

# DAWN



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

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## Asset declarations

THE Election Commission of Pakistan's decision to remove all asset declarations of parliamentarians and senators from its website is inexplicable. Moreover, the removal of these declarations at the height of the Panama Papers controversy makes the act appear even more suspicious. The data was removed when a parliamentary subcommittee objected to its online publication, saying that the lawmakers' privacy was being violated, and the ECP refused to restore the list to its website even after a larger parliamentary panel requested it to do so. Reportedly, the ECP is asking for additional legal authority to upload the list, while paper copies continue to be available to the general public against a small charge. What is puzzling is the ECP's argument for additional legal authority when the data was already available on their website for two years. Was specific legal authorisation not required for the upload back then? Removing the data now, as the May 9 release of the full Panama Papers dump approaches, even though a parliamentary panel has asked for the upload, makes the ECP's decision appear arbitrary and designed to accommodate the wishes of a small group of individuals.

The asset declarations do contain some personal information, such as account numbers and addresses, but those seeking elected office should know that these disclosures are a requirement. The ECP itself has done nothing with these disclosures except to shelve them. Making them available to the public would at least be a way of letting people know what the official declarations say and if they are in keeping with the politicians' lifestyle. By keeping them out of the public's view, the ECP ensures that the filing of these declarations is nothing more than a mere formality. One consequence of treating financial disclosure requirements for elected officials in such a non-serious way was apparent when the public learned through the international media that two-thirds of their elected parliamentarians don't even file income tax returns. The country suffered major humiliation due to this disclosure, and it is fair to ask why the ECP knew nothing of this — it certainly did not act on it. All financial disclosure requirements for elections, whether poll expenses, tax details or asset declarations, are public information and should be available online. The ECP is rightly being asked to change course and make the declarations available online, and it should heed this bit of advice.

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## A voice from Thar

THE report produced by the Thar Commission set up by the Sindh government makes for a very sad read. First of all, the commission based its conclusions on a few interactions with government functionaries and members of the community. One would have expected, given the seriousness of the situation in Thar, a more rigorous methodology to have been followed; any commission should at least have looked at the demographic studies conducted in the region by experts, and tried to get some data rather than basing the findings only on verbal testimony collected through a series of brief interactions with a miscellaneous group of people. Wherever any numbers are used, they often contradict each other, such as the number of reverse osmosis plants installed, and the figure for those that are operational. The report is, therefore, nothing more than a hasty, superficial compilation of impressions formed by commission members during a short trip to the region.

But even those impressions paint a depressing picture. Government doctors don't show up at their workplace. They feel better when they run private clinics as they are highly demoralised by the conditions in which they have to work. District hospitals are in a shambles. While their operational budgets have increased, funds can take years to be disbursed. Roads and other infrastructure are built without taking the requirements of the community into account. The reverse osmosis plants are either inoperative, or located too far away to be of use to many of the communities. Or, they are poorly maintained so that the quality of the water they provide is suspect. In many cases, the company charges the local community Rs100 per month, taking the money from every household to keep its plant operational. The people of Thar deserve better. Having said that, it is important to underscore that they deserved a far better inquiry into their plight than what the commission served up. The Sindh government should start getting serious about the issue.

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## F-16 sale in jeopardy

PAKISTAN and American F-16s have a long and complicated political history. A symbol of both Pakistani national-security pride and resentment, the F-16 looks set to reprise its role as a symbol of American betrayal of Pakistan in the 1990s. Back then, with the war in Afghanistan against the Soviets winding down, Pakistan was made aware of the limits of American cooperation and friendship. Infamously, the US not only blocked the transfer of more F-16s to Pakistan, but refused to return the money Pakistan had already paid for them. This time, the specifics are different, but the regional circumstances familiar. With the American war effort in Afghanistan vastly diminished and the need to rely on Pakistan for supply routes virtually eliminated, Pakistan is learning that it has neither any friends in the US Congress willing to release funds for the sale of eight subsidised F-16s, nor apparently anyone in the White House who considers it important enough to lobby Congress on behalf of Pakistan. Pakistan can still have the eight F-16s, but only if it pays the full price — a decision that virtually blocks the sale. Rejecting Pakistan appears to be once again fashionable in Washington D.C.

The story of ties with Congress is a particularly painful one. Where once at least some pragmatic understanding of the need to maintain a security-based relationship could be relied on, now Congress is mostly in the news on the Pakistan front for hostile statements against the country. Be it Afghanistan, Balochistan or India, there are several congressmen and senators who have taken their attacks against Pakistan to an unacceptable level. Part of it can be explained by the inability and unwillingness of the Pakistan foreign policy establishment, and particularly a succession of leaders in the Washington embassy of Pakistan, to cultivate ties in the US Congress. Unlike India, Pakistan has never really embraced the American way of doing business on Capitol Hill. But a great deal of the explanation is that sections of the US Congress, driven by domestic political concerns and freed from the constraints of a major war effort in Afghanistan, are demonstrating an antipathy towards Pakistan because they now can. Pakistan is expected to deliver peace in Afghanistan, allow Balochistan to secede and accept Indian hegemony — and it is expected to do so meekly and immediately. That is not only preposterous, but a dangerous rhetorical escalation by the US Congress.

Yet, it is perhaps not Congress alone that is to blame. Under President Obama, who recently described Pakistan as a “disastrously dysfunctional country” to an American magazine, there has been a growing reluctance to engage with Pakistan other than on the narrowest of security grounds. How much effort has the White House really put into lobbying critical elements in the US Congress who are undermining the Pak-US relationship? Surely, an increasingly disengaged White House is part of the problem.

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## Politicians' road to nowhere

IT may be a forlorn hope, but there is still time for better sense to prevail. At the moment, however, it appears that political fratricide is the likely outcome, with the country's mainstream and leading political parties seemingly oblivious to their democratic responsibilities.

Bizarrely, the PML-N appears determined to lead the charge, attacking the PTI with a gusto that suggests either misplaced confidence or great fear. Ruling parties are not supposed to behave like opposition parties, if only because it adds to the perception of political instability rather than combats it.

Consider also the tussle over government permission for the PTI rally in Lahore yesterday. Perhaps, as police officials earlier insisted, there were genuine security concerns in the provincial capital.

Yet, there is a legitimate suspicion that the PML-N uses security excuses as a cover for political ends.

The trust that all Pakistanis, non-political or political, supporters of the government or supporters of the opposition, should have in the state stands eroded by the unnecessary machinations of the ruling party.

Of course, where the PML-N is erring, the PTI seems to be set on fomenting the maximum political instability it can. True, the core of the PTI concerns may be legitimate – as the elected prime minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif has a great deal to answer for when it comes to the foreign assets and overall wealth of himself and his immediate family.

Moreover, the PTI has a democratic right to protest and nothing that the party has done so far suggests illegality. Yet, the PTI seems less concerned with systemic reforms than simply ratcheting up the political pressure on Mr Sharif.

The enthusiasm with which the PTI supremo takes to PTI rallies is matched only by the reluctance of the party to activate parliamentary channels for political and economic reform. Mr Khan looks worryingly more comfortable atop shipping containers than he does on the floor of parliament.

If the PML-N and PTI appear engaged in a personal war, the problem is compounded by the few outside parties that could help stabilise the country's politics. The religious right that could mediate is busy choosing sides, with the Jamaat-i-Islami and Maulana Fazlur Rehman of the JUI-F pursuing narrow, parochial interests.

Meanwhile, in a bid to perhaps increase his political relevance, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has weighed in with his own attacks on Nawaz Sharif, accusing him of being soft on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, abandoning Kashmir and calling on Mr Sharif to step aside until the Panama Papers judicial commission completes its work.

With political parties shunning stability, the spectre of anti-democratic forces will loom ever larger. That is the unfortunate history of this country: enlightened actions elude politicians to the point that the political process itself is tainted and anti-democratic forces stand at the ready to reap the benefits.

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## OBL raid, five years on

It looks as if we are not going to have a single authoritative account of the May 2, 2011, raid in Abbottabad that killed Osama bin Laden — at least not any time soon.

In fact, there will be newer claims and fresher or spruced-up versions of the event, such as the account that renowned investigative journalist Seymour Hersh has put forward.

In a newly published book on the subject, Mr Hersh has once more made the claim that Pakistan knew where Osama bin Laden was living but that it kept this knowledge from the United States at the behest of Saudi Arabia.

Whereas some have challenged this theory, there have also been several calls for greater transparency and a frank account of the events of that fateful night.

But debate has not been able to progress on the topic since the government classified the findings of the inquiry into the incident.

Most of the report was leaked, but the full picture was still not clear. In the absence of the official report, people's imagination has been left to feed on the visible, usual suspects, offering an escape to others who might well have been involved — much like other inquiry reports that have not seen the light of day.

Five years later, institutions in Pakistan which could help everyone arrive at some sensible explanation do not feel compelled to reveal or even probe the facts.

For want of better visibility, the attention is usually fixed almost entirely on the then army and ISI chiefs and president.

It is convenient for many that the blame for the blatant May 2011 violation of the country's sovereignty has been put squarely on retired Gen Ashfaq Kayani, retired Lt Gen Shuja Pasha and Asif Zardari.

There is little dispute that they will be the first suspects in any investigation of one of the most humiliating incidents in the history of this country.

Yet it is far from an open and shut case. It has to be ascertained who was responsible and to what extent.

The official release of the report would be an important first step towards this goal. Otherwise, the passage of each year will make it even more difficult for Pakistanis to attempt to find answers to this riddle. There is no need to hide the truth from the people. Indeed, they are more than mature and capable of handling it.

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## No honour in murder

KILLING someone in cold blood is murder that merits a lengthy jail sentence, and not forgiveness.

Last week in Karachi, 16-year-old Sumaira was brutally beaten and stabbed to death by her elder brother for talking to a man. Her throat slit with a kitchen knife, she bled to death as the neighbours looked on. When her father refused to lodge an FIR, the local police intervened.

In a rare instance of integrity, they registered a report with the state as complainant — not the usual pattern in cases where an 'honour' crime has been committed. On the same day that Sumaira was killed, Mehrunissa was reported to have been murdered by her family in the city's old Muzaffarabad Colony for defying social expectations.

Aurat Foundation statistics document that around 1,000 women are killed annually for bringing 'shame' on their families.

Their murderers gain societal respect and are supported by regressive patriarchies after they kill ‘disobedient’ female family members. Unfortunately, few cases are reported. The trials of those that do reach the courts go on for years — all the more reason for removing punishment waivers and compoundability provisions from the law books.

The 2014 case of Farzana Parveen murdered outside the Lahore High Court for marrying against her family’s wishes reminds us again of the disgraceful level of impunity that exists.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif must deliver on his pledge to amend the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2004, by removing the clauses that make such murder a private offence instead of a crime against state and society.

Mr Sharif has said the killers of women will be “punished very severely” and not allowed to be forgiven by the victims’ family. For this, he will need to deviate from his 1997 precedent when the PML-N government passed the Qisas and Diyat provision making prosecution and punishment the responsibility of the victim’s heirs.

With the religious right bent upon undermining women’s rights, enacting revised laws will require determination. Precise red lines must be drawn to show that there is no honour in murder.

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## WOW Festival

IT had an air of celebration, with the grounds of Karachi’s Beach Luxury Hotel filled with men, women and children milling about on Sunday as music played in the background. And that is exactly as it should have been — that is the mood for an event conceived as a cultural platform to acknowledge the achievements and contributions of women around the world and in the country. This was Pakistan’s first iteration of the Women of the World, or WOW, Festival, jointly organised by the British Council and London’s Southbank Centre. But beyond the relaxed environment, there was that vital backbone of seriousness underscored through a series of panel discussions on topics of contestation. The truth is, after all, that despite the push for gender equality and female emancipation being made in various countries over the past several decades, the world remains an unequal place and the treatment experienced by far too many of its women and girls who constitute half the global population continues to be criticism-worthy. The obstacles to gender equality in developing countries are obvious, but even in highly

developed countries, progress has been less than could have been hoped for on, for example, equal pay at workplaces, or the erasure of the so-called glass ceiling.

Pakistan, of course, has its own unique set of challenges where women's empowerment is concerned. In recent years, there have been some legislative successes, such as the laws framed against sexual harassment in the workplace and domestic violence. But society remains deeply patriarchal, with large numbers of women denied their rights. The presence of Mukhtaran Mai at the WOW Festival, for example, or Dr Fatima Haider who, after losing her husband and son in a drive-by shooting, started a voluntary service where people can find some measure of catharsis in sharing stories of tragedy, came as sobering reminders that a great deal needs to be achieved by both state and society before Pakistani women can expect to live their lives with dignity.

## Uzair Baloch's trial

UZAIR Baloch, the alleged mafia kingpin from Lyari in Karachi, has been accused of many things. Killing security personnel and rival gang members, drug trafficking, land grabbing, extortion — the list of serious crimes Baloch is accused of is a serious and lengthy one. Now, to that already lengthy list has been added the accusation of spying for Iran. The Joint Investigation Team tasked with interrogating Lyari's most infamous resident appears to have elicited a confession from Baloch that has rendered it necessary, in the view of the JIT, to have him tried in a military court. That rather extraordinary recommendation has come despite the Karachi operation being the catalyst for legal changes that have made it easier for the state to prosecute individuals in anti-terrorism courts. Given the range of crimes Mr Baloch is accused of, he should be tried by the criminal justice system instead of the military — it is both the right and fair thing to do. Right because the victims and survivors of his alleged crimes deserve to see justice done. Fair because military courts simply cannot guarantee the due process and transparency that every accused must receive.

Clearly, espionage is a serious crime and evidence presented in a trial must be handled sensitively where necessary. But to despatch Uzair Baloch to his fate in a military court would be to send a signal that military courts are increasingly being seen as the default option when it comes to the most high-profile criminals in the country — a further unwelcome encroachment on and militarisation of the criminal justice system. Baloch is accused of being a politically connected gangster, not someone who has waged an ideological war against the state. The red lines that were promised at the time of the creation of a new system of military courts under the 21st Amendment in January 2014 appear to be deliberately being blurred by vested interests. Instead of looking to wind

down the use of military courts as the two-year sunset clause in the 21st Amendment approaches, sections of the state seem to be trying to normalise their existence. If creating the exception was an egregious violation of the Constitution, normalising the use of military courts would effectively dismantle the criminal justice system. The Supreme Court still has an opportunity to correct a mistake by giving a thoughtful decision on the appeals by individuals convicted by military courts so far.

## IMF programme

WITH budget preparations in full swing, the IMF has issued an assessment that Pakistan will not require a new programme once the present one ends. In the Fund's view, the present government has "completed to a large measure the stabilisation agenda" of the present programme. The remarks underline the very narrow objectives of the Fund programme in Pakistan, and are doubtless going to be seized upon by the government as a vindication of its economic legacy as budget time approaches. But it would be a mistake to hang too heavy a hat on the words of the IMF given the manner in which the stabilisation agenda has been implemented, as well as the large gaps in the implementation of structural reforms.

The way the picture is shaping up, it appears that the government's paralysis on the policy front and its increasing embrace of populist measures in the midst of the growing political crisis that has emerged from the saga of the Panama Papers pose some challenges to the continuation of the reform agenda. Moreover, the failure to actually broaden the tax base or undertake any meaningful structural reforms means that achievements on stabilisation achieved thus far can reverse themselves quickly. Couple this with exports continuing to decline, and any gain on the external account earned largely through the fall in oil prices means vulnerabilities in the external sector remain strong. So far, stability has been earned for the most part by steep cuts in the development budget — reportedly as high as 24pc for the current fiscal year alone. For next year, the cuts are likely to be even larger, given that this is going to be the last full-year budget that the government is about to announce. Meanwhile, defence, debt servicing and current expenditures remain stubbornly stuck to their existing levels.

The macroeconomic picture indeed appears stable at the moment, if we look at nothing beyond the reserves and the fiscal deficit and ignore totally how these have been achieved. But stability is standing on a very narrow pedestal. Given the political uncertainties arising from the Panama Papers crisis, followed by a looming election and debt service outflows set to increase by then, such a pedestal is hardly a sound perch. The Fund itself is taking a limited view because its objectives in the country are quite narrow



but the government must avoid this trap. In all likelihood, Pakistan will not be entering a new IMF programme after the current one ends, preferring to leave that decision to the next government after 2018. But this cycle of temporary stabilisations followed by a new IMF programme with every change of government that Pakistan has been a part of for almost a quarter of a century has to be broken if the government wants to claim any economic legacy for itself.

## Opposition's ToR

IT is a remarkable document. The combined parliamentary opposition has come together to demand an exhaustive judicial inquiry into the assets and wealth of all individuals named in the Panama Papers, but beginning with the prime minister and the first family.

Taken together, the suggested terms of reference by the opposition alliance leave virtually no room for any discrepancy between what assets Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family have accumulated in the last three decades and what they have declared publicly and to the relevant authorities.

What is also gratifying is that the opposition is cognisant of the need to keep parliament front and centre — in demanding that the judicial commission be created by an Act of Parliament, the opposition has issued a welcome reminder of the true centre of a democratic polity.

If Prime Minister Sharif agrees to the opposition's demands, it would be a watershed in the history of politics of the country.

The prime minister would simultaneously be signalling that, as the guardian of the Constitution and the democratic process, he accepts that his conduct must be of a quality above that of the average citizen or public representative and that he is willing to be proven as the most thoroughly vetted politician in the history of the country.

In doing so, the quality of democracy would surely surge in the right direction and others would be forced to follow.

If Mr Sharif were to accept the opposition demands, Pakistan may at long last begin to get the transparent, fair and durable democracy that it deserves.

The PML-N should also note that the opposition has not jointly demanded the prime minister's temporary resignation, a move that would have suggested that the real



opposition motive is the ouster of Mr Sharif and not an improvement in the quality of democracy.

On the opposition's part, while a firm but fair set of demands has been presented by it, the suggested terms of reference for the judicial commission should not be treated as a take-it-or-leave-it offer.

The PML-N has the right, in fact it is its duty, to offer its own assessment of the demands and suggest modifications where necessary.

As long as the fundamental goal is to reconcile the actual income and assets of those named in the Panama Papers with the declared income and assets, the means by which that is to be achieved can be negotiated.

Consider that in crafting their demands, the combined opposition has delivered a sterner test to the government than any level of unilateral street agitation by individual parties may be able to achieve.

The opposition would do well to remember that it was the outrage of the ordinary Pakistani that created the initial pressure on the prime minister and not the self-interested protests of the political class.

Firm but fair — that should be the opposition's guiding principle in the Panama matter.

## Lahore without trees

IN the name of development, the government of Punjab is turning the once beautiful city of Lahore into a concrete jungle.

The point therefore bears repeating in every possible forum: development does not mean more roads and highways.

It means a process that improves the quality of life of the people, starting with the poorest and most vulnerable, including those who do not possess vehicles. More than 2,200 trees have already been felled to make way for the widening of key roads and, hence, for the growing volume of vehicles on the streets.

Now we learn that another road project meant to provide an elevated expressway from Gulberg to the Motorway will result in another 1,715 trees being felled — on top of those

that have already been ‘removed’ in the euphemistic jargon of the project’s environmental impact assessment.

Development of this sort will soon leave the city bereft of its precious greenery. Indeed, those who are opposing the projects until a proper environmental plan has been developed to compensate the city for its loss of tree cover are performing an invaluable civic function.

Perhaps the government of Punjab should learn a thing or two from its counterpart in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The PTI has made the protection and planting of trees a key part of its development agenda and has placed environmental concerns high on its list of priorities. This is not just bucolic regard for the picturesque.

The slash-and-burn model of urban development being followed by the Punjab government, with no regard for the environment or the city’s built heritage, is turning historical Lahore into a nightmare of highways.

The latter are more a barrier for movement — especially for those who don’t use automobiles. In addition, they create more traffic jams in the narrower capillaries of the city’s traffic system and lead to longer travel times for those on short hops.

These projects are not to be treated as favourite playthings; the kind of resources that the provincial government is spending on them can be better utilised to build parks, preserve heritage and provide for the transport needs of the masses in ways that do not call for chopping one’s way through the landscape with an axe.

The city authorities need to grow up and see their job through the eyes of the average city resident, rather than from the windows of their bullet-proof luxury cars.

## Self-censorship & media

THE statistics might show a different picture but the fact is that print and electronic media in Pakistan face many restrictions. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has ranked Pakistan 147 on the 2016 World Press Freedom Index — a ranking that is up by 12 places from last year's score.

And yet, there are restrictions on the freedom of expression, with journalists often trapped between dangerous non-state actors and the state itself.

Seventy-two media professionals have been killed in the country since 2002, according to the Pakistan Press Foundation.

With only four convictions, killers of journalists know they can escape the law.

Listed as “predators of press freedom” by RSF, militant groups, inspired by religion or nationalism, as well as the security apparatus, force their versions on the press — this is especially evident in KP and Balochistan.

Caught on all sides, the media resorts to self-censorship. The situation is worse for district correspondents and freelancers who cannot access support, however inadequate, offered by large media houses.

This is exacerbated by the absence of state protection and institutional support to exercise independence. Hence, the drop in the number of journalists killed — two journalists were murdered in the period May 2015 to May 2016 — is linked to self-censorship, and not to any decrease in violent propensities or better security.

Moreover, the government has yet to formally pursue a number of cases of attacks on journalists, despite blandishments and expressions of concern.

