, however, where are the ideas at the federal level? Where are the bills that the PTI has tabled via its individual MNAs and senators?

What is the PTI's input for fixing the electricity sector or improving the tax system? Surely, the PTI's parliamentary

record is not worthy of a party that won the second-largest share of votes nationally.

*Published in Dawn, July 28th, 2015*

## Human trafficking

WHERE the crime of human trafficking is concerned, Pakistan has received mixed marks in the 2015 Trafficking in Persons Report, released recently by the US State Department.

The report says that while human trafficking remains a substantial problem for the country, efforts are afoot to address outstanding issues.

Also, Pakistan remains on the tier-2 watch list. Pakistan is a source, transit as well as destination country for men, women and children who are trafficked both internally and across borders.

*Know more: [US report on human trafficking censures Pakistan](#)*

The victims are mostly subjected to forced labour or trafficked for sex, while bonded labour has been singled out as the biggest 'beneficiary' of this cruel trade.

Reflecting the less than ideal security, political and economic situation in Pakistan, the report says Hazaras, who have been

hunted down mercilessly by sectarian killers in Balochistan, “are particularly vulnerable to trafficking”.

However, it should be pointed out that as per the UN’s definition, migrant smuggling and human trafficking are two related but distinct crimes, which are often conflated by local authorities.

Where migrant smuggling is concerned, there is an element of consent involved on part of the person being smuggled, whereas victims who are trafficked are often done so against their will.

The report says the Federal Investigation Agency is making efforts to curb this crime, though the complicity of government officials with traffickers is a major problem. Indeed in many cases human traffickers and their modus operandi are known to functionaries of the state; yet due to the clout and deep pockets of these individuals they are allowed to carry on.

The report rightly points out that a comprehensive anti-trafficking law is needed in Pakistan.

Particularly, the “insufficient political will and capacity” of the state to clamp down on human trafficking must be addressed.

Traffickers prey on society’s weakest members, hence the state’s complacency must be replaced with alacrity to punish those involved in these crimes, while the black sheep within the government apparatus that help facilitate these crimes must also be brought to justice.

*Published in Dawn, July 29th, 2015*

## Surveillance bazaar

THE discovery of a number of Pakistani private contractors who have been in contact with Hacking Team, a private company based in Italy that specialises in developing snooping software, reveals the lax controls and widespread interest in government departments for acquiring the capability to monitor and intercept private communications and hack mobile devices of citizens.

Not only can the software in question intercept emails, phone calls and all other messages, it can access all data stored in mobile phones as well as switch on the microphone and camera remotely to listen to and watch everything happening in a user’s surroundings.

*Know more: [Hacking Team hacked: The Pakistan connection, and India's expansion plan](#)*

The revelation comes from a large hack of the private company’s internal emails, which contains more than 1,000 emails exchanged between the management and Pakistani contractors claiming to be working for various law enforcement bodies as well as the telecom regulator. The emails contain a record of one payment, indicating that somebody did in fact purchase the software.

Notwithstanding the fact that surveillance equipment has become a necessity for security agencies operating in a murky world where terrorism can be enabled by technology, this is troubling for several reasons.

For one, in Pakistan such capabilities have been used to spy on politicians and judges, as well as human rights activists and journalists, as detailed in a recent report by Privacy International. For another, very few controls exist over how this capability will be used.

As recently as in June, during the proceedings of a 19-year-old suo motu case, the ISI disclosed before the Supreme Court that it had tapped thousands of phones over the preceding months; there is no clarity, however, as to what parameters were followed in deciding to place the wiretaps. And perhaps most importantly, the leaked emails show how far snooping technology is now spreading, going beyond traditional intelligence agencies to police departments and provincial intelligence agencies.

The email exchanges provide a glimpse into a very disturbing world where technologies designed to violate people's private lives are being shopped from an online bazaar as if they were nothing more than cosmetics or music players.

Hacking Team undertook only the most pro forma and superficial vetting of the contractors they were approached by.

Considering that politicians and judges have themselves been the targets of these snooping tools, more must be done to legislate controls over this technology to ensure that it gets used only for purposes of fighting crime and terror.

*Published in Dawn, July 29th, 2015*

## Gurdaspur attack

IT was a startling assault, the first in over a decade, in Indian Punjab and in an area intrinsically linked to the bitterness of Partition and a more recent fraught communal history.

Yet, the terrorist attack in Gurdaspur — just a short distance from the working boundary and the Line of Control — almost immediately became about Pakistan and the ever-present tensions between the two countries.

There was no evidence offered; indeed, even the identity of the terrorists, one of whom is believed to have been captured alive, was not known by the time the Indian media and some — though fortunately, only some — Indian officials began to blame Pakistan and the ISI here.

*Take a look: [Gunmen who carried out India's Punjab attack were Muslim: police](#)*

Of course, if caution and common sense do not prevail often enough in India, neither do they in Pakistan.

As the Indian news cycle was dominated by coverage of the 12-hour-long stand-off in Gurdaspur and shrill accusations against Pakistan, the ISPR here chose to release footage recorded by an allegedly Indian drone — really just a commercially available so-called quadcopter with a camera — that had been shot down by the Pakistani border forces.

It was left to the Foreign Office to issue a condemnation of the Gurdaspur attack and to express sympathy for the victims and their families.

A familiar tale, then: India blames Pakistan for any terrorist attack on its soil, even before anyone on the ground could possibly know who was behind the attack and for what reason; the Pakistani state zeroes in on Indian military escalations along the Working Boundary and LoC to emphasise that the Indian state is not interested in peace.

Already, the prime ministerial meeting in Ufa, Russia, appears to have been eclipsed. The Ufa joint statement though zeroed in on the major — and most immediate — impediment to the eventual normalisation of ties: the terror threat in the region and the lack of coordination between Pakistan and India when it comes to identifying and eliminating the threats wherever they may be found.

Consider if the National Security Advisers of the two countries had already met, as had the DG Pakistan Rangers and the DG BSF and the DGMOs of India and Pakistan too. Consider also if they had worked out an arrangement for the sharing of time-sensitive intelligence and had come to an understanding about how to address real-time incidents along the Working Boundary and the LoC.

In that scenario, perhaps some of the public mistrust on both sides of the border would have been curbed, leading to more sensible, less reactionary responses in India and the Pakistani establishment seeking to help immediately rather than focus on something else altogether.

But all is not lost yet. As the facts from Gurdaspur emerge in the days ahead, Pakistan could extend its full cooperation in the investigation — if the facts do point to a role in Gurdaspur of elements operating from Pakistani soil.

*Published in Dawn, July 29th, 2015*

## Raids on eateries

IN Lahore and Peshawar, restaurants have received some unwanted guests in recent days. These nosey, curious visitors, armed with a governmental licence of inspection, have been on a spree where they have sealed eateries and imposed fines for eateries' failure to maintain the minimum expected standards of hygiene, freshness, etc, in the conduct of business.

The drive has drawn some support, and if there is a surprising element somewhere in the affair, it relates to the restaurant owners' inability to anticipate and react to the crackdown against them.

In the Punjab capital where the campaign to clean up the mess at the eateries is most pronounced, the Lahore Restaurant's Owners have, finally, decided to challenge the burgeoning — by some accounts intimidating — presence of the Punjab Food Authority (PFA).

*Know more: [Eateries body comes up with its version](#)*



The restaurant owners have built their counter-argument around familiar themes. They point out how officials can often overstep under the cover of the authority invested in them; and since this is about food and Lahore, the refrain about how ‘negative’ action can earn a bad name for the city’s culture has been easily invoked.

Yet more raids continue to be reported and the officials speak of expanding the PFA’s raid-and-seal operations to other towns in the province.

There is considerable merit in the urge to clean up the act at restaurants. The images and the stories emanating from these raids at eateries add to this urgency and to the calls for carrying on with the effort until some kind of basic hygiene and other standards are established, making eating out a less hazardous event than it appears now.

But most popular jobs must also entail the strictest adherence to the principles of fairness and objectivity by the officials assigned to perform them.

The campaign must continue and at the same time an awareness programme must also be undertaken to apprise restaurant managers about their responsibilities.

The aim should not be to embarrass or humiliate them — so long as they are keeping it nice and clean.

*Published in Dawn, July 30th, 2015*

## Brokerage research

IT has long been necessary to provide some oversight, and guidelines, to the in-house research floated by brokerages about the economy and the stock market.

All over the world these in-house research efforts are recognised to be suffering from serious conflicts of interest, and are thereby the subject of very stringent regulatory oversight.

Here in Pakistan, the brokerage houses operate in-house research departments that function largely without any serious oversight, and provide analysis that is designed more to serve marketing needs than providing any serious economic insights.

*Know more: [SECP issues research analyst regulations](#)*

Many lay investors place a great deal of trust in these reports, which often contain buy calls and advice to hold certain specified stocks.

The role that these research reports play in goading small investors to make investment decisions is very large, and as such it is important that the enterprise of creating and disseminating these reports be regulated to ensure that it does not end up resembling some elaborate marketing ruse.

Research designed to mislead the lay investor into placing their money in stocks that management is preparing to offload, for instance, must be identified and laws must exist and be

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implemented to ensure that those engaging in such unethical practices can be penalised.

Producing unethical research is tantamount to misleading advertising. This is why it is a good thing that the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP) is gearing up to tighten regulation of in-house research.