Who murdered Hayatullah Khan in 2006? Why did the judicial commission investigating Saleem Shahzad's murder fail to implicate his killers? Who planned the attack on Hamid Mir?

It seems that the information minister who is preoccupied with the first family's fortunes, has forgotten his government's commitment to media safety — indeed, while media houses must protect their workers, it is primarily the state's duty to ensure that journalists can safely and freely do their job.

Instead of appointing powerless commissions when it comes to assaults on media workers, it must prosecute the attackers to show it values freedom of expression.

## Death in custody

WITH unbridled powers comes the inevitability of abuse. That symbiotic link has been illustrated, gruesomely and assertively, with the death on Tuesday of Aftab Ahmed, senior member of the MQM and Dr Farooq Sattar's aide.

He was being held by the Rangers in preventive detention for 90 days, having been arrested by the law-enforcement agency barely 48 hours earlier.

The Rangers' claim that Ahmed had been brought alive to the hospital suffering from chest pains and had died after 25 minutes of admission stood in stark contrast to the hospital authorities' statement that the patient had "no pulse and no blood pressure" on arrival.

It indicates the extent to which the paramilitary force will distort facts to protect itself from blame, although a 42-year-old detainee dying of a heart attack — that too so soon after being taken into custody — should in itself be cause for investigation.

Shocking images of Ahmed's brutalised body that soon emerged on social media left little doubt as to what the deceased had been subjected to while in custody, a fact that the DG Rangers himself had to later concede.

The issue of extrajudicial killings has tainted the security operation in Karachi ever since it was launched in late 2013, following which the Rangers were given extraordinary powers — later extended to various other law-enforcement agencies — to detain people suspected of terrorism or facilitating terrorist activity.

Indeed, that latitude may itself be part of the problem: Section 11E of the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 which allows for the detention of suspects for up to 90 days, takes away judicial discretion in the matter entirely and stipulates only that the court be informed of each detention.

This has seemingly allowed an assumption of impunity by the Rangers predicated on the pretext of 'restoring law and order', and the MQM in particular has borne the brunt.

Not only is it well known that the court is belatedly informed in the case of many detentions, but there are also frequent allegations of people dying at the Rangers' hands either in fake encounters, or tortured and killed and their bodies being dumped.

Meanwhile, those quietly released have reportedly been terrified into keeping silent about their ordeal. It bears consideration that this is the same force that, even before its powers were enhanced, had been guilty of several violent transgressions against ordinary citizens, most notoriously in the 2011 murder of an unarmed youth in a Karachi park.

Gen Raheel Sharif has rightly ordered an inquiry into Ahmed's death. While the investigation must be transparent and the perpetrators prosecuted, the incident should provide an impetus for the federal government to review the powers vested in the paramilitary force and examine how far they serve the ends of justice.

Notwithstanding the MQM's own questionable tactics while in power, the Rangers' actions cannot be justified on moral or legal grounds.

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## Traffic safety

IF the three major factors contributing to traffic accidents in Karachi are unskilled, unlicensed drivers manoeuvring vehicles, overspeeding, and overtaking without indication, there is some irony in the fact that this is being pointed out by the city's DIG Traffic.

It is his department, and the traffic policemen are under his command. In fact, it is his job to keep traffic flowing smoothly and safely.

That said, it must be acknowledged that the task is one of nightmarish proportions in a city where 3,200 traffic policemen are deputed to regulate the movement of 3.79 million vehicles — a number that increases each day by over 900 vehicles.

These statistics were shared by the DIG Traffic on Tuesday. Considering that many of the vehicles are piloted with scant concern for either the law or personal and public safety, it is not surprising that the number of road accidents — most of them preventable — in the city is nothing short of frightening: some 30,000 accidents are reported in Karachi each year, and five fatal accidents occur every two days.

Moving beyond this chaotic city, however, there are a handful of areas which show that creating order out of chaos is possible, and that even Pakistan's risk-taking driving populace can be tamed.

A prime example is the Lahore-Islamabad Motorway, which has since its inception seen swift action by law enforcement whenever the rules are violated.

Traffic in Lahore used to be chaotic until the induction of traffic wardens drawn from a more qualified HR pool and paid in commensurate terms; their practice of handing out a fine for every violation, and for refusing to budge even if offered bribes, led to an appreciable improvement.

Islamabad, meanwhile, has been successful in overwhelmingly being able to enforce the law on seatbelts and motorcycle helmets. In terms of traffic management, much hinges upon the traffic police's desire and ability to enforce the rules without fear or favour.

True, accidents result also from patchy infrastructure such as dim streetlights, dilapidated roads and absent signals, as well as poor policymaking including the endless expansion of some roads.

And while it is equally important that the public be made aware of safety issues, a great deal can also be gained by reforming and empowering traffic police cadres and enforcing the rules.

The push for that can only come from relatively higher bureaucracy in traffic departments, and not the average policeman on the street.

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## Harassment at rally

THE horrific sexual harassment of PTI women activists by over 50 men after a rally in Lahore on May 1 has drawn attention not only to the deplorable behaviour, but also to the absence of effective security mechanisms at political gatherings.

Women activists were captured on video being physically assaulted by crowds of unruly men, then thrown to the ground and literally mauled as they screamed until they managed to escape by crawling through dangerous barbed wire fencing.

Although criminal cases have been registered against the suspects identified in the footage, Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah said investigations will determine whether the PTI failed in its responsibilities to protect its activists.

Other PML-N lawmakers were quick to express disgust at the rally assaults, at the same time hurling political barbs at PTI chief Imran Khan.

For its part, the PTI pinned the blame on PML-N, saying it deliberately caused the disruption.

This mudslinging is counterproductive because it belittles the overwhelmingly serious issue of sexual harassment.

Earlier PTI rallies in Islamabad and Multan also witnessed incidents where women were attacked. In cases like these, the sexual offenders must be prosecuted to send out the message that such behaviour will not be tolerated.

At the same time, women have a right to political participation and should not be discouraged from coming to rallies.

Indeed, PTI has among the most inclusive rallies in this regard where women freely participate alongside male activists.

However, their harassment gives right-wing parties an excuse to discourage women from participating as they did some time ago when certain politicians publicly cast aspersions on the character of PTI women when they were seen dancing and singing during sit-ins.

Prosecuting sexual offenders will certainly send a clear sign to those who harass women activists.

But more is needed over the longer term. The state must take the lead in ending the anti-women narrative in the country by ensuring the enforcement of pro-women laws and ending socioeconomic discrimination against women.

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## Accountability or politics?

IMMEDIATE and emphatic agreement was always unlikely — the PML-N and the combined opposition were expected to bargain hard over the scope of the judicial commission. But already the sense of purpose is eroding and the focus is slipping on both sides.

What the Panama Papers should principally lead to is fairly clear: serious and meaningful accountability of the country's elected representatives.

What the Panama Papers appears to be becoming, however, is a political tussle between a government that wants to obfuscate and an opposition that appears unsure of its belief in across-the-board accountability.

Consider the PML-N's response to the opposition-proposed terms of reference for a judicial commission that the Supreme Court is yet to indicate it is willing to create.

The PML-N is arguing that the commission should not put Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family front and centre because accountability should be about equal treatment, and everyone named, and to be named, in the Panama Papers should be probed simultaneously.

Effectively, however, the PML-N is trying to create a double standard: Mr Sharif should have all the superior powers and prerogatives that his office bestows on him, but be treated like the average citizen when it comes to suspicions of misconduct.

So, if the prime minister wants, he can twice use the platform of an address to the nation to respond to the Panama Papers — a privilege available to no one else — but for purposes of actual accountability, Mr Sharif and his family should not become the central figures. That is preposterous.

The quality and credibility of democracy is directly and disproportionately affected by the credibility and standing of the prime minister.



A prime minister should not hide behind technicalities and legal minutiae — it is not just his person, but the office itself that is affected by the choices the prime minister makes. The PML-N and Mr Sharif appear to be in denial of some rather basic democratic principles.

Yet, where the PML-N is content to play politics, so too, unhappily, is the opposition. It is an open secret that leading figures of the opposition would struggle to answer the very questions that the opposition wants a judicial commission to put to the prime minister and his family.

A cursory comparison of the asset declarations of elected representatives over the years with the lifestyle they openly live suggests that the vast majority of them have not fully declared their true income and wealth.

By focusing relentlessly on Mr Sharif, then, many in the opposition will be hoping to avoid similar scrutiny eventually.

If discrepancies in the prime minister's record are proved, his personal resignation will be demanded or early elections will become inevitable. That could be enough to distract from the real goal of accountability for all. Politics, as ever, appears to be trumping the will to improve the democratic system.

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## No relief for Thar

MEMBERS of the Senate Committee on Human Rights were justifiably astounded to learn that the Sindh government has spent over Rs10.3bn in Thar over the last three years on programmes to support food, health and general relief, simply because the results are nowhere to be seen for such a large sum of money.

Take the claim that Rs4.2bn worth of wheat was distributed free of cost throughout the district.

The Thar Commission's report that had been issued only a few days earlier, says "there is no evidence that all the poor people who deserve this service have got the wheat".

Additionally, the commission notes the growing role of contractors in the distribution of wheat, and anomalies in the number of recipients.

And then there is this line: “The wheat was distributed without assessment of who is poor and affected and who is not. Even the richest persons got the wheat (sometimes more than the poor).”

They concluded that “in the commission’s view, the wheat distribution was less a relief and more of a scam”.

Similar assessments are there for other areas where the Rs10.3bn has supposedly been spent.

For example, despite Rs2bn spent to increase health coverage, almost 40pc of the population of the district is still not served by any government health machinery, according to the Thar Commission report.

A programme for general relief and rehabilitation was allotted Rs1.8bn over the same period; yet the commission identified “gaps in government relief efforts as prime factors behind the crisis in Tharparkar”.

One such gap is evident in a programme on feed support for livestock, described by the commission as “a waste of government resources”, because the feed is of such poor quality that it “has no impact” and much of it is siphoned off from the bags by the time it reaches the beneficiaries.

The mismatch between resources and outcomes in Thar shows that racketeering and other weaknesses of the state machinery bear a large responsibility for the dismal situation in the district.

And this after the present provincial government has been in power for almost eight years now. The PPP prides itself as the party that empowered the provincial government through the 18th Amendment and the NFC award.

Yet, more than half a decade later, we are still waiting for the party to live up to its own promise of bringing governance closer to the people.

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## Utility stores' predicament

OF all the efforts that the government of Pakistan has been able to put in for the poorest of the poor, there are two programmes that stand out.

One is the Benazir Income Support Programme and the other is the Utility Stores Corporation.

Since the former has the backing of powerful donors, its allocation has increased year after year. But the utility stores have been cut off from funding by the federal government, according to its own management, after some irregularities were discovered in the way that matters were being handled there.

There should be zero tolerance for any kind of irregularity in programmes that are designed to benefit the poorest segments of society, and when the managing director of the corporation admitted that an audit had revealed corruption to the tune of millions of rupees in the organisation, some corrective action obviously became necessary.

But simply cutting the corporation off from all subsidies is a heavy-handed response, particularly since the impact of this move hits the poorest the hardest.

The government would do well to heed the advice of the Senate committee that has called for a resumption of funding for the corporation.

Once again, while there should be no room for any kind of irregularity in the programme, funding should not be a casualty.

A more helpful response would be to initiate an inquiry, perhaps with donor support, into the machinery of the corporation and strengthen its internal controls.

An independent board has helped endow the BISP with some credibility, and perhaps that model can be followed at the corporation too.

It would be a travesty if due to neglect, the Utility Stores Corporation should have to be shut down altogether. The poor who rely on it to meet their daily needs have no alternative, and no voice in government to speak up for their interests.

The government should consider the consequences of its actions, and immediately seek to rectify the problem rather than amputate it altogether.

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## CPEC politics

IT was never going to be easy to preside over a large and disparate enterprise like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and a lot was written and said about the challenges that lie ahead when we embarked on this road. But nobody said it was rocket science.

The politics around CPEC has been taking a turn for the absurd lately, driven in large part by the inept handling of dissent by the government. Just look at the developments of the last few days alone.

On Friday, the prime minister used the occasion of the inauguration ceremony for the Sukkur-Multan stretch of the motorway being built under the CPEC umbrella to lash out at political opponents who are demanding an investigation into the Panama Papers.

He likened them to ‘terrorists’ because in his view, they wished to stall progress in Pakistan.

Only a day earlier, the federal minister for planning refused to speak at a seminar in Peshawar on CPEC because a dissident was present in the audience, holding a stack of documents that he claimed was proof of the government’s failure to honour some of its commitments regarding the project.

The dissident leader had to leave the auditorium with his people before the minister took the podium to deliver an address that centred largely on his so-called Vision 2025, only tangentially related to CPEC.

Then we had the chairman of the Senate committee on CPEC announce that all committee members would go on a three-city tour of China, where reportedly Chinese officials are expected to address the reservations of members from the smaller provinces.

If this is true, it will set new standards in absurdity — why should a group of legislators from a democracy travel to another country to learn the art of consensus-building on local issues?

In all likelihood, the visit will be little more than a pleasure trip, the success of which will hardly be measured in terms of the ideas the committee members return with.

Tantrums, name-calling and junkets are not the tools of consensus-building in any democracy. There has been a visible erosion of maturity in Pakistan’s politics ever since the Panama Papers crisis broke out.

By using the platform provided by a CPEC project to tag all his opponents as ‘terrorists’, the prime minister has gone the extra mile in immature politics.

He has not only cheapened the promise of CPEC, but trivialised the grief of thousands of victims of terrorism by using the term in so casual a manner to brand his political opponents.

And the Senate committee, with their junket, has turned the detailed and deliberative nature of their task into a joke. There is little doubt that CPEC could be a game changer for the country. But by the looks of it, there is one game that it will not change and that is the game of Pakistani politics.

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## Ban on billboards

THE sprawling metropolis of Karachi — home to over 20 million people and three million registered vehicles, all spewing carbon dioxide into the air — is slowly being choked of oxygen.

On Wednesday night, over a dozen 20-year-old trees were chopped down on one of its main thoroughfares.

Although it has yet to be determined who committed the act and to what end, the felling of tens of thousands of trees — the ‘lungs of a city’ — all over Karachi in the past few years is indicative of the authorities’ reckless disregard for the environment and the residents’ quality of life.

Almost always, the impetus for the decimation of tree cover is to create space for commercial billboards multiplying like a virus on the streets.

On Thursday, the Supreme Court ordered the authorities concerned to remove within 15 days all signage installed without permission on public spaces and properties.

The three-member bench stipulated June 30 as the deadline for removal of billboards put up under any licence or lease on the aforementioned areas.

Moreover, it banned any authority from granting permission for installing billboards on any public space or property in Karachi in the intervening period, during which it ordered that amendments to relevant by-laws be finalised to safeguard citizens' rights.

This is not the first time the courts have taken note of an issue that has reduced parts of the city to an unsightly patchwork of commercial imagery which not only offends aesthetics but violates people's right to a safe environment.

After some fatalities were caused by falling billboards a few years ago, the authorities did institute some precautionary measures, but that is all. Multiple billboards create visual clutter and pose a serious traffic hazard while hoardings on pavements are an impediment to pedestrians.

Larger ones not only sometimes obstruct vision, they also cast shadows even on well-lit thoroughfares, thereby posing a risk to both drivers and pedestrians.

The courts' directives have been repeatedly ignored because of sheer greed on the part of the city's 'custodians'.

The sale of outdoor advertising is an enormously lucrative business for officials from various land authorities who have not desisted from commercialising even green belts and footpaths that, by virtue of being amenities, cannot by law be commercialised.

What will it take for the state to realise that it cannot be allowed to barter away the citizens' rights in the obscene pursuit of material gain?

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## Shocking jirga verdict

NOTORIOUS for abusing the concept of justice through their illegal verdicts, the proliferation of jirgas is of grave concern.

This fact was underscored after the killing last week of 16-year-old Ambreen Riasat, who had helped a school-friend elope. Her gruesome murder was ordered by a 15-member jirga in Abbottabad, one of hundreds of illegal judicial councils in the country that often sanction summary ‘punishments’ to legitimise anti-women practices.

Soon after the murder, chilling images of a charred, unrecognisable corpse fastened to the backseat of a van began circulating on social media.

Subsequently, 13 jirga members, and the victim’s mother — forbidden by jirga members from going to the police — were arrested.

The case is now with the anti-terrorism court. While in this case the police intervened, in many other such instances, the law enforcers fail to apprehend the offenders, often in cahoots with the tribal elders.

Their lack of vigilance and failure to obtain warrants beforehand allow parallel judicial systems to go unchecked.

Jirgas have been discouraged, even banned, and the Supreme Court has termed them unconstitutional. Yet, the Abbottabad murder reminds us that state judicial processes are inaccessible and slow and communities rely on parallel justice systems.

Why is the government not focusing on implementing the law and reinforcing the writ of the state? Jirgas must be prohibited from giving unconstitutional verdicts and the abuse of women should be criminalised.

Also, serving parliamentarians presiding over jirgas must be taken to task and made to face the law.

Some years ago, the apex court under former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry had ordered the arrest of a federal minister Mir Hazar Khan Bijarani and other jirga members, who had offered five minor girls as compensation in a murder case.

But such action against erring lawmakers must be consistent and across the board. Meanwhile, the government must condemn the Abbottabad murder and similar incidents, and punish the offenders; otherwise, the menace of these arbitrators of justice will continue to plague society.

## Sadiq Khan's victory

JUST about two out of every 100 people in London are of Pakistani origin. It is remarkable then that the city threw up for its 2016 mayoral race two men with distinct Pakistani linkages. 'Pakistan' echoed in the air as the campaign took on various hues culminating in a victory for Sadiq Khan. There is much to applaud and be proud of for those who sided with Mr Khan, who hails from a modest background and has been credited with running a clean campaign as compared to the one run by his rival Zac Goldsmith, a friend and former brother-in-law of PTI chief Imran Khan. Mr Goldsmith was accused by many of running a vilification drive in his attempt to deny the Labour Party a win. Mr Khan's victory consequently has been greeted with joy and relief by those in favour of diversity of opinion and people; it has been hailed as a proud feat — a sign of 'tabdeeli' or change.

It is indeed a moment to rejoice and it should not be spoiled by those who sound a cautious note. In fact, it should be pointed out to them that while Pakistanis may have some cause for congratulating each other on Sadiq Khan's victory, they can also, if they want, see his triumph as a model to follow in their own part of the world. It is, after all, an example born of an unshakeable belief and commitment that has sustained long years of struggle. London and Mr Khan must continue to inspire us. They are placed in a very sensitive position. The local reactions to the new mayor are going to have a profound bearing on the politics of the city, of the UK as a whole, and of the world too. There may be a strong backlash from the narrow-minded which the Khan camp must be ready to face. Hopefully, it is well equipped to face the challenge, urged on by its past record of succeeding against great odds.

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## Islamabad airport bungling

IN some ways, Pakistan can be considered the gift that just keeps on giving; the scale of blunders continues to grow, and little seems to be learned. The New Islamabad International Airport, the foundation stone of which was laid nearly a decade ago during the Musharraf regime, is after a series of delays and cost overruns, nearing completion — Dec 25, 2016, is the date being given by the Civil Aviation Authority. Shockingly, however, it is only at this late stage that a scandalous flaw in design has come to light. It has two parallel runways, which would allow aircraft to land or take off at the same time, which in turn would improve airport efficiency. But, these runways have been constructed at a distance of 200 metres from each other, while the standard set to allow concurrent landings and take-offs is one kilometre. In short, as the CAA director general informed the Public Accounts Committee in Islamabad on Thursday, it will not be possible for the new airport to handle concurrent aircraft movement. If the head of the CAA admits that the design flaw should have been corrected at the initial stage but was overlooked, it would have taken nothing short of effrontery to do so.

While this may indeed be a “criminal error”, as a PAC member termed it, the tale of monumental ineptitude does not end here. According to the CAA’s own audit report, presented to the PAC the same day, none of the 12 engineering management consultants hired for the airport project hold engineering degrees. Instead, they possess a bewildering galaxy of irrelevant certificates: homeopathy, business administration, technology — and some hold only basic Bachelor’s degrees. Were this not bad enough, according to the CAA audit report, the unsatisfactory performance of these gentlemen was in part responsible for the Rs19.39 billion cost overrun of the airport project, in addition to “different packages [being] awarded without due consideration [and] lack of coordination in execution of [the] package”.

Are these failings a case of inefficiency or corruption? Either way, the result is disgraceful and the matter requires being looked into. It is difficult to believe that such glaring inconsistencies managed to be overlooked by those who are required to execute a project of this scale — and, indeed, by the three successive governments under whose oversight the construction of the new Islamabad airport is now approaching completion. The project was earlier mired in controversy when its physical location became a matter of debate, with another location altogether coming under consideration. Now mismanagement and the wastage of funds have joined the list of talking points. The CAA needs to come up with a convincing explanation, and the parties responsible for such colossal blunders need to be identified and, if necessary, prosecuted. Bungling on such a large scale cannot be overlooked.

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## Asim Hussain indicted

WITH the indictment of Asim Hussain and his associates by an accountability court, matters are finally where they belonged all along: in a court of law. The former federal minister for petroleum was picked up last August on suspicions of involvement in terror financing. But it turns out evidence to support that suspicion was never found — it certainly does not feature anywhere in the indictment, nor in the reference sent by NAB to the accountability court earlier. Instead, after a wide-ranging inquiry that examined detailed financial information relating to him and to his associates, and with charges ranging from ‘China cutting’ to preferential treatment in gas allocations, the former minister has finally been indicted primarily for his decisions on gas allocations, in which the fertiliser sector was left at a disadvantage. Other charges point towards land acquisition and the financial dealings of his hospital in Karachi. It is now for the court to decide how much merit there is to the charges against him.

In the meantime, another important question must not be allowed to fall by the wayside. What happened to the suspicions of terror financing? It was under this charge that Asim Hussain was originally detained, and it was upon this charge that an extraordinary volume of evidence was accumulated, sometimes through tactics so aggressive they set a precedent for any terror-financing investigation. Now if we are to understand that nothing was found to substantiate those suspicions, it is necessary to ask what gave rise to them in the first place. What are the facts upon which such suspicions were based? The powers that the Sindh Rangers used to detain the former minister were created specifically to fight terrorism. But in the present case, those powers have been used to accumulate material to indict a group of individuals on charges that have nothing at all to do with terrorism. While the court decides the case, the Rangers should be asked to now make public the material that served as grounds for the original suspicion of terror financing. The case also highlights the extraordinary powers of detention that have been created for fighting terrorism, and the need for extreme prudence when utilising them. Perhaps the law needs some safeguards against the possible misuse of these powers by the law enforcers especially when it comes to investigating matters other than terrorism, in order to prevent any dilution of the fight against militancy.

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## Panama and neglected priorities

LOST in the cacophony of politics over the Panama Papers and other political fights in the country is a simple imperative: governance.

While Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif dashes across the country to urgently inaugurate various development projects, there are several other fundamentals that appear to be going unattended.

Foremost among those other neglected priorities — if only because of the time frame — is the upcoming federal budget.

In a matter of weeks, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar is set to make the fourth budget speech of the present government, but, despite the latter's insistent pledges that it holds the finances of the state and economy front and centre, there has been virtually no debate about what measures ought to be taken and which economic decisions could help put this country on a more stable growth path.

It already appears to be an eternity away when the incoming PML-N government declared that development, education and health expenditures would be priorities. Few now believe its initial promises.

Matters have also moved on politically. What was acceptable in 2013 has become that much less acceptable in 2016.

Several sections of the electorate have indicated that politics cannot be business as usual — past political practices, especially in terms of the wealth of elected representatives and campaign expenditures, need to be rationalised.

While it is true that the current leadership needs to progressively be made more accountable and transparent, the longer-term goal ought to be about lowering the barriers of entry to politics.

In today's Pakistan, there are only two kinds of candidates who can contest elections: independently wealthy individuals or less-well-off candidates who ingratiate themselves with the party leadership.

A political system with virtually insurmountable barriers to entry — even if those inside the system are deemed clean and accountable — impairs the quality of democracy the country can have.

Unhappily, democratic debate inside Pakistan far too often appears to be a private competition between political parties. In truth, democracy ought to be about the people and their evolving choices.

The PML-N is right in arguing it has a mandate from the people. But legitimacy can surely never be based on past events alone.

The Panama Papers have raised new questions about the prime minister's political credibility — questions based on thus far unproven allegations. The longer those questions go unanswered, the more the government's legitimacy will be eroded.

It is simply no longer enough for the government to rely on the legitimacy of the 2013 general election to defy its critics. It also ought no longer to be enough to simply fight politics with politics.

The transition to democracy must surely be about improving the quality of democracy further.

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## **NAB raid**

THE facts are unsurprising — even if the sums are eye-watering. The lessons are many and yet to be fully revealed.

Balochistan, a province that is routinely at the bottom of nationwide socioeconomic rankings and, historically, perceived to be at the top of corruption rankings, is back in the news for all the wrong reasons. This time the matter is financial.

The finance secretary of Balochistan, Mushtaq Raisani, a man so skilled at his job and considered invaluable by his political bosses that he managed to remain in the same post since the previous government, is accused of hiding in his home several hundred million rupees in cash.

Mr Raisani, now under arrest by the National Accountability Bureau, or his representatives have not been heard from in public since, but the piles of cash allegedly recovered from his house are so huge as to be virtually impossible to have been staged.

Perhaps what is most alarming — and indicative of the state of governance in Balochistan — is that even now it is far from clear if Mr Raisani will eventually be convicted and serve a lengthy prison sentence.

Worse, the problem of corruption has already been exposed to extend beyond just bureaucrats — top military officials in the province in recent years have recently been punished by the army high command for various, though still publicly unknown, financial misdeeds.

The political leadership of the province is already deeply tainted, with almost all parties accused of and perceived to be involved in some manner of corruption or the other. It is possible, however, that the high-profile recent cases are the start of a change of culture in leadership in the province.

Perhaps a signal is being sent — likely from the military leadership — that a business-as-usual approach will not be tolerated in the province anymore.

For the long-suffering people of Balochistan, an institutional attack against corruption — whichever quarters it originates from — could mean that governance in the province is finally being taken seriously as a priority.

Yet, it is the ad hoc approach that is already of concern. As finance secretary, Mr Raisani made for an obvious primary target — without the finance ministry's approval, large sums of money cannot be moved around by state officials. But corruption is as much about institutional flaws as it is about individuals.

The world over, the standard practice of good governance is to institute reforms when rot is discovered. Simply sidelining those who have fallen out of favour will change little.

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## Turkish PM's exit

BY resigning as prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu joins two other heavyweights — former president Abdullah Gul and deputy prime minister Bulent Arinc — who fell out with Recep Tayyip Erdogan over some of the Turkish president's most controversial policies.

Mr Davutoglu will formally step down after the ruling AKP's May 22 meeting, but he has made it clear he will not be party to the ongoing anti-Erdogan campaign.

Nevertheless, the outcome of Thursday's meeting with the president confirmed that a break had become inevitable.

There are many reasons why Mr Davutoglu has decided to quit, but the main issue is Mr Erdogan's vaulting ambitions, his determination to change the constitution by making it presidential and the display of the authoritarian streak in him as seen in his policies towards the media and judiciary.

To Mr Davutoglu's embarrassment, the president felt annoyed over the visa-immigrant deal with Europe. Mr Erdogan felt he was bypassed by the prime minister and made his annoyance clear in a tough speech in Istanbul last week, saying Turkey would not accept EU policies on migrants and would go its way.

The issue is Mr Erdogan's firm resolve to accumulate more powers by amending the constitution to make it presidential.

Obviously, he suffers no opposition within government and would like a pliant prime minister.

The constitution can be amended by a three-fifths majority in parliament or through a referendum, which too requires support from two-thirds of MPs. He has neither, the only option being support from other parties, an unlikely phenomenon given his unpopularity with the opposition.

Nevertheless, he is apparently committed to democracy, and observers say he could call another general election to gain the required number of seats for his AKP.

The split within the ruling party as indicated by Mr Davutoglu's exit is unfortunate at a time when Turkey needs stability, given the Syrian crisis, acts of terror on Turkish soil and the crisis in relations with Europe when the EU itself is divided over the migrant crisis.

## Security of schools and colleges

THERE are finally signs that the state may be adopting a sensible approach to protecting educational institutes in the country.

Indeed, there has been little let-up in the fear generated by the grotesque attacks on the Army Public School in Peshawar in 2014 and the Bacha Khan University in Charsadda earlier this year.

But on Saturday, the Sindh Rangers launched a software application for the safety of schools and colleges in Karachi, selecting 15 places, in the initial stage, for the operation and testing of the immediate response system.

Under this project, registered institutions will be provided a code enabling them to send a text message to the security system and the mobile phones of Rangers officials up to the rank of commanders.

The intention is to link up the system with the police station and Rangers checkpoints in the area concerned, with the city being divided into 60 sections with a Rangers company being made responsible for security.

The scale of the task is not small: there are some 15,000 educational institutions in Karachi.

Even though the military is winding down operations in the tribal areas and the fight against terrorism is being taken to other parts of the country, the fact is that the threat of militancy is far from over. And educational institutes, as the militants have reminded us, remain targets because they are perceived as promoting the state's ideology.

This point was brought home even before the APS attack when militants would blow up girls' schools in the north of the country. Even after the Peshawar massacre and the consensus on the National Action Plan, the state blundered in crafting its response.

Educational institutions were told to beef up their security and add to their defence detail armed guards, raised boundary walls installed with razor-wire, and so on.

The question of where the resources would come from was not deliberated over.

Moreover, some rather odd ideas were mooted, even temporarily implemented in some places with disastrous results, such as allowing staff and students to bear arms. Or students were subjected to poorly planned re-enactments of militants' attacks.



In this context, the experiment in Karachi is worth conducting. The hope is that emergency response times can be improved and coordination between law enforcers and educational institutions — indeed among the various branches of the law-enforcement authorities themselves — tightened.

There will no doubt be some hiccups initially, but these can be reviewed to close the loopholes.

A system such as this, if in effective working order, could be replicated by law-enforcement authorities across the country.

The geotagging of police vehicles with a central coordinating command centre, for example, would improve response efficiency. In the next few weeks, institutions across the country will begin their long summer break. That provides the time and the impetus to fine-tune and perfect such protective systems.

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## Privatisation continues

IN the approaching twilight of its term, the government is reportedly trying to resume the push towards privatisation.

But a lurking danger now is that the government may have given contradictory assurances to various stakeholders in the process.

Last month, opposition members in parliament were assured that there would be no privatisation of PIA, for instance, and that the airline's management would remain with the government.

In return, the opposition extended its support for the bill to transform the legal status of PIA.

But only a month before the joint sitting of parliament that passed the conversion bill, the government had assured the IMF that “we remain committed to move ahead with seeking strategic private-sector participation in PIA”. In return for that assurance they obtained the release of the tranche.



Now comes the time to deliver on both promises, ie to keep PIA management in government hands while seeking ‘strategic private-sector participation’ in the airline. It is anybody’s guess what game plan Finance Minister Ishaq Dar has for this feat. His speech before the joint sitting of parliament on April 11 was the moment he ought to have outlined the path forward that he has in mind. But there was nothing in his remarks to indicate how he intends to move ahead.

The forthcoming budget presents him with another opportunity to tell us what the game plan is, and if he once again fails then the conclusion will be that he has none and is only appeasing every camp in order to buy more time and keep the dollars flowing from successive IMF tranches.

The same is true with the commitments given regarding Pakistan Steel Mills, where the government had committed to wait until May 15 for a response from the Sindh government on whether or not it wishes to take control of the beleaguered enterprise.

Failing an affirmative response, the government committed to the Fund that it would proceed with the approval of the transaction structure for privatisation.

But now we hear that it has decided to wait till June 10 for an answer. Clearly, the original deadline meant little.

Given that the government has only one full fiscal year left in its term, the timeline for privatisation appears more and more unrealistic. It is up to the finance minister to dispel the growing scepticism.

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## Rights activist killed

THE authorities are never averse to trotting out statistics that purport to illustrate the success of the ongoing operation to rid Karachi of criminal/terrorist elements.

The murder of rights activist and blogger Khurram Zaki on Saturday night exposes the hollowness of those claims.

It was a wearily familiar *modus operandi*: armed men on motorbikes targeted the activist as he sat with a couple of friends at a roadside café in North Karachi.

He died almost immediately in the hail of bullets while his companions were wounded, one of them critically.

On Sunday afternoon, a large number of Khurram Zaki's friends and family, as well as members of civil society — particularly those belonging to Shia organisations — took his coffin to a brief protest sit-in before the Sindh chief minister's house.

The FIR, registered under sections of the Pakistan Penal Code pertaining to murder and abetment as well as Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act, names two clerics, Lal Masjid's Abdul Aziz and the leader of the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat's Karachi chapter Aurangzeb Farooqui, as the perpetrators.

While it may be premature to definitively hold any specific individuals responsible for the attack, it is clear that Pakistan, in particular Karachi, remains a dangerous place for anyone speaking out against religious extremism or in propagation of the values of tolerance and inclusiveness.

Zaki was known to be a fearless and passionate defender of religious freedom, and he did not mince his words against those he perceived as primary actors in the country's drift towards radicalism.

His death, coming almost exactly a year after the murder of the well-known rights activist, Sabeen Mahmud, is disturbing evidence of the enormity of the task that lies before this society.

No number of 'intelligence-based operations' will break this vicious cycle of bloodletting unless the very seeds of intolerance are rendered sterile. That requires a level of introspection that is ruthless in its thoroughness. Do we as a society have the stomach for it?

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## New Panama names

MORE names have been added to the registry of notoriety that has become the Panama Papers and once again a section of Pakistan's wealthy class is facing uncomfortable questions. Yet, is action — where allowed and required under the law — imminent?

Unhappily, aside from facing a media trial, the individuals named in the Panama Papers do not appear likely to face any immediate legal jeopardy or even a thorough investigation of their declared income and wealth.

That situation is all the more astonishing given the public anger that has steadily grown since the Panama Papers first ensnared the political and moneyed class of the country.

Pakistan, it appears, is a country where justified and sustained public anger does not lead to the people's elected representatives taking the necessary steps to address real and ongoing problems that the people want addressed.

Part of the problem is clearly Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the PML-N. The ruling party has responded fiercely to the allegations against the first family, but in a thoroughly inappropriate political manner.

Rather than acting immediately and incontrovertibly to reconcile the disclosures in the Panama Papers with the declared income and assets of the first family, the N-League has turned to a combination of patronage politics and delaying tactics to shield the Sharifs.

The fundamental problem with the PML-N's stance is that while it is protecting its prerogative to legislate and make new laws, it is unwilling to accept that Prime Minister Sharif should, therefore, be the first to be properly and fully vetted by an independent commission.

In essence, Mr Sharif is arguing that as elected leader of the country he has significant privileges, but not commensurate responsibilities. That is a transparently undemocratic position to take.

Yet, try as it might and much as it may wish, the PML-N's political problems are not likely to dissipate. It is a measure of the party's reluctance to engage in true democratic behaviour that a decision by the prime minister to attend parliament later this week will likely be spun as a victory by the party.

In truth, what the Panama Papers have revealed is more than a problem that can be addressed by a one-time judicial commission, no matter how empowered, independent and thorough it may be in its workings.

It is an institutional failing across the board that has led to a situation where few are surprised by the revelations but little can be done to investigate and hold accountable the country's wealthy individuals, especially among the political class.

Statutory authorities such as the FBR and NAB are little more than a jumble of alphabets when they cannot act independently and meaningfully to detect and punish defrauding of the national exchequer.

The Panama Papers could yet become a moment of reset for the country's institutions — but will the political class allow that to happen?

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## OPP director's murder

THE lackadaisical progress on the investigation into Perween Rahman's murder offers several insights into why the well-known social activist and development expert died at all.

It is only now, three years later, that Raheem Swati, the prime suspect, has been arrested.

The relentless legal campaign fought by Rahman's family and friends to compel the police to undertake a thorough and credible investigation into her death and the close interest evinced by a responsive apex court in the matter, played a large role in whatever progress has been made until now.

Rahman was shot dead on March 13, 2013, while on her way home from her work as director of the Orangi Pilot Project Research and Training Institute.

The very next day, the police announced with much fanfare that the suspected assassin, Qari Bilal, had been killed in an 'encounter'. That claim, coming so quickly on the heels of the crime, was in itself reason to suspect that the murder was being conveniently dismissed as an open-and-shut case.

The judicial commission ordered by the apex court in June 2014 exposed the police's deliberate misrepresentation of facts and efforts at a cover-up. Those familiar with the environment in which Rahman worked were not surprised.

A criminalised politics, in which corrupt law-enforcement agencies play an integral part, has long been a feature of Karachi.

This teeming metropolis of 20 million continues to expand haphazardly, which places enormous pressure on its resources — foremost among them land and water. That in turn has given rise to formidable mafias whose fortunes are built on the plunder of the city's resources which they sell to the highest bidder.

Perween Rahman was a passionate advocate for the collective right of all Karachiites to basic services such as affordable housing and water supply; in the process, she had made some very powerful enemies.

Aside from her extensive research into the theft of water through illegal hydrants in the city, she was documenting the many villages in Karachi which, in the absence of legal title, are often the first to fall prey to land-grabbers. From what is so far known, Raheem Swati is but a low-level player in a high-stakes enterprise.

Only an investigation led by officials with an unimpeachable record would be able, and willing, to connect all the dots and unearth the real culprits behind a crime that robbed this country of one of its brightest lights.

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## Campus moral police

ONCE again, a university has issued an official notification placing restrictions on the dress that students can wear on campus.

It has justified this as an effort “to promote a positive image” of the university. The institute in question is the National Textile University in Faisalabad, and the restrictions that are spelled out in the notification are absurd considering the close connection between the textile and fashion industries in Pakistan.

For example, “stylish sunglasses” and designer caps will no longer be allowed on campus. Banned also are “t-shirts or any clothes carrying emblems, letters, art of slogans and pictures printed on them”.

Simply by issuing this notification, the university management — led by its registrar — has exposed itself to mockery.

Arguing that such codes are required to ensure that the students' dress code is "in accordance with the values enshrined in the divine code and in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan" takes the fun out of the joke, but nothing more.

It is not the job of the registrar of any university, let alone one dedicated to the study of textiles, to enforce a dress code on its students. It is shameful to see the management backing this absurd action and invoking divinity and the country's Constitution in the process.

Reportedly, the notification has generated protests from amongst the student body, which is entirely appropriate, and the parents of the protesting students ought to support them.

Increasingly, universities across Pakistan are resorting to such tactics — only recently NUST issued a similar code and started fining students for violations — and the trend shows that university administrations are more interested in the moral policing of their campuses than in ensuring excellence in the standard of education.

If the administrations of these institutions are truly concerned about their image, they would clearly lay out and enforce policies against gender discrimination and sexual harassment on their campuses first. Let the parents worry about what the students are wearing.

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## Military court sentences

THREE more individuals sentenced to death by military courts have had their sentences stayed by the Supreme Court while the appeals are to be heard.

The convicts and their families have raised a disturbingly familiar set of objections: the accused were not allowed to pick their own lawyers at the trial stage; the defence was not allowed access to the state's evidence against them; and the families only learned of the sentences via press releases.

The latest appeals add to the dozen cases already before the Supreme Court, and for now, there is no indication which way the court is leaning — the stay of execution does not suggest innocence in the eyes of the court, merely that the sentence is irreversible and therefore the appeals process must be completed first.

What is clear is that military courts by their very design cannot ensure due process or a fair trial and that only the Supreme Court stands in the way of the total annihilation of constitutional safeguards of fundamental rights.

Given that the Supreme Court itself sanctified the creation of military courts for terrorism offences under the 21st Amendment, the other tier in the appeals process was not expected to produce favourable results for those seeking enforcement of their rights — the Peshawar High Court, absent any clarification by the Supreme Court about the grounds of a successful appeal, has already turned down most requests to overturn sentences handed down at the trial stage in the military courts.

Nor has the PHC generally seen fit to convert death sentences to lesser punishments. The real concern, then, is that the Supreme Court has not shown any urgency in dealing with the appeals of military court convicts.

In January the sunset clause in the 21st Amendment will mean that, barring an extension by parliament, military courts will cease to exist. It is possible that the edifice of military courts could be dismantled before the first batch of appeals is decided.

A question that is not before the Supreme Court, but ought to be asked of those who pushed for and sanctioned military courts is whether convicting 76 individuals in 18 months has been worth the price of distorting the Constitution and sabotaging the justice system in the country.

The alternative — reforming the criminal justice system — may have been more difficult and involved coordinating across many institutions and tiers of government, but such a project could surely have been achieved in two years, if the institutional will had been found. What the country is left with, instead, is a still-broken criminal justice system and military courts that are soon to expire and that will leave in their wake a host of legal complications to resolve in the appeals stage.

It truly appears to be a case of a terrible original idea compounded by predictable complications.

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## Ali Gilani's rescue

SELDOM is the outcome of a counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan of such direct significance to those on this side of the border. However, a joint Afghan-US raid on Tuesday in Paktika province led to Pakistan's most high-profile kidnap victim, Ali Gilani, being rescued after three years in captivity.

The son of former prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani had been abducted by gunmen from an election rally in Multan on May 9, 2013, in an attack that killed his secretary and bodyguard.

According to US officials, the commando raid on Tuesday targeted an Al Qaeda compound in response to intelligence about terrorist activity in the area.

It seems that seven officials of the Fata Development Authority, who had recently been kidnapped from South Waziristan, were also recovered in the same operation. Indications are that the captives were being held by an Al Qaeda-affiliated group, possibly the Pakistani Taliban.

As in the case of Shahbaz Taseer, who was recovered two months ago from Kuchlak in Balochistan after four and a half years of being kidnapped, Ali Gilani's safe return to his family has sparked much jubilation in the country.

As in the earlier instance, details about his captivity or rescue may never come to light. For instance, it is still unclear whether the US-Afghan forces had any idea they were on a rescue mission or whether they stumbled upon the captives in a stroke of good fortune; or for that matter, whether intelligence originating from Pakistan played any role at all in the operation.

Regardless of the fine print, the happy outcome has generated a fair amount of goodwill all around and could offer an opportunity to improve bilateral ties and cooperation between the countries' security forces.