The task will not be an easy one. Many brokerages use their in-house research efforts as marketing support, with analysts fed the company line appearing on TV shows to talk a particular stock up or down.

Not all the research is necessarily tainted, but greater guarantees of the independence under which it is produced are required. Just like the HEC lays down guidelines for universities, the SECP should also start by first emphasising the educational credentials required to work in an in-house brokerage research department, and demand appropriate procedures in place to ensure autonomy for the researchers.

There should also be limits on what a brokerage can say about stocks that it holds in large quantities. At the end of the day, this practice of misleading in-house research will be difficult to restrain.

The lay investor should be educated about the risks of relying too heavily on these documents, and should know the many conflicts of interest that lie behind them.

*Published in Dawn, July 30th, 2015*

## Road to religious harmony

FOR over three decades now, the twin plagues of sectarian terror and religious violence have caused immeasurable harm to Pakistan's social fabric, taking thousands of precious lives and causing evident fissures within society.

Much of the blame for this falls on the state for either promoting ideologies that have nurtured extremism, or for looking the other way as violent actors with unabashedly toxic agendas have caused havoc in society.

Indeed debates within and between religions have been taking place for centuries, but in today's Pakistan belonging to the 'wrong' sect or religious group can have dire consequences, thanks to the space provided to extremists.

*Also read: [Religious scholars stress interfaith harmony](#)*

The state has made a few attempts to reverse the tide of intolerance, with mixed results. Among these efforts have been attempts to foster interfaith dialogue along with bringing Islam's different schools of thought together on one platform.

On Tuesday, the federal religious affairs minister organised a conference in Karachi which brought together clergy and representatives from different faith groups.

Participants of the event discussed the problems faced by minorities in Pakistan, as well as ideas about how to alleviate these concerns.

Earlier in the week, the minister — in a written reply to a lawmaker's question in the National Assembly — said his ministry was taking various steps to tackle sectarianism in the country.

These included forming a committee on sectarian harmony, holding conferences and naat competitions, as well as issuing a uniform azan calendar for all sects to follow in Islamabad.

While all the aforementioned steps may be commendable, it is essential to ask how successful similar efforts have been up until now in tackling intolerance and promoting harmony.

For example, are the warm, positive messages espoused at such interfaith meetups and intra-religious events filtering down to the preacher in the neighbourhood mosque?

For it is here where matters are most sensitive, where loudspeakers can easily be misused to foment trouble and which need to be monitored particularly.

Equally important is the state's attitude and actions towards clamping down on hate literature and speech, which is probably the biggest driver of faith-based violence in Pakistan.

Indeed there have been convictions related to hate speech over the past few months, particularly in Punjab, while numerous suspects have also been reportedly arrested.

Simply put, unless the state and the ulema — in their respective spheres — both work towards punishing and isolating, respectively, rabble-rousers who demonise any sect or religion, there will be no change on the ground.

Organisations such as the Milli Yakjehti Council have stated that they will monitor Friday sermons in order to promote sectarian and religious harmony.

Do the clergy have the wherewithal to isolate and report those preachers who spew hate and promote violence?

As for the government, in order to really promote harmony, it must prosecute and punish hate-mongers across the board.

*Published in Dawn, July 30th, 2015*

## Change of tack?

MALIK Ishaq, co-founder and leader of a faction of the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi — by most accounts Pakistan's most active sectarian terrorist group — lived a violent life and met a violent end on the outskirts of the Punjab town of Muzaffargarh on Wednesday.

Questions remain about the way the militant leader was killed; the reported details don't quite add up, strengthening the view that he was eliminated in a staged encounter.

There is no argument that extrajudicial killings are unacceptable; eliminating suspects in such a manner creates 'martyrs' and serves to further radicalise supporters of extremist groups.

There is a lesson here that absolutely has to be learned if there is a viable way forward: the feared militant spent years behind bars but could not be convicted in court – not necessarily because he was innocent, but because witnesses were too terrified to testify against him, while the broken justice system could not build a watertight case against him.

To achieve success in countering terrorism and militancy, the authorities must arrest, prosecute and punish militants through legal means.

The dysfunctional justice system needs to be fixed and effective protection programmes for witnesses, prosecutors and judges dealing with terrorism cases need to be in place.

In the bigger picture, for a long time, there has been criticism (much of it justified) that the state — particularly the Punjab administration — has not done enough to tackle militancy.

There has even been criticism that elements within the Punjab government have hobnobbed with sectarian figures.

Hence, is Malik Ishaq's killing the first clear sign that the Punjab leadership has decided to pursue a more proactive counterterrorism policy?

It is possible, though some observers feel it is actually the military establishment that has taken the initiative.