The reality is that both Pakistan and Afghanistan have a militancy problem; the two also share a border that is already difficult to monitor in many places. That is a boon for terrorist/criminal networks that slip easily back and forth evading capture.

Moreover, deadly attacks carried out in Afghanistan by militants allegedly finding shelter in Pakistan have repeatedly soured the relationship between the two countries, often at crucial times.



The importance of intelligence-sharing by the two countries cannot be overstated. In the aftermath of this episode, one must also spare a thought for the less high-profile victims of kidnapping and enforced disappearances whose stories remain untold, but who are nevertheless equally precious to their families.

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## Bangladesh execution

WITH Wednesday's hanging of Motiur Rahman Nizami, the number of prominent opposition leaders executed in Bangladesh has risen to five, four of them belonging to the Jamaat-i-Islami and the fifth one to the main opposition Bangladesh National Party headed by former prime minister Khaleda Zia.

Both the JI chief and BNP leader Salahuddin Chowdhury, who was hanged last year, were former legislators, the latter having been elected six times from Chittagong.

Astonishing as it sounds, Chowdhury was in Karachi in 1971 when the civil war was going on.

The trials were termed flawed by international rights agencies, which said the legal process was far below acceptable international standards.

Yet Prime Minister Hasina Wajed seems indifferent to the criticism of her policies, which smack of political persecution and appear odd at a time when a wave of extremist violence has rocked Bangladesh.

The militant Islamic State group has either secured a foothold in the country or extremists are using its nomenclature to target bloggers, members of minority communities and foreigners.

What has added to the extremists' power to strike is the Awami League government's weak response to the terror wave.

Observers of the Bangladesh scene say the government has tried to downplay the crisis, and investigations into the terrorist attacks have been half-hearted for political reasons.

The government denies the involvement of IS or Al Qaeda in acts of terror, has outlawed some militant groups and insists that the violence is home-grown, but the thrust of its

propaganda has tried to establish a link between the BNP-JI alliance and IS and Al Qaeda.

It is time Ms Wajed tackled the day's problems, which are many and pressing. She should know that her country is party to the 1974 tripartite agreement at New Delhi, when Bangladesh agreed not to proceed with any trials because its founder and her father, Mujibur Rahman, had decided to "forget the past and make a fresh start".

Instead, she should work for national reconciliation and focus on her country's economic development.

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## PM's opportunity in parliament

PRIME MINISTER Nawaz Sharif will once again have an opportunity to do right by the nation and the office he occupies and to explain frankly and fully the circumstances surrounding his family's name appearing in the Panama Papers.

On Monday, postponed from today, the only three-time prime minister of Pakistan will have perhaps a final opportunity to make democratic amends in the highest house of democracy in the land, the National Assembly.

But does Mr Sharif appreciate the political, systemic and democratic stakes of his address?

A crisis that originates in the first family's decision to indulge in secretive financial dealings can only be ended by the family patriarch's truthfulness and frankness about the Sharif family's scrupulous and historical adherence to the law of the land where the income has been earned and the wealth located.

Prime Minister Sharif does not at least lack for inspiration and examples to follow internationally. Elected democrats in various countries have found themselves named in the Panama Papers — and several have responded appropriately, even if only under pressure.

Embattled British Prime Minister David Cameron, for example, at first offered various and contradictory explanations for his father's name appearing in the Panama Papers, but

then had to appear in parliament and give a detailed explanation for what happened and why.

Subsequently, Mr Cameron has made targeting corruption and financial reform a legislative goal of his government.

Efforts to establish personal probity and effect systemic reforms are a democratic hallmark.

Where that was not possible, as in the case of former Iceland prime minister Sigmundur Gunnlaugsson, the honourable decision to resign was made quickly, even if under public and political pressure. When the legitimacy of a democracy is in danger, true democrats must act to save the system before themselves.

Perhaps the most damning detail in the case of Prime Minister Sharif and his family since the Panama Papers were first made public is that the prime minister has not made a single declaration that has been definitively backed up by documentary evidence to support his family's position.

A challenge to the personal credibility of the prime minister has grown into a full-blown political crisis largely because of the inadequate responses of the prime minister himself and the bitter partisan tone adopted by his party.

Prime Minister Sharif will then have an opportunity to make amends and reset both the tone and substance of the debate surrounding his family's wealth.

The prime minister should not only accept that accountability must begin with him, but demonstrably prove that he is willing to accept the deepest scrutiny of his family's declarations of income and wealth.

For its part, the opposition should give the prime minister the opportunity to re-establish his credibility and legitimacy. The country can neither afford a tainted prime minister nor another endless political crisis.

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## Exit controls

WHAT are we to make of the report filed by the FIA that when one of its officials visited the residence of retired Gen Pervez Musharraf, with the intention of bringing him before the court as ordered, he discovered that the former dictator was not there, and immigration records showed he had left the country?

The level of ‘innocence’ exhibited evokes laughter. Mr Musharraf’s exit from the country was high drama when it happened, and the Exit Control List from which his name was removed is managed by the FIA, as well as the immigration counters through which he passed.

The court had asked the FIA to produce Mr Musharraf in court a month ago, and this was the response they filed, rather than mounting an effort to apprehend him abroad.

The court has rightly declared Mr Musharraf a proclaimed offender in the case following the report.

Meanwhile, two former prime ministers remain on the ECL, despite the fact that the wrongdoing of which they stand accused is of an order of magnitude less than that of the treason charges Mr Musharraf is facing. Yousuf Raza Gilani and Raja Pervez Ashraf were placed on the ECL in 2013 and remain on the list to this day.

The irony is difficult to miss. Civilian rulers when accused of wrongdoing have to face the consequences for years, whereas military rulers, even when accused of some of the most serious crimes in the country, can leave easily and never appear before the court to face the charges.

The bizarre statement by the FIA that it sent a person to Mr Musharraf’s home where he was told that the former president was not in simply illustrates the pathetic helplessness of our civilian institutions when they try to deliver justice in a case involving an ex-military man.

It is an open secret that the government was pressured into removing Pervez Musharraf’s name from the ECL, following which he left the country in full glare of the media.

Yet two former prime ministers must continue to face the prospects of court proceedings and a ban on travel abroad due to charges of committing irregularities in appointments to government jobs or the awarding of government contracts, alleged crimes that cannot be equated with the graver charge of treason.

The FIA needs to stop acting innocent, and the interior ministry should play a fairer game in dealing with public figures.

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## Cricket coach

THE long-winded debate over the Pakistan cricket team's new head coach has finally been settled with the appointment of South African Mickey Arthur.

However, there is still debate over Mr Arthur's ability to settle into what is described as the thorniest of all assignments, given the many controversies of Pakistan cricket.

To begin with, the head coach will be filling the shoes of Waqar Younis whose bookish methods of coaching didn't help the team as evident in the string of defeats suffered during the past year and a half.

The players will be anticipating a more rational, friendlier approach ahead of a hectic season in the next 12 months.

Needless to say, the coach, too, will be looking to strike a chord. That said, he is reputed to be bit of an egoist himself and overbearing at times — a trait that led to his sacking as Australia's coach three years ago.

Indiscipline is another contentious issue that he is likely to grapple with. In the wake of the recent row, triggered by the ouster of the talented yet erratic opener Ahmed Shehzad and middle-order batsman Umar Akmal from the England tour camp, Mr Arthur has already aired his views about having little tolerance for selfish, undisciplined players.

That could send mixed signals to the Pakistanis who are accustomed to getting away with the worst offences, thanks to the inconsistent policies of the team management and PCB's chaotic administration.

More importantly, he will be mindful of the failed campaigns of previous foreign coaches with the national team — from late Bob Woolmer to compatriot Richard Pybus, Australian Geoff Lawson and Dav Whatmore — men with competent coaching skills. But they only succeeded in producing mixed results.

Only time will tell whether or not Mickey Arthur will prove the messiah Pakistan cricket has been waiting for.

## CASA moves ahead

AFTER decades of discussion, a landmark power transmission project has finally taken the first step towards realisation. In a slightly over-the-top ceremony, the heads of four states that are party to the CASA 1000 project put their hands together to turn the first bolts on the first tower on which will hang a transmission line that will carry 1000MW of electricity from Kyrgyzstan via Tajikistan and Afghanistan to Pakistan. The four 'stans' will connect Central and South Asia in the first regional power-sharing arrangement of this sort, involving so many partners. Regional power transmission lines have enormous potential, and CASA is best viewed as the first step towards a larger future where transmission lines run from Iran, Turkmenistan, Russia and China towards Pakistan and help create a regional market for power. The vision is marvellous and holds the promise of creating a powerful convergence of interests of Asian neighbours, binding them together in a mutually beneficial arrangement, and helping lift Pakistan out of its perennial and long-standing power deficits.

But there are a few problems standing in the way which will take much political will to settle if the vision is to advance towards its full promise. One problem is the growing need to reform power tariffs in Pakistan to allow for a greater role of market forces in power pricing. This step has been stuck in limbo since the early 1990s, hostage to a deep-rooted political economy that militates against any changes in the status quo. The second problem is security, rightly highlighted by the World Bank, which is a key partner in the project. The security situation in Afghanistan has already led to upward cost revisions in the project, which will ultimately have an impact on the final tariff. It also casts a shadow over the project's viability and capacity for expansion. It is imperative that all power centres in Pakistan realise that perpetuating a deeply flawed status quo in both areas — security and power pricing — keeps the country bottled up in a highly untenable situation. Pakistan needs to break out to achieve the next generation of growth to power our future, and this means building linkages in power, natural resources, transport and many more areas. CASA breaks new ground towards this future, but it is just the starting point. Realising the full potential of the project requires some profound changes within the country.

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## Saudi-Iran Haj row

UNLESS there is an eleventh-hour deal, Iranians will not be able to perform Haj this year because Riyadh and Tehran have not been able to agree on organisational details. The guilty parties include the two governments which have failed to sort out their relations, frozen since January after the unfortunate attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran following a Shia cleric's execution by Saudi Arabia. Time is running out. But both sides continue to blame each other for the impasse. While the Saudi minister for Haj and umrah said Iran's was the only side that had refused to sign an agreement and had made "unacceptable demands", Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance accused Riyadh of sabotage. The problem is compounded by the fact that there is no Saudi diplomatic mission in Iran. Since, in such a situation, visas can be issued only by a third country, Iran wants Riyadh to have the visas issued by the Swiss embassy, which looks after Iranian interests.

The bad blood between these two oil powers has done enormous harm to the Muslim world and worsened the bleak Middle East scene because of their adversarial policies on Yemen and Syria. Instead of resolving their dispute and working for peace in the Muslim heartland, Riyadh and Tehran have adopted inflexible positions. No wonder, Syrian peace talks are being held in Geneva rather than a Middle Eastern capital. The truth is that the deadlock over Haj arrangements is a reflection of the deeper malaise that characterises their bilateral relationship. It is also a measure of Pakistan's diplomatic impotence that it is in no position to mediate between two of its friends, and it is Switzerland which is looking after Iranian interests in Saudi Arabia. The redeeming feature is that talks continue, even though, as the Iranian minister put it, "it's now too late". For political reasons, thus, a large number of Muslims would be deprived of their right to perform what is one of the five pillars of their religion.

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## Torkham tensions

WHILE yesterday's meeting between the Afghan ambassador and the army chief resulted in the reopening of the Torkham crossing after nearly four days of closure, a more permanent solution is needed to end border concerns between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Following the Bacha Khan University attack in Charsadda in January, the security establishment here decided to try and finally tackle the Torkham problem. The legendary, and also infamous, border crossing has long been a source of problems for both the Afghan and Pakistani states — mixing with the mass of humanity that uses the border crossing each day is believed to be a significant militant element, such as the one that the security establishment says was involved in the university attack. Aware that the Afghan state, which does not recognise the Durand Line and fiercely resists anything resembling border fencing, may not have reacted positively to Pakistani requests for cooperation, a unilateral plan was developed. At the official border crossing itself, valid paperwork would be eventually required for all those seeking to enter Pakistan. Meanwhile, to prevent illegal crossings from nearby areas, a fence would be constructed inside Pakistani territory on either side of the Torkham crossing.

The Pakistani plan appears reasonable and can create a template to monitor cross-border human traffic. But all plans must be implemented in a manner that minimises on-ground tensions. The Afghan response, while predictably hostile, may also have been exacerbated by the unilateral actions that Pakistan has taken. Instead of immediately attempting to erect a fence, perhaps the Pakistani state should have first used the full spectrum of its diplomatic and military contacts to explain the situation to Afghan officials. Through diplomacy and military-to-military contacts a picture could have been painted of how Pakistan's proposal would serve the interests of both the Afghan and Pakistani states and people, and that it is militancy and criminality that would be most affected. As for the Afghan concern that the transit rights of local populations might be curbed through the new measures, an awareness campaign could go some way towards encouraging Afghan nationals to acquire passports or other necessary travel documents.

What is unacceptable, however, is the escalation of military tensions along the border as was evident in the last few days. The brinkmanship that the Afghan and Pakistani security establishments find all too easy to indulge in must stop. The Torkham crossing also has a significant humanitarian dimension, with many Afghans relying on it for access to healthcare and for family reasons. Given that the very reason for the Pakistani attempt to institute new measures at Torkham was to ensure legitimate traffic, it is wrong to punish the people who have relied on the crossing for genuine needs. Moreover, Afghanistan and Pakistan have enough troubles of late to deal with for yet another issue to be added to the mix. Such tensions should not be allowed to recur.

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## Panama: judicial commission

THWARTED first by a series of retired chief justices, the PML-N government has now been dealt another blow by the Chief Justice of Pakistan Anwar Zaheer Jamali in its increasingly futile bid to try and move past the Panama Papers debacle. Declining to form a judicial commission in unusually blunt language, the chief justice has effectively pushed the PML-N into negotiating with the opposition on the terms of reference of a judicial commission. On Monday, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will have an opportunity to reach out to the opposition in parliament and expedite the work on resolving the differences between the two sides on the scope and powers of a Panama Papers judicial commission. The crux of the government's demand is that whatever inquiry is conducted, it should not be limited to just the prime minister and his family. Meanwhile, the crux of the opposition's demand is that the prime minister and family be investigated first. As already suggested by some in the opposition, a sensible compromise would be to establish parallel tracks: one for the prime minister and his family, and another for others incriminated in the Panama Papers and all other issues judged suitable for investigation.

Whatever the specifics that are hammered out between the government and the opposition, two aspects must be guaranteed in the final agreement. First, the judicial commission must be authentically empowered to seek whatever material it deems necessary. Be it by appointing investigators locally or using the state's resources to acquire information from abroad, the judicial commission should be able to use whatever legal tools that it finds necessary to complete its task. Second, as the chief justice has indicated and as has been argued by opposition figures since the government first mooted its own ToR, the commission should be able to complete its work within a reasonable time span. There is a wealth of legal talent in both the government and opposition, and this should be used to draw up a framework for the commission that will ensure it can complete its work within a stipulated time frame.

Finally, there is the matter of speed in reaching an agreement on the ToR themselves. Since the Panama Papers revelations in early April, the wheels of governance have effectively ground to a halt and the political landscape has been transfixed by the matter. While the government has been keen to play up alleged losses to the economy as a result, it should be aware that its own campaign-style politics have contributed to the prevailing sense of governmental paralysis. Pakistan needs a number of things at the same time, as all states do, and those things are not mutually exclusive. A credible and legitimate head of government and a functioning and institutional form of government are both imperatives.

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## Flood protection

THE good news is that for the first time, an attempt is being made to prepare for monsoon-related flooding before the start of the rainy season. The federal Flood Forecasting Division is doing the right thing by coordinating among different federal, provincial and sub-provincial agencies to reach some level of preparedness. The list of bodies that must coordinate is long, showing the challenges inherent in the exercise. The bad news is that the response to the FFD's initiative has been patchy at best. Only Balochistan managed to report compliance with a directive to remove all encroachments from flood-protection infrastructure and waterways. Punjab reported partial compliance, while Sindh, KP, Fata and Gilgit-Baltistan did not even respond, despite a passage of five months since the deadline. What should we make of this? Are the officials in the irrigation departments of these provinces too busy to worry about flood preparedness? Or do they believe they don't need to coordinate with anybody to handle the floods should they come?

And that is not all. Besides irrigation, Wapda has returned to the FFD with the same answer it gives to any question from any quarter: we await the release of funds from the ministry before executing this job. Perhaps they should engrave these words on a plaque and hang it up outside their headquarters. The Met office too has failed to submit a plan for the flood forecasting and warning system. In all the floods since 2010, we have seen few short lead times of maximum 48 hours, and in the case of the flash floods in Chitral, which triggered multiple simultaneous glacial lake outburst floods, there was no warning at all. Have malfunctioning weather radars been fixed? Have new forecasting models to increase lead times been incorporated? Have new signalling technologies using mobile phones been deployed to issue alerts? If this year is like the previous ones, then one more time we will see the district administration struggling to organise an orderly evacuation and getting embroiled in heated disputes about where canal breaches need to be made to control flood surges. At the moment, it would appear the provincial government departments have a wait-and-pray approach to the approaching monsoon season. Wapda too is content to hide behind bureaucratic excuses. We can only hope that nature's fury is restrained this year, because the season is about to begin and they haven't even started to move in many government offices.

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## Medico-legal reports

A DRAFT law sent to the chief minister of Punjab seeks to address the complicated matter of medico-legal reports, while at the same time raising concerns that, contrary to the intent, the whole process may end up becoming quite tedious. Medico-legal reports are assigned to surgeons at big public hospitals. Medico-legal surgeons examine, whenever it is deemed necessary, patients brought to the hospital and file reports providing the very basis on which a criminal case may be formed. Over time, along with other defects in the system, medico-legal reports and those who write them have come under sustained criticism. Not only have these basic documents been found to be faulty, they have quite often been crafted to suit those who can pay the right price. For long, governments all over the country have been called upon to improve the law and prevent the misuse of medico-legal requirements. The five-layered alternative that Punjab officials have come up with now reflects the strong urge for fairer laws which are less vulnerable to various interest groups.

Instead of one form, the prosecution department has proposed five online forms which will make up one report. The paramedical staff of the ambulance service (Rescue 1122) will fill in the first form complete with a picture of the ‘victim’ and his or her injury. The police report of the incident will be the second layer, whereas the third would record the patient’s history. The fourth form will comprise a preliminary report by the medico-legal surgeon and the last will provide the latest picture based on medical tests conducted after the patient’s arrival at the hospital. The whole process is aimed at minimising chances of error, negligence and wilful misreporting, but it does require that many more responsible heads to complete. It may turn out to be too lengthy and cumbersome for those who are already routinely denied in the name of procedure. The idea is to keep procedures simple for the people’s benefit.

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## Strained ties with the US

A COMPLICATED, but vital relationship — an assessment offered by the US State Department spokesperson — is an apt description of the state of Pak-US relations.

But the latest stresses in the bilateral relationship have not come as a surprise. For a couple of years now, as the US military engagement in Afghanistan has diminished markedly, the possibility of a changed relationship between Pakistan and the US has been clear.

And yet, while efforts such as the strategic dialogue have continued, there have been signs of mutual fatigue — the stresses and demands of a post-9/11 security-based relationship appear to have taken their toll in the form of a lack of any direction of overarching vision on both sides today.

Where once there were initiatives such as the Kerry-Lugar civilian-focused aid and attempts to spur regional trade and productivity, now there is little more than haggling over bills and military hardware.

Inside Pakistan, the civil-military dynamic has clearly affected the trajectory of the Pak-US relationship and pushed it in the direction of being wholly security-based.

But part of the blame must surely lie with the civilians and the present PML-N government in particular.

So invested is the government in the Chinese relationship and the possibilities that CPEC offers that it appears to have become oblivious to all other foreign relationships, barring perhaps the occasional ill-planned attempt to begin a process of normalisation with India.

Consider that when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif went on an official visit to the US last year, the highlight of the trip was an announcement of a small-scale effort to boost female literacy in Pakistan.

Trade was nowhere on the agenda and little effort was made to engage the US Congress, thereby contributing to a drift that has allowed elements hostile to Pakistan in Congress to shape the emerging narrative on Pakistan.

Even now, with the F-16 issue cropping up, there has been no attempt by the government to conduct emergency diplomacy.

Distracted by the Panama Papers controversy and seemingly having ceded control over policy on the US to the military, the government — still without a foreign minister — has

been reduced to articulating sad-sounding admissions of struggles in the bilateral relationship.

The country needs a full-time foreign minister, it needs a government that recognises the importance of maintaining ties with the US, and it needs a political leadership that can engage the military on national security and foreign policy matters.

Unhappily, none of that appears to be likely anytime soon. The F-16 debacle is only a sign of things to come if some urgent thinking is not done here on the relationship with the US.

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## **An improved police**

A MILITARISED law enforcement — such as that we have been witnessing in Karachi for nearly three years — may improve the situation in the short term, but it is not conducive to a sustainable peace.

Fortunately, the apex committee in its meeting in Karachi on Thursday is developing a new strategy which aims to enhance the strength and capabilities of the city's police force.

Additional personnel numbering 20,000 are to be inducted — 8,000 of them for Karachi alone — who will undergo training by the army.

It was also decided to make efforts to procure modern techniques of investigation and forensic analysis to further augment the force's capacity.

Statistics that emerged from the apex committee meeting show that targeted killings, kidnappings for ransom and extortion have come down by 80pc since the Rangers-led operation began in September 2013.

To cement those gains, however, requires a rethink of how the police should function in Karachi.

Cronyism and politicisation of the force since years has degraded the quality of personnel: a policeman beholden to his benefactors has interests other than fighting crime.

In an environment where even recruitment at constable level can be contingent upon the ‘right price’, a thorough cleaning out of the stables is required.

To some extent, this has been set in motion, with the Supreme Court having ordered NAB to investigate the former Sindh police chief’s recent admission that 5,000 of 12,000 appointments in the force were illegal. It is also necessary now for the Rangers to retreat and let the police take the lead.

It is for good reason that in any well-ordered society, the police are considered the first line of defence where citizens’ rights to life and property are concerned.

Unlike the Sindh Rangers, which is a federal force whose officers are from the army and therefore susceptible to a certain lack of ‘local’ sensitivity, police cadres are drawn from the communities themselves.

They have their finger on the pulse of their neighbourhoods where they are posted, and are invested in the latter’s well-being.

Here it is also pertinent to question — notwithstanding that a militarised approach to justice and law enforcement is increasingly being perceived as the gold standard — whether the army trainers will have the capacity to train policemen in investigation and policing.

This city deserves a police force recruited through proper procedures and given the right tools and training to meet the rigorous demands of its job.

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## Thalassaemia concerns

THE issue of thalassaemia, it appears, has calcified into yet another grave public health concern that has failed to elicit the required attention from governmental quarters.

Of the three types of thalassaemia, it is thalassaemia minor that is perhaps the most dangerous for societal health: those carrying the gene often remain unaware of it, but the offspring of two carriers have an abnormally high chance of being born with thalassaemia major.

According to the Punjab Thalassaemia Prevention Programme director, some 60,000 thalassaemia major patients are enrolled in Pakistan.

About 7,000 new patients of this most serious variety of the disease surface every year; and some 14 to 17 children with thalassaemia major are born every day.

Yet the response is lackadaisical. A day before World Thalassaemia Day recently, the national coordinator for the Safe Blood Transfusion Programme told the media that a draft for a policy is still being prepared.

Sindh, on its part, has taken the somewhat bizarre step of requesting the National Database and Registration Authority to not issue marriage certificates to those whose thalassaemia report is not submitted.

We call the move bizarre because it overlooks the fact that in Pakistan, a nikah can be solemnised without state involvement, and only subsequently do couples apply for a formal marriage certificate from Nadra.

In other words, such a rule would create paperwork hassles for couples that are already married.

A much simpler method of combating thalassaemia would be to make the test, which is inexpensive, widely available across the country at the taluka level and then initiate a large-scale public awareness campaign that impresses upon people and clerics the need for pre-nuptial testing before the marriage itself.

For many, a child with thalassaemia major is an unthought-of eventuality that had not been factored in while the match was being made, but must thereafter be endured. Key to combating the figures is to facilitate people in making informed choices.

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## PM's defence

PRIME Minister Nawaz Sharif arrived in parliament yesterday with a great cloud of questions hanging over his head, not least of which were the seven questions that the combined opposition had wanted him to answer.

He left answering few of them except perhaps the most immediate — there will be a parliamentary committee consisting of both government and opposition members who will draw up mutually acceptable terms of reference for a judicial commission to investigate the disclosures in the Panama Papers, and presumably other revelations since.

While it was the third time Mr Sharif has addressed the Panama Papers issue directly — two earlier addresses to the nation clarified little — it was still an uneven performance.

At various points in his speech, the prime minister's delivery suggested a nervousness at odds with the defiant content. Underwhelming too was the business and financial history that Mr Sharif narrated.

While the sums quoted by him were not insignificant, they certainly appear far from the enormous wealth that the prime minister and his family are widely perceived to have.

The speech and the opposition's response — a walkout that appeared to agitate the PML-N leadership — suggest though that consensus on the scope and powers of the judicial commission will be difficult to achieve.

Mr Sharif appeared to lay down a marker that all those incriminated in the Panama Papers should be equally and simultaneously investigated. Indeed, from the prime minister's tone it seemed that he expects some of his rivals to be found guilty of the financial misdeeds that they have accused his family of.

Meanwhile, from Leader of the Opposition Khursheed Shah's brief comments it appeared that the opposition is determined to keep the focus on the prime minister and the first family.

Much may ultimately depend on how those differences are reconciled. For now, the opposition ought to consider that, setting aside all the rhetoric and political posturing, the prime minister has consistently maintained that he is willing to be scrutinised by whatever commission the opposition sees fit. There is, at least, no attempt by Mr Sharif to reject fresh scrutiny.

Where the PML-N is doing a disservice to itself and politics is its attempt to link the Panama issue to conspiracies to hold the country back developmentally.



While Prime Minister Sharif alluded to it in his speech, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar was more direct and insistent in his own speech after the opposition walkout.

That the machinery of the government has ground to a virtual standstill since the Panama Papers first cast a shadow on the prime minister is an indictment of the government, not the opposition or unnamed conspirators.

Consider that the finance minister himself, instead of being immersed in the details of the upcoming budget, is spending a great deal of time acting as the government's chief political fire-fighter.

Surely, governance ought to still be a priority.

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## Back to fixed taxes

NOW that the infamous tax amnesty scheme of this fiscal year has comprehensively collapsed, the government is back to the oldest ideas to tax the retail sector. Some early reports say that retailers whose electricity bill is below Rs0.6m will be subjected to a fixed tax of 2pc of their turnover. Talks around the proposal are continuing but it looks as if it might yet be part of the forthcoming budget. Resort to utility bills for tax purposes makes one part of the job easy: locating the taxpayer. But fixed taxes on turnover, pegged to utility bill payments, shows how the mighty have fallen from their avowed intention in the last budget to document the economy, because the transactions of the retailers will remain as opaque as ever.

Pakistan is fighting a losing battle on the tax front, and the repeated return to the same place is a good indication of this. Time and again, attempts have been made to get retailers and wholesalers, who make up almost 20pc of the economy, to document their transactions, and each time these attempts have failed, forcing the authorities to fall back on using utility bills or levying a tax at the import stage as full and final settlement. In the meantime, a massive undocumented sector has grown making large-scale evasion possible even within the corporate sector. Ultimately, the traders are afraid of documenting their transactions and often the reasons they give sound irrational. But the stubbornness has to be broken because fixing their tax liability on turnovers and electricity bills is not only primitive, it also facilitates much of the evasion. The tax amnesty scheme that the government announced last year brought in less than a fraction of the intended number of retailers into the tax net, and collected less than Rs1bn in

revenue. The banking transaction tax, presented as a fine for those who insist on remaining non-filers, has also morphed into more of a revenue measure and less of an inducement to file returns. When the government started announcing one extension after another for the deadline for filing returns under the amnesty scheme, it became clear that it had no idea about what to do in the event of the scheme's failure. Now we appear to be back to square one with outdated proxies like turnovers and utility bills to locate the taxpayers and calculate their liability.

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## Factory workers' safety

THE authorities are dragging their feet when it comes to ensuring the safety of factory workers. Consider Sunday's tragic accident in Karachi's Korangi industrial area where five labourers, including two brothers from Peshawar, died after inhaling toxic fumes. Reportedly, they were not wearing safety masks and rubber shoes when cleaning an underground dumping tank that contained chemical waste. In violation of labour laws, the factory owner had not installed adequate health and safety mechanisms. As long as factory owners, culpable of criminal negligence, are not taken to task, the informal sector will continue to use cheap labour at the cost of lives and in violation of building rules and equipment standards. More than 70pc of all workers comprise the informal sector, making it challenging for the state to institute legal and administrative structures that ensure their rights are not abused. And although Pakistan has ratified 36 ILO conventions, there is little implementation, and small industry owners continue to ignore the laws. Despite the Factories Act, 1934, being on the statutory books, weak implementation has resulted in tragic disasters on factory floors, such as the Baldia incident in Karachi some years ago when over 250 workers were killed. Meanwhile, poverty, illiteracy and lack of rights awareness contribute to the acceptance of poor working conditions.

Pakistan also lags behind in the provision of safer working conditions because of the poor labour inspection system. The ILO estimates that the country has 336 labour inspectors for 60 million registered workers. Clearly, this is not enough, and bridging this enormous gap, especially in cities crowded with industrial units, through the recruitment of more inspectors is necessary. Surely the frequency of accidents — factory roof collapses, boiler explosions, electrocution, etc — are reason enough for the provinces to form inspection teams and mechanisms for legal frameworks. Responsibility lies with the provinces to protect the exploited labour force by strengthening inspection systems, offering social

security for formal and informal sectors; and vigorously instituting laws for a safe work environment.

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## Parliament and Panama

AMONG a host of questionable decisions by both the government and the opposition in the wake of the Panama revelations, there has come at last a wholly welcome and sensible one: the opposition has decided to end its boycott of parliament. Triggered by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's overt reluctance to engage with parliament on a regular basis, the opposition boycott achieved its basic purpose of having the prime minister appear in parliament. That Mr Sharif did not on Monday answer the questions that the opposition had put to him is something for the opposition to wrangle with — as long as the debate is held inside parliament. At its core, whatever the specifics that the government and the opposition want to focus on, the Panama Papers debate is about improving the quality of democracy in the country. One route, a clearly necessary one, is to ensure that the country's elected representatives are held to a progressively higher standard of conduct than in the past and as compared to the average citizen.

The other route, equally vital, is for the institutions of democracy to be strengthened. Unhappily, arguments for institutionalising democracy are often dismissed as pedantic or trite. The baseline is considered to be what the politicians themselves do once elected, and far too often the behaviour in elected office lacks respect for democratic institutions. Yet, that is not always the case. Consider the previous parliament where PPP prime ministers, particularly Yousuf Raza Gilani, made it a point to regularly attend parliament and answers questions where necessary. True, the role of the prime minister in the last parliament was limited by the reality that the PPP boss, and hence centre of power, was in the presidency. But Mr Zardari, too, made it a point to abide by the constitutional requirement of addressing a joint session of parliament each year and, perhaps more historically, transferring virtually all his constitutional powers to parliament and the prime minister. Glaring as the governance deficit was under the last PPP government, parliament surely gained in strength. It was doubly surprising, then, to see the PPP lead a walkout from parliament on Monday with the prime minister himself present in the National Assembly.

Meanwhile, the other leading opposition party, the PTI, has demonstrated a bewilderingly contradictory approach to parliament. Having boycotted the last parliament, the PTI has spent much time during the current one arguing for a fundamental pillar of a democratic

institution — transparency and fairness in the process by which parliament is elected. Yet, the PTI has demonstrated a remarkable indifference to the actual workings of parliament, with Imran Khan leading the way in terms of non-attendance and the PTI membership generally uninterested in parliamentary goings-on. Perhaps now, with the PML-N needing to answer serious questions still, the leading opposition parties will once again begin to treat parliament with the respect it deserves.

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## China's footprint

THE latest annual report from the Pentagon on China's security and military developments contains a few observations that are worth pausing on. Previous annual reports have noted only that Pakistan is "China's primary customer for conventional weapons", in addition to listing the various joint exercises the militaries of the two countries have participated in during the year under review. To that extent, the relationship between the two neighbours, as described in the report, could be seen as cooperative. But the latest report has added a new element: "China most likely will seek to establish additional naval logistics hubs in countries with which it has a long-standing friendly relationship and similar strategic interests, such as Pakistan, and a precedent for hosting foreign militaries." With this possibility, the relationship goes far beyond cooperation towards a deeper strategic engagement, built on the history that Pakistan has written for itself as a launching pad for the regional aspirations of great powers. In its denunciation of the report's contents, China has mentioned only the South China seas and said nothing about the intentions imputed to it. It is necessary for the government, and particularly the army which is in the driver's seat of the relationship with China, to clarify whether or not Pakistan is indeed moving towards hosting Chinese naval forces, and how much of the CPEC relationship is actually military in nature.

Pakistan's search for a big partner is undoubtedly driven by India's massive arms build-up — the largest in the world — with the test of an anti-missile system coming as the latest provocative act in a dangerous game. It is not possible to view this arms build-up across the border without deep concern. Caught between the mutually reinforcing logic of regional control that is unfolding between China and India, Pakistan is left with no option but to seek whatever means its smaller economy allows it to beef up its own defences. Deepening the relationship with China beyond military cooperation and economic investment towards actually hosting Chinese forces and providing logistic support for their presence in our oceans is naturally a part of this search. But the gambit carries its own risks, especially given how the history of Great Power engagement in our region has

worked out in the past. The Pentagon's insinuation that Gwadar is really being built as a naval logistics hub needs to be responded to.

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## Policeman's removal

THE case of an upright police officer refusing to be intimidated by political authorities keeping him from doing his job is the usual tale of modernity and progress versus stubbornness and exploitation. DPO Shariq Kamal found himself up against a local influential in the southern Punjab district of Bahawalnagar. According to reports — bolstered by media images of Mr Kamal being honoured by local traders — the outgoing district police officer won the respect of the people of the area after he refused to be cowed by the local MNA who had been angered by the drift of an investigation. Senior members of the police department have confirmed that DPO Kamal rejected a compromise with the MNA; for this show of integrity, he was relieved of his duties by the provincial authorities and sent to the federal pool in Islamabad. Such a principled stand is quite rare and must be appreciated. In a country where the clamour for transparency and autonomous, unaffected and politically free law enforcement has been increasing with time it is bound to be viewed as a sign of reform in the near future. But yet again, the incident brings out the need for allowing the police a free hand — without any political interference whatsoever — in the performance of their functions, after putting in place a system that can hold the law enforcers accountable for any misdeeds.

There may, of course, be other versions that might want to present the MNA in a better light, and, instead, question whether the police officer might have overreacted or acted out of reasons other than commitment to his job. But such is the extent of our disillusionment with the whole system that we simply want to stand by those who want to establish the writ of law without considering both sides of the picture. The right example is important, and DPO Kamal's case must be upheld as one. However, a balanced perspective is necessary to detect the failings of each side.

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## N-weapons build-up in South Asia

NEW submarines, missile defence and now a missile test — India's breakneck acquisition and development of nuclear weapons systems and platforms are thoroughly alarming and wholly unwelcome.

Already Pakistani officials have warned that the Indian moves are threatening to change the military balance of power regionally and implied that a Pakistani response is all but inevitable.

Good sense and a more comprehensive understanding of national security appear to be falling victim to narrow, militaristic views of security once again, on both sides of the border.

With Pakistan having officially adopted so-called full-spectrum deterrence — itself a reaction to India's Cold Start doctrine and long-range missile threat — the response to missile defence and nuclear submarines is likely to further complicate the nuclear equation in South Asia.

For India, which is using its strong economic growth as a springboard for massive military outlays, the fiscal logic to avoid an arms race may not be as compelling as it is for Pakistan.

But nuclear strategies need to remain rational, especially if the purported enemy sits right on a lengthy shared border.

Consider the case against missile defence, a fanciful, wildly expensive project that is of dubious deterrent value.

If India does somehow manage to develop and deploy a working missile defence model, Pakistan will have the option of trying to overwhelm the missile defence system with many more nuclear-armed missiles of its own.

That would mean a significantly more nuclearised South Asia.

Adding to the danger is the short flight time between India and Pakistan for missiles — an accidental or mistaken launch of the missile defence system by India could be misunderstood by Pakistani officials as a nuclear attack, and South Asia could in an instant be on the verge of the unthinkable.

Not every military or nuclear development is worth the price — even if India believes it can afford the price tag.

For Pakistan, the ever more exotic realm of nuclear strategy that the country is finding itself pulled into poses real questions about sustainability and desirability.

Second-strike capabilities such as nuclear-armed submarines are prohibitively expensive and pose a host of new challenges.

On submarines, separating warheads from missiles — as Pakistan is believed to do with its nuclear arsenal — becomes more problematic.

Furthermore, new safety, security and chain-of-command issues would come into play.

As for missile defence or missiles with multiple warheads to confuse or overwhelm missile defence systems, they are simply not in the realm of contemplation given the size of GDP and the resource crunch.

Meanwhile, an ever-closer military relationship with China, for example, could have all manner of unforeseen consequences for regional and global stability.

Pakistan is right when it insists that all disputes and issues with India should be resolved through dialogue.

Perhaps now is the time for India to demonstrate a real commitment to dialogue and help prevent South Asia from hurtling over the precipice.

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## CPEC coal project

THE decision by a Chinese sponsor to withdraw from a coal-based power project in Punjab reminds us of two crucial facts. First, the investments arriving in Pakistan under the CPEC bouquet are entirely commercial; they come on a profit basis and are not exactly the 'gift horse' they are sometimes referred to as. Second, at least in some respects, the government's much-vaunted push towards coal as the fuel of choice for Pakistan's power generation could have been conceived in haste. The sponsor in this case is the China Machinery Engineering Corporation, and the project is a 330MW coal-mining and power-generation venture near Pind Dadan Khan in the Salt Range, Punjab. When CMEC applied for a tariff determination back in January of 2015, the total project outlay was \$589m, translating into per megawatt CAPEX cost almost 15pc higher than that of Thar coal, even though this project is nowhere near as remotely located. CMEC claimed that the coal in the Salt Range had higher ash and sulphur content, the seam was far thinner, and its transport from the various locations where it would be mined added to the cost.

The Planning Commission and Nepra both opposed the higher project cost, and rightly so. CMEC asked for a levelised tariff of 11.67 US cents (brought down from 12.4 due to an error in calculation spotted by Nepra), compared with 8.5 cents for Thar projects in the 330MW range. The difference is wide and if it cannot be bridged it is better to let the sponsor walk. Locating a coal-mining and power-generation project in the Salt Range, given the peculiarities of the coal and issues with water availability, appears to be a problematic proposition to begin with. In fact, one wonders how much thought went into the decision to include this initiative on the list of 'actively promoted' ventures under the CPEC umbrella in November 2014. This is also a good time to remind ourselves that these Chinese power-sector projects carry lucrative commercial terms for the sponsors with an equity IRR of 20pc built into the tariff structure. Loans are to be taken from Chinese banks, serviced at 4.5pc above six-month LIBOR, with Sinosure fee of 7pc on top, and the funds used to purchase Chinese technology to be installed by Chinese labour. With these terms, the projects deserve careful vetting before they are approved.

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## Protecting women

PUNJAB appears to be leading the way in putting concepts of women's protection into actual practice. In February, its provincial assembly had passed the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act, 2015. In many ways, this is perhaps the most comprehensive legislation on the subject because it also takes into account cultural realities that make women doubly vulnerable in this society and stipulates measures to address them. Then, on Tuesday, the Punjab chief minister directed the province's top police official to create the post of DIG women protection — to which a woman will be appointed and which will be under the IGP's direct command — and depute women superintendents at the Violence Against Women Centres in order to implement the aforementioned legislation.

It is encouraging that not only has the Punjab government resisted the pressure from religious parties to roll back or modify the Women's Protection Act, but has seen fit to take follow-up steps fairly quickly. Many a good law on our statute books has been unable to make any impact because of lack of implementation. The domestic violence legislation in Sindh and Balochistan, passed in 2013 and 2014 respectively, is a case in point. In fact, where setting up implementing mechanisms is concerned, laws pertaining to violence against women or to cultural practices that violate women's rights are particularly prone to foot-dragging. There is simply not enough enthusiasm within the relevant political circles or the bureaucracy — both of them overwhelmingly male — to change a status quo so skewed in their favour. The VAWCs are the linchpin of the Women's Protection Act, containing under one roof all the facilities required to deal with cases of gender-based violence from initial reporting all the way up to post-trauma rehabilitation. Appointing a senior woman police officer specifically to head them, and giving her the requisite powers to do so effectively, makes eminent sense. Care must be taken, however, that these centres retain their specialised purpose and do not become an extension of women's police stations.

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## QCG meeting

CONVENED after three turbulent months, the fifth meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group was not expected to provide any significant breakthroughs. But when the QCG itself can only agree on hopeful — even wishful — language in the official statement and cannot even announce a date for the next meeting, it would appear that the peace process in Afghanistan is well and truly at an impasse. Yet, given the overall history of the Pak-Afghan relationship, it will come as a relief that, for all the anxiety and acrimony, neither side is willing or ready to walk away from dialogue altogether. Afghanistan and Pakistan still engaging in dialogue, even if frustrating, slow and seemingly without any results, is certainly preferable to an outright rejection of talks. Moreover, despite the acute and apparent difficulties in nudging the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table, there still appears to be a consensus in the QCG that an intra-Afghanistan peace process is the only viable option for the country. From those admittedly frayed strands could be constructed the basis of the next phase in the dialogue process.

The draft agreement between the Afghan government and the infamous Afghan warlord and long-time Pakistan ally, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, suggests that a path to peace can in fact be forged. A peace agreement with Mr Hekmatyar and his Hizb-i-Islami was perhaps possible because of the vastly diminished influence and military strength of the Hizb — long gone are the days when Mr Hekmatyar could terrorise Afghans from his base in the northeast of the country and attract UN sanctions for his actions. But with no success or even measurable progress elsewhere, the Afghan government can try and use a tentative peace agreement with Mr Hekmatyar and his group to demonstrate the possibilities of dialogue to other Afghan militants. Ultimately, it is with the Afghan Taliban, still lacking a dominant new leader but believed to be largely falling in line behind Mansour Akhtar, that the Afghan state must pursue dialogue. While it is the task of the QCG to create the conditions for talks, the Afghan state can also shape the environment for dialogue with the Taliban by demonstrating robustness on the battlefield and reconciling with whichever groups it finds are amenable to a quick peace.