Questions also persist about the state's intent in going after militants across the board. For example, on the day Malik Ishaq was killed, Rafiq Mengal, a key sectarian leader in Balochistan,

was arrested in Quetta and taken into custody after he led a demonstration protesting the militant's killing.

Why have cases not already been registered against such elements that publicly display their sympathies and support for operatives of banned outfits?

In order to uproot militancy, amongst other things the state must also prosecute the sympathisers and accomplices of militants in political garb.

If the establishment persists with the thoroughly discredited 'good militant, bad militant' line of thought, the belief that it is being selective in its anti-militancy measures will persist.

*Published in Dawn, July 31st, 2015*

## Hunting of houbaras

THE humble houbara bustard on one side versus the rapacious Arabs and supine Pakistani governments on the other – it was always a no-contest.

Now, however, the Supreme Court, in response to a petition, has weighed in on the issue of foreign dignitaries from the Arab world being granted licences every year to hunt the internationally protected bird in various parts of the country.

The court made its objection to the practice very clear and added that the Foreign Office, which issued the licences, did not “prima facie” have the authority to do so.

*Know more: [SC criticises grant of licences for houbara bustard hunting](#)*

The court, which raised questions of violation of sovereignty and the decimation of environmental assets in the leeway being given to the Arabs, ordered the centre and provincial governments to submit detailed reports on the situation by Aug 11.

Failure to do so satisfactorily, it said, would result in the foreign secretary being summoned to explain why such permits were being granted.

The crescendo of voices from civil society objecting to the arrival of the bustard-hunting parties from Gulf countries has been growing louder each year.

Giving the protests further impetus is evidence that the visitors brazenly flout even the nominal constraints placed on them by their host country.

In early 2014, for instance, a Saudi prince hunted 2,100 houbaras during the course of 21 days, whereas the permit limits the holder to a maximum of 100 birds over a 10-day period.

Last year, the high court in Balochistan decided to take up the gauntlet by cancelling the permits awarded to foreigners for hunting the bird in the province. Nevertheless, the hunters were welcomed with open arms, with the Balochistan government itself challenging the ban.

That is where the problem lies: those who are responsible for upholding the law and protecting this country’s assets — whether environmental or otherwise — are themselves either beholden in myriad ways to international parties or else want to pander to them for future gains.

Until that changes, the courts are our only hope.

*Published in Dawn, July 31st, 2015*

## Mullah Omar dies

IN death, Mullah Omar has proved to be as controversial as he was in life. After overnight speculation on when, where and how the Taliban supreme commander had died, the Afghan Taliban appear to at least have put to rest speculation that one of the world's most famous recluses may be still be alive.

Confirmations from Omar's family and via official Afghan Taliban channels, though, have not settled the basic facts surrounding the death.

If it is true that Omar died in southern Afghanistan recently, as the Afghan Taliban are claiming, and not in a Karachi hospital two years ago, as alleged by Afghan government officials, that still leaves a major credibility issue on both sides.

*Know more: [Mullah Omar did not die in Pakistan, say Afghan Taliban](#)*

Why did the Afghan Taliban try and hide Omar's death and only confirm it once the Afghan government had leaked the news to the media?

Only two weeks ago, the Afghan Taliban had claimed Mullah Omar had issued his standard pre-Eid missive. Were they lying then? Or have they been dissembling for years now?

More importantly, from a dialogue perspective, has a group within the Afghan Taliban been lying about the internal cohesion of the Taliban and trying to use Mullah Omar's name

to win a settlement with the Afghan Taliban that it cannot guarantee?

For the Afghan government side, too, there are major questions. News of the death was leaked by elements within the Afghan state on the eve of a second round of direct talks between the Afghan government and representatives of the Afghan Taliban shura in Pakistan. That has led to the postponement of the next rounds of talks and plunged the very notion of talks into disarray — benefiting whom and to what end?

Surely, the latest development cannot suit the pro-peace faction of the Afghan state. A leadership struggle or a splintering of the Taliban just as the Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani is seeking to draw the Taliban into a dialogue process is hardly welcome news.

With Mullah Omar dead, the Taliban movement's first and only supreme commander is out of the picture just as some kind of understanding needs to be reached between those elements making significant gains on the battlefield and those looking to the negotiating table for a permanent settlement.

Whoever takes over the Afghan Taliban now will have that much of a harder time trying to win over the faction committed to defeating the Afghan state militarily.

The role of the outside powers too hardly seems benign in the present scenario. Were the Americans, with their vast surveillance powers, completely unaware that Mullah Omar has been dead for years or has died recently?

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What also of the Pakistani security establishment's knowledge regarding the workings of the Afghan Taliban? Either the outside powers are utterly clueless or recklessly naïve to have believed news of Mullah Omar's death could remain hidden.

*Published in Dawn, July 31st, 2015*