If there is anything that is clear in Afghanistan it is that neither can the Taliban achieve a military victory and overthrow the Afghan state nor can the latter decisively and permanently defeat the Taliban. In theory, that should offer some space for a negotiated settlement given that both Kabul and the Taliban have rational expectations. But in the real world the many and overlapping variables can undermine simple logic. Pakistan may not have a master key to unlock the Afghan problem, but surely it is time to put more effort into converting theory into practice.

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## Budget and Panama

THE deliberations surrounding an inquiry into the Panamanian affairs of the prime minister are finally set to begin in a properly defined context, and it is time to keep them within the confines agreed upon. The finance minister needs to be freed from the deliberations so he can focus on the more important budget preparations that should be the biggest claim on his time these days. With an agreement that the terms of reference for the inquiry will be decided by a parliamentary body, the political crisis has now found rails and should stay there. The budget process is at risk of being subordinated to the noise and fury of the affair, and that must be prevented from happening. The tools of the budgetary exercise should not be used to shore up the government's support during this crisis, and insulating the budget from the pressures generated by the political crisis should be the priority. There are indications already that the crisis is driving the government to adopt a goodies-laden approach towards the budget in the hopes of buying popular support, such as the May Day announcement by the Punjab chief minister to raise the minimum wage by Rs1,000. A hike in the minimum wage is not a bad thing, but the timing of the announcement gives rise to suspicions that it is designed to buy support at a time when the government is struggling to regain its credibility.

Much damage can be done to the economy if the government loses track of its responsibilities at this critical juncture. This is the last full-year budget the government is going to announce and the last opportunity to get some vital work done, particularly on the fiscal and structural side where matters have been bogged down since 2013. If we see wildly unrealistic revenue targets, followed by goodies like enhanced laptop distribution— a pet scheme of this government — we'll know they have taken the low road forward. This is the time to be searching for revenues to fulfil next year's goals, and deciding on expenditure priorities that best advance economic growth and job creation. The Panama disclosures have presented the government with a stark challenge to explain the assets of the prime minister, but the matter need not, and certainly must not, become an all-consuming obsession that takes away from the government's ability to discharge key obligations either.

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## Syrian peace talks

As fighting intensified in Syria this week, UN-brokered peace talks in Vienna failed to revive the February 2016 ceasefire agreement and restore humanitarian aid to trapped civilians. The US and Russia, alongside the 17-nation International Syria Support Group, left without any conclusive gains. Only last month, UN envoy Staffan de Mistura conceded talks were “barely alive”. But talking peace is the only solution. That this conflict has spawned displacement and starvation for millions of Syrians should be reason enough for the immediate re-enforcement of a ceasefire agreement, especially given the deepening of sectarian sentiments — Alawites are identified with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Sunnis with the opposition. With questions being raised about the Middle East’s political and religious polarisation, the Arab nations must demonstrate political and moral leadership, uniting on a single platform —perhaps breathing life into the moribund Arab League or OIC — to push for peace. De-escalating support for regional militant/sectarian proxies, if only for the sake of the Syrian people, must be the call of the moment.

Since talks began last October, divisive superpower politics have further thwarted a truce. Rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as Russia and the US, have yet to agree on a common agenda for peace. And while the US should be reminded that any ill-conceived removal of Mr Assad will strengthen Sunni jihadi militancy, Russia’s and Iran’s refusal to consider an alternative to the status quo will only strengthen the impasse. Lost in the maze of politics is the core issue: the plight of the Syrian people, living through a protracted civil war, is worsening by the day. Quantifying the carnage, the Syrian Centre for Policy Research estimates war fatalities at 470,000 ie 11.5pc of the country’s population has been killed since 2011. This crisis will end when global and regional players stop catering to their own hegemonic interests. Until then, we will see the knock-out effect of the population displacement, with the war destined to gradually reshape the region and beyond.

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## Electoral reforms

THE 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, approved unanimously by the National Assembly on Thursday, is a step in the right direction for electoral reforms. At its heart, the polling process is a vast administrative exercise, and the current requirement that effectively only superior court judges can be a part of the five-member Election Commission of Pakistan is flawed. That limited choice was born of the long-standing political consensus that judges of the superior court are the closest thing Pakistan has to competent neutral officials. The demand for judicial commissions to investigate major national scandals is another manifestation of the political suspicion that bureaucrats and technocrats may have some hidden political biases and may try and tamper with elections. But honourable as many ECP members have been, they have struggled with the manifold administrative tasks of organising and conducting polls. Once the 22nd Amendment is signed into law by the president, the pool from which ECP members can be selected will be vastly increased — allowing individuals from the private sector or the bureaucracy with the right credentials to be picked as ECP members. At least at the very top, the ECP may get the right leaders needed for the job.

Yet, five members of the ECP alone, no matter how competent and professional, cannot deliver cleaner and more transparent elections. For that, a raft of electoral reforms are needed at every stage of the election process — reforms which all political parties claim they are interested in and committed to introducing, but somehow have been unable to steer through parliament. Perhaps with Law Minister Zahid Hamid now having returned full-time to the ministry, there will be some fresh energy and impetus injected into the electoral reforms process. But so far, the process in the special parliamentary committee and the various subcommittees it has spawned has been desultory and insular. The process of elections are, in truth, too important to be left to politicians alone — barriers to entry and electoral rules that favour incumbents are not issues that politicians will be keen to address. Perhaps the revamped ECP will be able to take the lead in public consultations and offer its own suggestions. Surely, three years after a general election in which the historic turnout was marred by allegations of fraud the time has come to ensure that the next general election will be better managed, with lower levels of fraud and more transparency.

Both in the region and internationally, countries with similar levels of development as Pakistan have managed to create far more robust systems when it comes to organising and conducting polls. The three basic stages of an election — nominations, campaigning and voting — pose different challenges, but none are insurmountable. A combination of better laws, strong leadership and trained officials who are empowered but accountable is needed. The question is: will parliament deliver?

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## Perks of power

AT a time when the government is battling to regain its credibility, a most unhelpful motion has been introduced in the National Assembly calling for all members of parliament to be given a hefty pay raise. The motion has asked for a report submitted by a standing committee recommending pay raises to be adopted. The Senate chairman did not entertain the idea at the time, saying it was not the right time to be considering such matters. The raises called for are substantial, especially given that parliament already places a burden of Rs4.7bn on the revenue account, although the figure includes total expenditures including capital costs, salaries and pensions of all staff and officers, and much more. Nevertheless, the costs are substantial and it is worth asking whether this is the right time to be adding to the bill.

The MNA responsible for the report argues that members of parliament are individuals with a “high standing” in society and their remuneration should reflect this. It is true that holding elected office is a high station in life, but the rewards come with responsibilities. One of those responsibilities is to share, even if only symbolically, the hardships the government is asking of others. In four of the past six years, the amount for parliamentarians has been increased through recourse to an ad hoc allowance that has almost doubled the remuneration they get. This ought to be enough, and asking for an excessive pay increase at this time, which is what the report is urging, is totally out of place in a country that is still trying to implement an austerity agenda. In addition, the legislators are given ample allowances for travel, stay and telephone use. These perks can be encashed, and in many cases, are also available to family members. Given the facts, the National Assembly should say ‘no’ to the proposed pay raises, and use the vote as an opportunity to indicate that their own welfare comes second. There is no end to demands for increased perks and welfare coming from parliamentarians, whether in the form of official residential facilities, blue passports, exemptions from checks at airports or utilisation of VIP facilities, with even former lawmakers pining for similar treatment. It will make for an unseemly sight if members of parliament are seen giving themselves a pay raise while the finance minister has to struggle to explain new revenue measures in the forthcoming budget.

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## Cricket fitness at PMA

MANY moons ago, a well-wisher of Pakistan cricket came up with a ‘very practical’ solution to the challenges of having so many candidates for team captain: “Make all of them captain. Appoint a major over them.” For obvious reasons, the proposal was unlikely to catch the fancy of the country’s cricket bosses then but the tradition of trying the military option to deal with a cricketing problem continues to this day. In what must easily be one of the biggest challenges of their professional lives, the national cricketers have been taken to the Pakistan Military Academy in Kakul for a fitness programme to prepare them for the coming English tour. The real results of the special arrangement will show once the tour gets under way in July, Pakistanis will, however, be hoping the experience will help these players set new standards and uplift the national side that is more frequently applauded for its skill rather than its physical or mental toughness.

The camp pictures do capture the intensity of the action that had been missing in the team of late, especially in the shorter versions of the game. And while there are some who don’t approve of the sessions at the military academy, many comments posted on the internet make it clear that this is an exercise which has popular support. In fact, some of these remarks are laden with deep meaning, like the one which calls for an even grander, more formal training regime run by the best in the army. For instance, “Let them spend two weeks with Mr Raheel, he will smack the discipline into [them]... If Mr Musharraf has nothing to do, let him give these privileged kids some commando bootcamp training.” Another one says: “Let them also take PMA oath at the end of their training session...” In the fitness of things shall we say? Surely this is one way of showing how keen we are to see our players perform to their full potential.

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## Unachieved growth target

THE latest data on GDP growth may have come in below target, but the government will still try and claim that it has revived the economy despite facing serious challenges. According to data presented to the national accounts committee, this year the growth rate of the economy has been 4.7pc, compared to the target of 5.5pc. Some may well wonder about the merits of quibbling over a fraction of a percentage, but since the data refers to a Rs27tr economy, even that fraction adds up to a lot. Nevertheless, since last year's growth rate was 4.23pc, the government can claim some success in raising that to 4.7pc this year. But there are two questions to ask regarding this. First, what has fuelled this growth? And second, where has it largely come from? In fuelling this growth, the government has also taken the public debt to unprecedented levels, both domestic and external. And the drivers of growth, when the data is looked at slightly more closely, appear to be temporary. In short, much work remains to be done to put this growth on a sustainable footing, failing which we are bound to be left with large bills to pay and not much to pay them with.

When looking at the drivers of growth, it is important to note the dismal situation in agriculture, which accounts for almost a fifth of our economy. The sector shrank by 0.19pc instead of growing. Some of this can be accounted for by factors beyond the government's control, such as the collapse in commodity prices around the world, and serious drought and irregular rains. But much of the explanation also lies in the government's failure to understand, much less reform, the agriculture sector. Smuggled GM seeds still form the mainstay of the cotton crop, even as the updated Seed Act awaits implementation. Crop economics, as the experts call it, have placed high-quality inputs far beyond the reach of farmers, making the sector vulnerable to exogenous shocks from the climate and global markets.

In industry, the story is a little more mixed. Much of the growth has come from construction, which is low-quality growth due to its fleeting nature. The services sector met its target largely due to an increase in government salaries, which says nothing about the underlying state of the economy. Power generation and gas distribution have improved undoubtedly, but this simply reflects better utilisation of the existing capacity rather than any improvement in the nature of the economy. A boost has come from increased consumption as in the automobile sector, while exports have plummeted. In short, the economy is sputtering to a short-lived revival of sorts, but can it last? Given the haphazard movements upon which it is built, the growth figure presented before the committee cannot be taken as a sign of an economic rebound.

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## Pemra pulls the plug

WHERE self-regulation fails, the situation opens the door to outside attempts to steer the debate. Unfortunately, that seems to have happened with Pakistan's electronic media industry, which has in recent times been increasingly in the cross hairs of Pemra, the electronic media regulator. On Friday, Pemra chairman Absar Alam said his organisation had pulled the plug on re-enactments of crime stories, monitoring teams having found several instances where the lines of acceptable programming had been transgressed. These, according to Pemra, include the provision of information about rape victims, forced entry into private premises, the overly graphic representation of rape and suicide, and several other examples. Reportedly, this ultimate step was taken after Pemra received complaints and the channels in question had repeatedly been sent notices, in some cases with the imposition of fines.

It is regrettable that matters have come to this pass, but few would deny that unethical practices have over the years been embedded in some quarters in the country's electronic media output. Take, for example, the concern about forced entry into private premises, which is illegal in addition to being unethical journalism. It had become fairly common for viewers to watch media personnel swoop down on the premises to sniff out some alleged wrongdoing. Such an intrusion can only be undertaken by law-enforcement authorities, and then too under a fully fleshed-out procedure. Similarly, crime story re-enactments have been found to at times breach the requirements of dignity and good taste. That said, however, such decisions are ideally left to professional news editors; it is, therefore, up to media houses and their employees to drastically and evidentially improve standards of journalistic judgment so that Pemra is left with no excuse to become involved. Issues of a criminal nature are tricky to handle, and the regulatory authority may not be the best forum to play adjudicator. The delicate balancing act that the media must achieve is perfectly summed up by the situation that the drama serial *Udaari* finds itself in, the associated television channel being issued a notice for scenes implying child sexual abuse. The fact that this programme is part of advocacy against this rampant scourge, and that it was created/scripted with the thorough involvement of NGOs working on child rights, appears to have escaped Pemra's attention. Such matters must be left to the professionals, but those professionals must also prove themselves worthy of trust.

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## ETPB goes overboard

THE Evacuee Trust Property Board's action in Nankana Sahib 10 days ago was a demonstration of how not to go about an eviction operation. The May 14 action was marked by the 'overzeal' of a senior politician — Siddiqui Farooq — in the role of administrator, and his highhanded subordinates keen on summarily displacing a set of families who have a long-running land ownership dispute with the ETPB. Some of the scenes have been doing the rounds of the social media and are a source of shame for all those Pakistanis who understand how important dignity is in all matters of life. The details about the latest action to throw these families out of the land they have tilled for decades are chilling to say the least. Claiming they are the legal tenants of the ETPB, they have nevertheless spoken of the violence unleashed on them by the brutal minions of an official who apparently suffered from an illusion regarding his responsibilities. Not only have they talked of being beaten and having sticks thrown at them but have gone on to accuse the ETPB chairman of firing at them with his personal weapon.

The trick appears to have backfired. Reports of a violent attempt at uprooting these tillers will add greater vigour and purpose to calls for an administratively just and humane solution to the issue involving the ETPB and some of the occupants of its lands. But before that important subject is taken up, with due empathy for these occupants, there must be an investigation into what went wrong with the eviction operation in the Nankana village on May 14. There have to be examples of how not to do it. Some of the officials — such as those in the police and the district administration — have expressed their shock and dismay at the way the ETPB raid was conducted. There have to be safeguards against one individual going on the rampage by over-asserting the powers at his disposal.

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## New twist in Afghan peace

Akhtar Mansour, leader of the Afghan Taliban, has reportedly been killed in Balochistan in a US drone strike. While confusion still persists over the news made known to the world initially by US officials, and subsequently corroborated by Afghan officials and the Afghan Taliban, the security equation in the Pak-Afghan region has changed once again.

Pakistan, the country that is alleged to have hosted Mullah Mansour, and said to have helped him ascend to the top of the Taliban leadership and nudged the group to the negotiating table with Kabul, is left with unanswered questions and is at the receiving end of considerable international finger-pointing.

Yet again the morass that has been Afghan policy — for many states, but perhaps most consistently for Pakistan over the past three decades — looks set to lead a number of countries into an uncertain future with few good options.

Five years since Osama bin Laden was killed in Abbottabad, and less than a year since it was revealed, though never conclusively proved, that Mullah Omar too had died on Pakistani soil, Mullah Mansour's reported death in Pakistan is not altogether surprising.

Pakistani officials have acknowledged that the so-called influence, though not control, that the state here has over the Taliban is partly a result of providing sanctuary to Afghan Taliban leaders. If there were no sanctuary, there would be no influence — and certainly none of the control that the outside world accuses Pakistan of having over the Taliban.

Yet, it is troubling that Mullah Mansour was apparently allowed to move freely on Pakistani soil even as it became clear that the Taliban he controlled were neither lowering the intensity of the war they are waging against the Afghan state nor really looking for a way to start dialogue.

While Pakistan has rightly insisted that it cannot realistically be expected to take military action on Pakistani soil against the Afghan Taliban, surely the freedom of movement that friendly Taliban leaders are believed to still enjoy is not in Pakistan's interests.

What is indisputably in the interest of Afghanistan, Pakistan and other regional and international powers is for the Afghan question to be settled through dialogue. However, given that the US has now bluntly stated that the Taliban leader was an impediment to negotiations and reportedly eliminated him, it is not clear who dialogue can be conducted with among the group or even if the Taliban will be able to stay united.

Whatever the case, Pakistan should be wary of repeating the process that led to Mullah Mansour's accession and the determined attempt to unify the Taliban behind him.

With new strains in relations with Afghanistan and the US, Pakistan must be clear about what it believes it can deliver and set realistic expectations. Otherwise, the regional security situation may deteriorate further.

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## Monetary policy

IT might seem odd that the State Bank would say “inflation is likely to attain a higher plateau” in the future on the one hand, and yet cut the policy discount rate, even if by a meagre quarter of a percentage point. Nevertheless, the cut is too meagre to count as a meaningful step, and even if inflation is on the rise, this is still a healthy sign given the lows to which it had fallen in 2015. An increase in inflation can be considered healthy when the economy is struggling to recover from years of moribund growth, because it can be a sign of a revival in demand. But the uptick could also come from new revenue measures that a severely cash-strapped government could resort to in the forthcoming budget, or the upward movement of oil prices.

The least convincing part about the monetary policy statement, though, is where it dwells on the state of the economy. Celebrating a revival of growth, led by construction and consumption, ought to be beneath the dignity of an institution entrusted to look out for the medium term, as well as the underlying fundamentals. The ongoing collapse in the farm sector should not be papered over the way the State Bank did, by simply arguing that growth in industry can “salvage some of the lost momentum” from agriculture. Important reforms are needed to make agriculture more productive and less vulnerable to exogenous shocks, and the government should not be allowed to use industrial growth as an excuse for failures in this sector. Likewise in industry, “buoyant growth in construction and improved demand for consumer durables” is hardly something to cheer about, especially in the context of falling exports. But going on to say that these developments are “expected to provide the needed sustainability in growth trajectory and the basis for further improvement in FY17” simply stretches the argument to breaking point. The reserves do paint a positive picture, and the arrival of CPEC projects will surely boost the economy, as the statement points out. But one can only hope that too many eggs are not being put in that basket, given that the reserves growth owes to “favourable developments” and not any reforms, and the benefits of CPEC may or may not be as large or shared as widely as is being anticipated. The State Bank owes us a better description of the economy than this.

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## A hospital in crisis

KARACHI'S Abbasi Shaheed hospital offers a stark example of how politics at its most unscrupulous and self-serving can play havoc with the lives of people. A report in this paper last week painted a disturbing picture of the conditions prevailing at the third largest public-sector hospital in the city where every day over 2,000 patients seek treatment. The Karachi Metropolitan Corporation that runs this 950-bed hospital finds itself unable to provide even 10pc of the budgetary allocation set aside for it, and with philanthropic donations insufficient to meet expenses, all units at the health facility are facing a dire shortage of life-saving medicines and other essential supplies. Half the machines are out of order and the laboratory only has the capacity to conduct the most basic tests.

The Abbasi Shaheed hospital is one of the casualties of the power struggle between the PPP and the MQM over Karachi. One of the measures taken by the PPP provincial government to neutralise the MQM was to cripple KMC, the central body responsible for providing municipal services to Karachi — and where most of the employees were from the MQM — by creating district municipal corporations reporting directly to the provincial government. The subsequent devolution of education, health and local taxes departments to the DMCs last year has been nothing short of a financial catastrophe for KMC. To put things in perspective, prior to the creation of DMCs, the local taxes department alone generated over a billion rupees in revenue. Now the KMC faces a shortfall of Rs93m even in paying the salaries of employees at KMC and Karachi Development Authority, as well as at the health facilities that it runs, including the Karachi Medical and Dental Clinic, Spencer Eye Hospital, Sobhraj Maternity Hospital, etc. While there was undoubtedly much to criticise in the way KMC functioned, and the blatant nepotism and corruption in its ranks, it is shameful that the price of political gamesmanship in the metropolis is being borne by the ordinary citizen.

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## Sovereignty debate

THE US drone strike that killed Afghan Taliban leader Akhtar Mansour was unquestionably a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty.

The fact that it was a violation does not change whether Pakistani officials were informed before or after the strike. And even if some Pakistani officials, military or otherwise, secretly coordinated with the Americans to allow the drone strike, it would still be a violation of territorial sovereignty.

Simply put, the territorial and aerial sovereignty of Pakistan cannot be bartered, bargained or handed away by officials colluding with outsiders.

No matter what the officials' rank or seniority, they have no jurisdiction or authority to make such decisions.

A drone strike in Balochistan, very much inside Pakistani territory, conducted unilaterally by the US or in collusion with officials here, ought to be an unacceptable red line.

The days of secret pacts under a military dictator are over, as is the logic that may have once applied to allowing drone strikes in remote areas of Fata.

Gone, hopefully forever, are the days when the Waziristan agencies were under the virtual control of militants.

And yet perhaps the most significant-ever drone strike did take place on Saturday in Balochistan. Why?

In the unapologetic and blunt statement of US President Barack Obama yesterday lies perhaps the unwelcome answer: Pakistan, President Obama implied, continues to be a place where extremist networks that threaten the region and the world continue to find a safe haven.

So murky is the Pakistani record against global militants and terrorists that even when Mullah Mansour, who only days ago the US was still publicly hoping to draw into dialogue with the Afghan government via the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, was killed by the US in an act of dubious legality, the focus of the world immediately and fiercely turned to the fact that he was inside Pakistani territory when the attack took place.

While Pakistan may rail against double standards and unfair characterisations of the international community, for much of the outside world it is an article of faith that this is

a country that knows only double games and that will inevitably pursue policies that cause harm to other nations.

What makes it so easy for the US to violate the territorial integrity of Pakistan with a drone strike in Balochistan and a night raid in Abbottabad is not the superpower's military superiority but the weight of global opinion that Pakistan is a country whose own actions make it possible for other states to disregard international law and arguments of sovereignty.

If Osama bin Laden can live undetected for years in Abbottabad, Mullah Omar can allegedly die in Pakistan and Mullah Mansour can hold a Pakistani identity card and passport, the arguments for selective sovereignty, when it comes to drone strikes, ring hollow.

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## Repatriating IDPs

THE army's commitment to clear North Waziristan of militancy has progressed with elaborate plans for a Fata-based infrastructure development project inclusive of road networks and 'urban hubs' comprising schools, shops, mosques and parks. That said, the crucial success determinant of North Waziristan's counterinsurgency operation will be in the resettlement of the displaced. As of February 2016, UNHCR estimates thousands of IDP families from KP and Fata. Although counterinsurgency operations have cleared militant sanctuaries, we must remember that Fata was on a socioeconomic precipice when it played incubator for an assortment of terror affiliates. Fata's chequered past underscores the need for investing in its human development through effective governance. This plan must work in conjunction with resettling IDPs in an environment that safeguards against militant groups seeking inroads within settled communities.

Meanwhile, it has been six years since the South Waziristan military operations were launched and four since repatriation first started. But a large percentage of IDPs have yet to return home because of unsuitable economic and security conditions. Many repatriated Mehsud locals have not received house compensation for destroyed homes. Ruined livelihoods and infrastructure exacerbate poverty and divide families, with many people finding jobs in large cities. And there are parts with an unofficial 7pm curfew restricting free movement with security forces reportedly subjecting locals to humiliating treatment at check posts. The challenging process of rehabilitation comes after war. While the government has conducted a damage assessment survey in most areas, money is only trickling in. Without this, reconstruction and resettlement by a deadline is impossible.



Rebuilding damaged infrastructure, resettling displaced people and instituting confidence-building measures is mainly the responsibility of a civilian government, and it is about time that the ruling politicians pulled up their socks after decades of not including the tribal belt in the mainstream. A joint civilian-military rehabilitation plan endorsed by the government is long overdue. For Waziristan, it appears the political agent is a figurehead with the security establishment calling the shots. If there is to be voluntary repatriation of all displaced persons from Waziristan by the end of this year as the army has stressed, there must be a civil-military partnership to facilitate returnees. Giving precedence to socio-economic needs and fundamental rights — education, healthcare and livelihoods — will play a notable role in securing the region from an assortment of militant hopefuls scouting to fill the governance vacuum.

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## Unfair load-shedding

IT has been a number of years now that K-Electric has been following the practice of enhanced load-shedding in ‘high-loss’ areas, but so far, very few voices had been raised against the injustice of this policy. Now a small group of civil society activists have had the conscience to speak up against this patently unfair policy. The latter is the toast of the city’s elites because it means superior service and uninterrupted supply to well-to-do neighbourhoods and industrial areas. But for the majority of the city’s residents it spells misery. K-Electric has managed to turn its finances around in large measure due to this policy, but the net result has been the diversion of a considerable proportion of the city’s power supply to elite consumption, leaving the poor behind. The policy makes very good commercial sense, but in moral terms it promotes the inequitable allocation of a vital resource — electricity — that can be considered a public good.

Karachi needs more voices like those of the activists who recently held a news conference against the policy of recovery-based load-shedding. The poor are almost always left out of the conversation when looking at how the city’s resources are allocated — whether the issue is water, land, transport, or, as in this case electricity. K-Electric enjoys monopoly status as the only provider of power to this city of 20 million, and its workings cannot be left solely to market forces to determine. There are, indeed, serious problems in high-loss areas with recovery teams being attacked, but solutions also exist, particularly with the enhanced use of Aerial Bundle Cables, to reduce theft. Awareness campaigns against the old system of kunda connections have also worked well in some cases. Clearly, a high road exists to rectify the problem in high-loss neighbourhoods, but the current incentive structure under which the utility works provides no encouragement



to actually take that route. The policy is a highly unfair one and should be dispensed with as soon as possible.

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## **Fistula: a silent epidemic**

IRONICALLY enough, it was International Day to End Obstetric Fistula when it emerged that in Pakistan, the goal of ensuring that no more women fall victim to this debilitating medical condition, may become more elusive still. On Monday, the United Nations Population Fund announced that because of serious resource shortage, it can no longer continue supporting the fistula project in the country that has been running with its assistance since 2005. Thirteen centres have been set up at public-sector hospitals in major cities to provide free treatment for fistula, with training provided to doctors in handling such cases. According to the UNFPA, the memorandum of understanding signed with the Pakistan government was for only five years, following which the government was supposed to take over the project. That it has not done so is consistent with the low priority the state gives to maternal health.

Of the many terrible ways in which poverty and patriarchy together exact a toll on women, obstetric fistula is one of the most devastating. In Pakistan, around 5,000 women each year — inevitably from the poorest sections of society — develop the condition, in which internal injuries sustained during obstructed labour cause urinary or faecal incontinence to varying degrees. There are primarily two reasons for fistula to occur: early childbirth and/or delayed obstetric care. In the first, the misogynistic cultural practice of giving underage girls in marriage exposes them to the rigours of childbirth before they are physically mature. In the second, the state's dereliction of duty in providing easily accessible, quality obstetric care renders even adult women at risk. Besides the physical ramifications, those who develop fistula also suffer far-reaching social and economic consequences. They are often spurned by their families and community, and have severely limited work opportunities. Poignantly enough, most cases of fistula can be repaired by a simple operation. All it takes is a government that has the will to tackle a problem that has no place in the modern world.

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## Lessons from Chabahar

On the day when Pakistan struggled to find the words with which to register its reaction to the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a drone strike on its soil, the leaders of India, Iran and Afghanistan were preparing to meet in Tehran to finalise an agreement. The latter will take economic cooperation between the three countries to a new level.

That meeting took place on Monday. And on that same day, our Foreign Office relayed its ‘concern’ over the drone strike to the US ambassador even as President Obama hailed it as “an important milestone”. Also on that day, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, seated between his Afghan counterpart and the Indian prime minister, spoke in a televised address following the signing of a transit accord in which he said, “from Tehran, New Delhi and Kabul, this is a crucial message ... that the path to progress for regional countries goes through joint cooperation and utilising regional opportunities”.

Over the years, Pakistan is becoming increasingly isolated from its own neighbours, and the events of Monday, when juxtaposed against each other, provide a vivid illustration of how this is happening.

Read: Rail link planned between Gwadar and Chabahar

The port at Chabahar, and the linkages it opens up, can be seen either as a challenge to be countered or an opportunity to be exploited for Pakistan. Viewed through the lens of rivalry, the cooperative relations being forged by three of Pakistan’s four neighbours, with Chabahar as the emblem of this cooperation, look like an encirclement of the country, necessitating counter measures such as greater subordination of the state’s foreign policy to the dictates of China.

But viewed through the lens of cooperation, the same ties appear as an opportunity to be tapped, calling for reciprocal measures such as opening talks on overland transit trade between the three countries, building links between Chabahar and Gwadar, as well as enhanced road links between Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif with Chaman and Peshawar to complete the loop.

Pakistan’s foreign policy is built on rivalry, whereas it would be to the country’s long-term advantage to view its regional environment through the lens of cooperation instead.

Our region is alive with possibilities that greater cooperation and connectivity bring — from trade to energy — and Pakistan’s location can only be a significant asset in tapping these opportunities if our foreign relations are not dominated by suspicion.

It is realistic, and not naïve, to suggest that in the evolving regional situation, cooperation yields greater benefits, while rivalry and conflict only serve to bottle the country up further.

Of course, changing the rails upon which our foreign relations ride is not going to be easy, especially given the baggage of the past. But that doesn't obscure the fact that the dividends actually lie on the other side.

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## Middle East crises

EVEN by the Middle East's volatile standards, Monday was an incredibly bloody day in the region. The Syrian cities of Jableh and Tartus were targeted by the militant Islamic State group, resulting in the death of nearly 150 people. Meanwhile in Aden, militants also linked to IS targeted army recruits, causing at least 45 fatalities in the Yemeni city. Iraq, on the other hand, has seen hundreds of people killed in terrorist attacks since the start of the year, with militants targeting markets and other public places. The latest atrocity occurred in Baghdad last week. Of course, Syria, Yemen and Iraq have a few features in common: these Arab states have been suffering from years of internal strife, while actors from beyond their borders — especially where Syria and Yemen are concerned — have used them as proxy battlefields to either push for regime change, or prop up the existing order. The results have been obvious: most notably, growing space for militant groups like IS (active in all three states), Al Nusra (an established force in Syria) and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (well ensconced in Yemen), as well as an unending nightmare for civilians haunted by death and starvation.

Experts have rightly termed the Middle East an 'arc of crisis'. However, the factors behind the current crises must be clearly understood. For one, while all states experiencing turmoil have suffered from years of bad governance, corruption and internal repression, the fact is that in all three cases — Syria, Yemen and Iraq — external actors have intervened to fuel further chaos, often under the pretext of regime change or 'liberation'. This includes regional players as well as global actors, trying to fashion the region as per their wishes. At this point, matters look bleak: the UN-backed Yemeni peace process is barely hobbling along, while Syrian peace talks are stalled. The OIC and the Arab League are, as usual, absent from the scene. The fact is that multilateral diplomacy will fail to deliver unless regional heavyweights — such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey — as well as global players — primarily the US, Russia and the European states — stop fuelling conflict and urge their local 'clients' to come to the negotiating

table and not leave until there is some consensus on peace. The people of this devastated region need a fair chance to rebuild their lives, free from the horrors of war and terrorism.

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## Afghan dialogue

ARMY chief Gen Raheel Sharif believes that the drone strike that killed former Afghan Taliban leader Akhtar Mansour is “counterproductive for the ongoing peace process”. The interior minister does not know what he believes or even what he knows about the strike. Meanwhile, the Taliban leadership has gathered and already chosen a new leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada. It is futile to speculate at this stage what the new chief’s ascension means for Afghan dialogue. After all, Mullah Mansour was an alleged Taliban peacemaker until he was not and then was killed by the US for his intransigence. What does appear to be the case is that dialogue is not dead as an option. Gen Sharif himself does not appear to believe that to be the case — ‘counterproductive’ and ‘ongoing’ are words that do not suggest dialogue is dead. And for all his confusion, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan too could not bring himself to suggest that dialogue is no longer possible.

If and when dialogue does resume, the killing and its aftermath have exposed issues that Pakistan needs to address urgently. It has been nothing short of alarming to learn of the extent of freedom that Mullah Mansour, and presumably other Afghan Taliban leaders, enjoyed in Pakistan. The unspoken argument for providing sanctuary to Taliban leaders has been that it gives Pakistan influence over them. But even as Mullah Mansour defied Pakistan and refused to open talks with the Afghan government, he appears to have had few restrictions on his movements. Pragmatic association is one thing; giving the Taliban free rein is something else altogether, and ought to be unacceptable. Haibatullah Akhundzada, allegedly coronated on Pakistani territory, should be informed of the new rules on the ground in Pakistan — do the right thing and help Pakistan make Afghan dialogue possible or else expect restrictions on what he can do in Pakistan and where he can go.

Clarity, too, is needed on how and why Afghans like the late Taliban leader can come to possess Pakistani identities. When dialogue is conducted in a third country, it may perhaps make sense to provide travel documents to facilitate travel. The Taliban office in Doha is an example of why Taliban officials could need a passport. But the CNIC and Pakistani passport that Mullah Mansour is alleged to have possessed under an alias go far beyond the narrow needs of dialogue or even back-channel communications. Was he officially provided with a fake Pakistani identity or was it acquired secretly through bribery and local contacts in Nadra? The difference matters because the more important question now

is who else among the Taliban have Pakistani identities. Yousuf Raza Gilani once famously denounced a state within a state here and asked who gave Osama bin Laden a visa. Several years on, there are ever-more troubling questions and even fewer answers.

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## Internet pornography

IT is easy enough to understand why online pornographic content ought to be filtered out in a country like Pakistan, notwithstanding counter arguments connected with free speech and digital freedoms. The online world is a tricky place, and for many the line between the images and videos they see on the web and the real world can easily become blurred. Considering that internet pornography can assume nasty forms, with paedophile and violent content being widely available, the argument for filtering this content becomes stronger. Regrettably, in response to a Supreme Court directive to ensure that such filters are in place, the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority has initiated a random and rambling effort to block almost 400,000 links, many of which have no connection with pornography. This exercise is more of an insult to the court's directive than an effort at compliance. Instead of focusing on the task given to it, the PTA has turned itself into some sort of moral police, deciding on an ad hoc basis what content is offensive and what is not.

Such a haphazard and random effort does more damage than good. Going about the job haphazardly, as the PTA is doing, creates the risk of disrupting normal internet traffic as well. Trying to target pornographic websites through keyword searches has led the PTA to block medical journals and Disney websites, an absurd result of 'implementing' the court's directive. The PTA is expected to demonstrate a little more mind when going about this task, and put in greater effort to first target the most damaging kinds of pornographic sites that feature violence or children. Perhaps help can be obtained from firms that have expertise in the area of locating specific URLs that link to content clearly defined as pornographic before creating any filters. It is also important to update these filters in real time as links come and go with the traffic. Filters to block hate speech and pornographic content will take a far more serious effort to implement than what the PTA has demonstrated thus far. Being the regulator for the high-tech sector, the PTA is expected to show more intelligence in how it executes its tasks than resort to the blanket banning of websites based on simple keyword searches. This sort of lazy, ad hoc approach simply makes it difficult for stakeholders to take the regulator and its capacities seriously.

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## Deadly roads

DEADLY traffic accidents are, unfortunately, not unusual on Pakistan's roads. On Tuesday, at least 10 people were killed when a passenger coach overturned on the Jamshoro-Sehwan stretch of the Indus Highway in Sindh. Police officials say the driver was operating the vehicle at high speed, which caused it to overturn. Earlier, over the weekend, around 14 people were killed in a bus-truck collision on the Jhang-Khushab road in Punjab. As reported, one of the drivers was apparently drowsy and lost control of his vehicle. The high death tolls in these two accidents within the span of a week are part of a much bigger problem. The fact is that thousands of people are killed or injured in road accidents annually in this country. According to figures compiled by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics for the period 2004-13, on average 15 people die every day in Pakistan in road accidents. Punjab, overall, has the highest number of yearly traffic accidents.

Of course, the main reason behind such high figures of deaths and injuries on our roads is the fact that whether it is the nation's highways, or congested urban roads, there is very little by way of regulation. For example, the roads themselves, in many cases, are in pitiful condition, with potholes and other hazards. Moreover, the fitness of many vehicles — especially passenger buses and freight trucks — is highly questionable, as are the qualifications of many of those who get behind the wheel. Drivers are confident that the payment of a small bribe will be enough to make up for a lack of vehicle fitness or the driver's road sense. One way of controlling this chaos could be to have Motorway Police-like units patrolling both the highways and city roads, with officers cracking down on unfit vehicles as well as errant drivers. Road conditions must also be improved. Unless such measures are seriously considered, there is little likelihood of seeing a drop in the number of accidents and the resultant deaths.

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## CNIC re-verification

IT is a monumental folly and possibly sinister in intent too. By his own admission, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan does not know much, or indeed anything at all, about the CNIC and passport that allegedly belonged to assassinated Afghan Taliban leader Akhtar Mansour and that may have been recovered from the site of the drone attack. But the facts-free interior minister wants to plunge headlong into an administrative exercise of staggering proportions to supposedly re-verify all CNICs issued by Nadra. So critical is the task, according to Chaudhry Nisar, that he has given his lieutenants in the interior ministry just 48 hours to draw up a plan for the unprecedented project. Nothing, it seems, will stand between the interior minister and his quest for a fool-proof registration system. Nothing except for perhaps the facts themselves.

At every level of Chaudhry Nisar's pronouncements since the Mullah Mansour killing there have been questions. For one, the interior minister has casually admitted to comprehensive corruption in the ranks of Nadra. This after three years of him heading the interior ministry and lecturing the country at every opportunity along the way on the 'great' reforms he has implemented during his tenure. So, why is corruption still so endemic in Nadra? The admission of corruption means the proposed purge of fake or unverifiable CNICs will also be flawed. Why should Nadra staff be expected to fix the problem of false identities when it is itself the reason the problem exists in the first place? Finally, how would a re-verification drive, no matter how elaborately conducted, address the problem of the state itself providing false identities to Afghan Taliban leaders? Among the various possibilities of how Mullah Mansour came to be in possession of a Pakistani passport and identity card, it is entirely likely that he was provided these as part of the sanctuary that Afghan Taliban leaders enjoy in Pakistan. Will Nadra realistically have the power to cancel such documents?

Perhaps most troubling in the interior minister's decision is the scale of disruption it may cause in the country. The re-verification exercise could easily unravel into a farce and little more than a petty extortion project, especially given the power of a CNIC and the relative ease with which individuals can be harassed by Nadra. Misdeeds of Nadra officials could also trigger inter-provincial spats and ethnic tensions if migrant communities in urban centres are pressed by Nadra officials for documents they do not possess or that are only available in their native districts. So, rather than harass or inconvenience peaceful, law-abiding citizens of the country and cause major disruption nationally, here is a better idea for the interior minister: devote some of the interior ministry's resources to determining how Mullah Omar, Mullah Mansour and, now, Haibatullah Akhunzada came to take up residence in Pakistan.

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## Laundered funds

A LINE is doing the rounds with increasing conviction that within the existing legal framework the government is powerless to scrutinise the source of funds that leave the country through official banking channels. Most recently, the line has been repeated by the chairman FBR before the Public Accounts Committee, when he stressed that the laws prevent his department from proceeding against individuals known to have accumulated undeclared assets abroad. He even mentioned some amendments to the legal framework that the FBR has suggested be made in the forthcoming budget to plug the loopholes that have created these implied money-whitener schemes.

Unfortunately though, the line itself is totally unconvincing. The legal framework in Pakistan gives plenty of options to investigate money laundering, and all that is needed is the will to follow up. If it was indeed that easy to move money out of Pakistan through banking channels, why would the State Bank governor tell a Senate committee back in 2013 that almost \$25m is smuggled out of the country in suitcases every day? The only reason there is a suitcase trade in foreign-currency cash is because using banking channels is not as straightforward as it is made out to be. Pakistan has one of the highest pools of tax-evaded wealth in the world, and the vast amount of Pakistani money parked in Dubai real estate is an indication of this. This money, that dare not speak its name, needs to move around, and often travel into and out of the country. For this purpose, an elaborate system has come into being to fulfil this purpose without triggering alarms. In large measure this system operates through the collusion of government departments, through the use of offshore companies and through loopholes in the law or the unwillingness of state officials to vigorously implement it to intercept funds. If the quantum of funds to be moved is large, the hired expertise of high-level transaction lawyers and chartered accountants is also pressed into service. This system has been plying its sleuthful craft for decades now, and those invoking impotent laws to argue their helplessness are, in reality, afraid of disrupting this machine that gives white-gloved treatment to the rich and powerful. If the state wants to shut down this apparatus, it needs no new laws. But the sad fact is it does not.

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## Missing foreign minister

As the Nawaz Sharif-led set-up at the centre completes its third year in power, the nation is still without a full-time foreign minister. The prime minister holds the critical portfolio himself, although power has been delegated somewhat by farming out responsibilities to the adviser on foreign affairs, as well as the special assistant.

However, as lawmakers belonging to the opposition PPP and PTI pointed out recently, the lack of a dedicated foreign minister is inexplicable, especially considering the numerous crises Pakistan has to deal with on the external front.

Every state worth its salt needs a focused and experienced hand that can plead the nation's case and protect its interests on the foreign front. And when a nation has the type of complex foreign relations that Pakistan obviously does, the need for a consummate top diplomat becomes even more critical. So it is difficult to fathom why the prime minister refuses to assign the foreign affairs portfolio to a dedicated individual, apart from the fact that he wishes to make all key decisions himself.

The opposition's demand for a full-time foreign minister is justified, and Mr Sharif should ensure the vacant slot is filled without delay. Having said that, it must also be acknowledged that when it comes to foreign affairs, as well as other 'sensitive' portfolios, the civilians play second fiddle to the men in khaki.

It is a barely disguised reality that significant 'input' from the security establishment goes into setting the foreign policy agenda. In a democratic dispensation, where parliament is supreme, this state of affairs is unacceptable. The military should be consulted on key issues linked to national security, but decisions about foreign affairs must be made in Islamabad, not Rawalpindi. Of course, the control of external affairs is but one part of the overall lopsided civil-military relationship in Pakistan.

The country needs a dedicated foreign minister, empowered by the prime minister and cabinet and answerable to parliament, to steer it through the often turbulent waters of external affairs.

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## CII: of what use?

If the Council of Islamic Ideology's regular anti-women pronouncements were turned into satirical theatre imagine the shock value, given the body's peculiar fixation with all things women.

The latest example focuses on the CII's 75-page women protection 'bill'. Clearly in response to the Punjab Women Protection bill (rejected as 'un-Islamic' by the CII), the council, under its chairman Maulana Mohammad Khan Sheerani, has suggested that a husband be allowed to 'lightly' beat his wife 'if needed', among other such clauses.

Surely the word 'protection' has been misconstrued. Another recommendation is that while women should be allowed to enter politics they should not be permitted to receive foreign officials.

Read: CII justifies 'light beatings' for errant wives

What is lost on the council is that Pakistan was the first Muslim country to elect a female prime minister with potential for the same in the future given the number of committed women legislators. Moreover, Pakistani women have proved themselves as the best ambassadors for their country as sportswomen, filmmakers, diplomats, pilots, scientists, doctors and entrepreneurs.

With its history of baseless attacks on women, will the CII be allowed to dictate how women are treated and how they should conduct themselves? Or will parliamentarians exert themselves to ensure that such pointless interventions are not taken seriously?

It is exactly this sort of regressive mindset that hampers the implementation of pro-women legislation that is the outcome of years of relentless campaigning by rights activists.

Among its many interventions, the CII has rejected the admittance of DNA testing as primary evidence in sexual assault cases, insisting on the testimony of four male witnesses; argued that nine-year-old girls are of marriageable age; and criticised the existing law that requires written approval from the first wife if her husband wants to marry a second time.

Further, it had a hand in thwarting the passing of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) bill in 2010 in the Senate, terming it un-Islamic because it would increase the divorce rate.

While it is true that the CII's recommendations are not legally binding, politicians have often failed to resist the religious body's assault — a case in point is the KP government that despite the CII's known views on women enlisted its help in vetting the provincial domestic violence bill.

If the CII were trying to effect genuine social change, it would also take note of non-women issues and offer recommendations to end extremism and curb hate speech besides lobbying for greater protection of minorities.

In any case, in a freely elected democratic polity, should there be space for an obsolete body such as the CII? Parliament is already bound by the Constitution to legislate in a manner that does not deviate from Islamic principles. Perhaps that is the most pressing argument in favour of disbanding the CII.

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## Vilifying Afghans

THE sobering and serious business of unveiling spy accusations against a neighbouring country took a turn for the farcical and unpleasant on Thursday. Addressing a news conference, the voluble Balochistan Home Minister Sarfaraz Bugti made an extraordinary series of claims backed up by a gimmicky confessional video of a suspect, a tactic pioneered by the security establishment and that now appears to have become standard operating procedure to sway the court of public opinion. The allegations are certainly alarming: the five arrested Afghan nationals (and one Pakistani), apparently residents of Pakistan as long-term refugees, were accused by Mr Bugti of working for the Afghan intelligence service NDS and carrying out a bombing and killing campaign across Balochistan. The arrests and Mr Bugti's hard-hitting statements are likely to further escalate tensions with Kabul that has been bitterly critical of the presence of the Afghan Taliban on Pakistani soil. The spectacle of accusations and recriminations is something that Pakistani and Afghan officials know well, but the latest round comes at a particularly difficult time. Mr Bugti made no mention of it, yet the killing of Mullah Mansour in Nushki and the coronation of Haibatullah Akhundzada allegedly inside Pakistan are likely to pile further international pressure on Pakistan and make the outside world less sympathetic to claims of so-called foreign interference in Balochistan.

Where Mr Bugti crossed the line of behaviour expected from a senior public official was in his remarks against Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. Long marginalised, vulnerable and severely disadvantaged, Afghan refugees in Pakistan should not be made to suffer the verbal assaults of government officials who cloak their bigotry and racism in nationalist

rhetoric. The state of Pakistan has legal and moral responsibilities towards refugees, especially those who are the victims of a war that Pakistan first helped fight in the 1980s, and, over the past decade, may have indirectly helped sustain. Moreover, when senior officials like Mr Bugti launch a tirade against entire communities, local officials may interpret it as a licence to harass and persecute the targeted community. While surely some Afghans have been involved in crime in Pakistan over the years, never has any evidence been presented to suggest that as a group Afghan refugees are statistically more prone to violence and crime than Pakistani citizens. What is clear is that while a full-blown Islamist insurgency has raged in Pakistan over the past decade, Afghan refugees have not been known to embrace it. Mr Bugti may want to reflect on that.

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## Cutting development

IT seems there is no escaping the fiscal straitjacket that the country is in, no matter what the level of external assistance. Next year's PSDP allocations, announced yesterday, show that a severe shortage of resources is hitting projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. This underlines the point that pursuing a large developmental agenda on the back of external assistance is an unviable proposition. The meagre increase of 14pc in the PSDP for next year shows there is no substitute for mobilising own resources, and that can only come with deeper and substantive reforms that help broaden the base of taxation. The gap between resources required and those available cannot be reliably bridged with external resources.

The Planning Commission had asked for Rs900bn to be able to complete ongoing CPEC projects, but Rs655bn has been allotted. Given the large amount of unbudgeted expenses, as well as security-related overruns running into Rs100bn annually for a number of years now, and the rigidity of the country's outmoded revenue system, the finance ministry has struggled to keep to its deficit target this year largely by slashing development spending by almost a third. Now the same dilemmas are presenting themselves for next year when a number of CPEC projects will be at a crucial stage. This is especially troublesome because these projects are being counted on heavily to help lift growth. When the resource envelope constrains us between security and development, and particularly when the impact of that choice falls on those areas that are central to next year's growth, the enduring rigidity of the revenue system must come under focus. The government has done a noteworthy job, mobilising revenues in its three years in power, but largely through burdening existing taxpayers and businesses rather than broadening the base. The results are there to see, with crucial CPEC projects being forced to bear the brunt of the budget axe. Tax reforms are becoming more and more urgent in Pakistan.

## Media & democracy

DURING the hearing of a petition against obscenity on television channels in the country, a three-member Supreme Court bench recently articulated a very valid concern about Pemra. The judges pointed out that while the electronic media regulatory authority concerned itself with issues of obscenity and vulgarity, it made no effort to rein in the attempts to undermine the democratic set-up, provoke fascism and incite sectarian tensions that on its watch continued unchecked on television. Certainly, the tone and tenor of talk shows frequently crosses the boundaries of what can be considered civilised — even animated — discussion. Even more importantly, the programming content is deeply problematic. Reporters Without Borders in a recent report described the Pakistani media as being “among the freest in Asia when it comes to covering the squabbling among politicians”. That characteristic would not by itself, however, serve to increase public cynicism towards the civilian political establishment and by extension, the democratic system — were it not for the silence that the media adopts where other centres of power in Pakistan are concerned.

The debate on the direction of Pakistan’s electronic media must, therefore, be expanded to consider the repercussions not only of what is said, but what is left unsaid. Far from being the watchdog of democracy and guardian of the public interest, the media has become complicit in undermining the system because it allows the actions of the establishment — its political meddling as well as its business interests — to go almost entirely unexamined. Human rights abuses in Balochistan, or activists highlighting them, also get no airtime. Few independent assessments of the situation on the ground are emerging from Fata even with the winding up of military operations in the area. Sometimes, the blinkered coverage is the outcome of self-censorship — characteristic of a media psyche subjected to years of ‘press advice’ from military authorities in the past as well as outright violence from various quarters, including state and non-state actors. On other occasions though, in an increasingly frequent trend, news blackouts in specific instances are the result of direct instructions conveyed by the establishment to the media to desist from covering issues deemed ‘sensitive’.

The media has partly itself to blame for this. Instead of presenting a unified front against forces inimical to democratic ideals, the ugly, internecine rivalry among various media houses — a dimension of the sector’s corporatisation — has allowed space for these elements to erode the fourth estate’s essential oversight role. A fragmented media landscape is unable to either protect its own or fulfil its responsibilities towards society. When issues that must be aired and subjected to rigorous discussion are sanitised or mothballed altogether, news coverage and political debate lacks depth, nuance and context. That serves only the cause of illiberal forces who would rather the public remain uninformed, and hence all the more easy to manipulate.



## PM's absence

IT is an unprecedented and, curiously, a constitutionally unforeseen event: a serving prime minister, the chief executive of the federation, undergoing surgery that will possibly keep him out of the country for several weeks. In terms of a government that is effectively frozen, the event is not new. During multiple political crises over the last two parliaments, the federal government has for long stretches been forced to or opted to put regular governance matters on the back-burner. But it is entirely new for a prime minister to be absent from the country for such a long period and for the federal government to go through the formal budget process without the chief executive. While the government has announced that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will convene the federal cabinet via videoconference a day before he undergoes surgery, it has not clarified what the rules of business state on the matter. There may not be an immediate constitutional crisis, but the situation that has arisen demands at least two things be done.

First, the government should institute the practice of the chief executive undergoing an annual medical examination and the results being shared with the public. The US, for example, has a periodic medical examination of the president, the results of which are released by the White House and that contain specific information on the state of his pulmonary, cardiology, neurological and musculoskeletal systems, among others. The health of the chief executive is a matter of legitimate public interest and democratic concern. Mandating a periodic physical examination of the prime minister will boost transparency and confidence in the system. Second, the government needs to look into whether the Constitution itself or the rules of business need to be changed to introduce a formal temporary transfer of the chief executive's authority. It is one thing for Mr Sharif to repose great trust and confidence in Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, but quite another to simply hand over the reins of the federation to a federal minister, who is technically equal in rank and authority to other full federal ministers. The constitutional system of governance works by having the public elect its representatives and the elected representatives choosing a chief executive. The government does not belong to Mr Sharif or any other prime minister and it cannot be treated like a private business where ad hoc arrangements are made. A constitutional lacuna has been identified — the government must now address it.

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## Alisha's death

THE death of Alisha, a transgender activist, is a tragic tale of how our society treats those who do not have a definite gender identity. Requiring urgent medical attention after she was shot multiple times, Alisha, who was the fifth member of the transgender community to be attacked this year in KP, was rushed to hospital where, according to reports, doctors delayed treatment as there was confusion about whether to lodge her in a ward for male or female patients. Derisive remarks alluding to the sexual orientation of the transgender community were made as alleged by those who accompanied Alisha to the hospital. This depressing attitude speaks volumes for the kind of prejudices ingrained in a society that cannot see even a dying human being in a compassionate light.

While there is a need to investigate the murder and bring the guilty to book, there are other aspects to the situation that demand serious introspection. Such an exercise should not be restricted to those who mock the transgender community, but also include people who call for equal rights and dignity for its members. Did we protest loud enough as Alisha lay dying? In cases like this, there is always regret that we could have been a little more persistent in advocating protection and respect for the vulnerable and the easily discriminated against segments of society. Greater assertiveness is needed. The media has been, for its part, highlighting the transgenders' case regularly, even if it has not been able to go beyond the already well-known features of their lives. It is time that others, most importantly the political parties so far missing from the scene, showed up and demonstrated some courage in the fight towards restoring dignity to this group of Pakistanis. The politicians must join in to boost the efforts of those who have raised their voices against the treatment meted out to a community that has always been kept at a distance from society's conscience.

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## Security challenges in Balochistan

BALOCHISTAN, the so-called strategic asset that is always seemingly bleeding, has been in the news for several reasons lately. There has been, of course, the global focus on it ever since Akhtar Mansour, the Afghan Taliban leader, was killed while travelling across Balochistan. Since then, the elevation of Haibatullah Akhundzada, allegedly an event that took place in Balochistan, has sustained the interest in Pakistan's geographically largest province. Balochistan has also been in the spotlight because of aggressive new claims by the security establishment and its allies that the province has been virtually overrun by foreign spies, from Afghanistan, India and, for now, several unnamed countries. Yet, the original security problem there – a low-level Baloch insurgency that is now the longest in the province's history – continues. The outgoing month has been especially bloody, with losses on both sides as militants have claimed bomb and gun attacks and security forces the elimination of militants in firefights. Is there hope for Balochistan?

Perhaps the first step that needs to be taken is for the country to come out of its denial over Balochistan. Political leaders like Balochistan Home Minister Sarfaraz Bugti may rail against the NDS and Afghan refugees, but the IED that killed two FC personnel in Awaran and the two dead bodies of government employees recovered over the weekend from Kech occurred in areas that are hardly Afghan stamping grounds. Meanwhile, the political government in Islamabad appears to have all but given up on a political settlement in Balochistan despite the PML-N having installed its own party's leader in the province as chief minister. The overall media, too, by its lopsided coverage of Balochistan has exacerbated the national problem of perceptions and understanding of what ails the province. With the aggressive, almost hysterical, coverage of claims of foreign interference in Balochistan in recent weeks, the disaffected Baloch may well be wondering if they were better served when their province was effectively under a national news blackout. More than ever, there is a yawning chasm between what is alleged to be taking place in Balochistan and what the swathes of the Baloch population are experiencing.

Ultimately, if the Baloch insurgency is to be brought to an end, the lead will have to be taken by the political class. The security establishment, now under three successive army chiefs spanning over a decade and a half, has demonstrated that it still sees Balochistan from a regional security prism rather than as a province with legitimate socioeconomic and political grievances. But is the political class capable or willing to take lead on Balochistan?

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## Education report

ADVERSELY impacting the poor, Pakistan's state of public education is nothing short of a national crisis. The results of decades of neglect towards education investment are aptly illustrated in Alif Ailaan's report Pakistan District Education Rankings, 2016. For its fourth edition, the advocacy group tracked the performance of 151 districts in the country, only to find a decrease in overall education quality and infrastructure. Alarming, 81pc of all government schools operate as primary schools (that is 124,070 primary schools) and the remaining as middle, higher or higher secondary schools. These figures indicate that the state can provide only one in five children with an opportunity to continue his or her schooling. This is a violation of constitutional rights — under Article 24-A, the state is responsible for educating each child up to the age of 16. This crisis will cause Pakistan to miss the SDG of inclusive and equitable education, just as the country failed to meet the MDGs.

Using education (enrolment, retention, learning, gender parity) and infrastructure (facilities) markers, Alif Ailaan found scores of one-room primary schools employing lowly trained teachers; this resulted in high drop-out rates — 41pc of all primary schoolchildren dropped out of school, whereas 43pc (aged 15 and above) had never attended. Meanwhile, politicians have made negligible efforts to improve education in their respective constituencies. Why have there been no enrolment drives? Why is there no evidence of efforts to improve school infrastructure and the quality of teaching? What is being done to increase the number of secondary schools? These are key questions the politicians must be made to answer. While there are some signs of hope, eg the KP report card shows that the province is doing better since 2015 on enrolment and gender parity, despite a drop-out rate of 35pc, there is vast ground to be covered before schools in the country can truly function as institutes of learning. For starters, the state can address the infrastructure problem: the report indicates that around 48pc of schools have no toilets, boundary walls, electricity or drinking water; hence, the use of school management funds must be probed. This is necessary as matters will not improve unless it is ascertained how effectively and transparently education budgets are spent. And as long as the government does not fulfil pledges of spending at least 4pc of GDP on education, an unschooled, disillusioned young generation will have dire implications for the future.

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## Hospitals targeted

DEPLORABLE as war is, what is absolutely reprehensible is when hospitals are deliberately targeted during hostilities. As World Health Organisation figures released on Thursday show, this atrocious practice is widespread in conflict zones, with all sides — state and non-state — guilty. The UN's health agency says over the last two years, nearly 960 people have been killed in attacks on hospitals. The victims have included doctors, staff, patients and visitors. What is especially shocking is that, as per the report, over 60pc of the attacks were deliberate. Syria, where a brutal civil war has ground on since 2011, has witnessed the highest number of attacks including by Syrian forces; however, a variety of other actors have also been involved in the attacks in numerous theatres of conflict. The Americans in Afghanistan and the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen have also attacked hospitals, while Israel is known to take aim at medical facilities, especially during its merciless forays into Gaza.

While it is true that all sorts of atrocities occur during wartime, combatants are expected to respect the sanctity of medical facilities, and targeting hospitals is considered a war crime. True, little moral clarity can be expected from militant groups that indulge in terrorism, but states at least are expected to behave in a more responsible fashion; they have no excuse for deliberately targeting health facilities. As WHO officials have rightly said, those who attack hospitals must be held accountable. In fact, as peace talks to end the conflicts in Yemen and Syria continue, the international community must press all sides to respect the sanctity of hospitals and other humanitarian facilities. Through no fault of their own, civilians are caught in the crossfire as hostilities continue in these theatres. They have been deprived of the most basic human needs with governments, rebels and militants all oblivious to the devastation these conflicts have spawned. The least the global community can do is to ensure that people trapped in war zones are not killed while getting medical help.

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## Rules during PM's absence

WHILE continuity is essential to the democratic project, it is clearly not enough. For democracy to be strengthened and deepened, our political leadership must embrace institution-building and move away from a wholly election-based understanding of what constitutes democracy. Unhappily, political governments still appear disinclined to take advantage of opportunities that come their way to strengthen the democratic system. Consider what has been the PML-N government's response to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's need to undergo heart surgery today. Government spokespersons have been keen to convey two points: one, that all the prime minister's health-related expenses will be borne by the family and not the national exchequer; and two, that the running of government will not be affected, or only minimally disrupted, by the prime minister's absence. On both counts, the government's position is either untenable or ought to be unacceptable.

The claim about the Sharif family bearing all expenses related to Mr Sharif's medical treatment may well be true, but it is just that — a claim. No documentation has been provided, and none is likely to be. The country will simply be expected to take the first family at its word and trust it will scrupulously adhere to strict standards regarding the separation of public money and private expenses. Clearly, the prime minister is entitled to many legally approved perks and privileges and he should receive high-quality medical care, but none among the government and first family, or the prime minister, appear to be concerned with transparent, verifiable processes. Politics and PR appear to be the government's dominant concerns. Where is the commitment to improving the systems and institutions of democracy?

More alarming has been the response to the genuine questions pertaining to a prime minister being away from the country during the crucial budget process. Once again, the government's priority appears to be to deflect political attacks rather than provide a definitive and legally based explanation for its actions. For example, the law ministry could have been tasked with drawing up a memorandum stating precisely the laws and rules under which government business will be conducted this week, and the attorney general of Pakistan could have been asked to verify the government's position. Furthermore, a governmental statement could have been made to parliament or the relevant parliamentary committee about which powers have been delegated and which will remain with the prime minister at all times. Finally, the Prime Minister's Office should have explained in a detailed statement the rules, process and security for a cabinet meeting to be convened by videoconference. All of the above could have been down side by side with the politics and PR battles the government sees fit to fight. Democracy ought to be about rules, systems and processes — and an ironclad commitment to transparency.

**Correction: The editorial earlier stated that Nawaz Sharif's surgery is happening tomorrow. It is, in fact, today. The error is regretted.**

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## Migrant crisis

AS another summer gets under way, disaster looms large on the southern Mediterranean with terrified people hanging onto flimsy boats capsizing in the sea's azure waters. Last week, more than 700 people from three migrant ships drowned while trying to reach Europe. Termed a 'massacre' by rescuers, the UNHCR describes this as one of the deadliest weeks in the Mediterranean since April 2015. Clearly, this indicates that Europe's migration crisis has taken a turn for the worse. The latest drownings, that push the death toll to 2,000 this year, underscores the increase in human trafficking along the North African coastline. It also reiterates Europe's failure to clamp down on traffickers despite an EU anti-smuggling naval mission patrolling the seas. Besides, closing European land routes by throwing up razor-wire fences in a display of collective panic leaves illegal sea journeys as the only option for migrants — 41,000 have been rescued at sea since the start of this year.

The recent disaster also points to the EU's failure to allocate collective resources to concentrated search-and-rescue operations — rescue operations are only being undertaken by humanitarian missions and Italian coastguard and navy ships. The next few months are critical with the summer weather facilitating profit-seeking traffickers focused on dangerous sea routes from Libya to Italy. Attempts to deter migrants from reaching Europe, such as the EU-Turkey pact, also raise questions of whether Syrians and Iraqis can still use land routes given that Europe's borders have been fortified. The possibility of being forced to take sea routes (via Libya) — as previously attempted — will increase the probability of drowning incidents, especially in warmer weather, when migrants are most likely travel. Workable solutions to the refugee crisis include an EU agreement on sharing the migrant burden and beyond the meagre number of refugees wealthy countries have pledged to resettle. Presently, the resettlement quota of European countries is unequal in the light of resources and space each state can provide. Also, European nations must be reminded of their pledge to help countries neighbouring Syria that house refugees under great economic stress. Providing war-weary populations (and other asylum seekers) a realistic chance of a better future in the long term will surely require negotiated political settlements to the conflicts and issues in their respective countries. But, in the meantime, shutting borders to keep migrants out will not stop desperate people when the danger at home exceeds their fear of death at sea.



## Tobacco epidemic

IT is difficult to imagine that only a few decades ago, smoking was considered glamorous and ‘macho’, with slick advertisements designed to promote tobacco products. Today, such ads urging people to light up have largely been banished from most media across the globe as the realisation about the deadly effects of tobacco has sunk in. Hence, as we observe World No Tobacco Day today, it is a good opportunity to take stock of the situation locally. Medical experts and activists have used the term ‘tobacco epidemic’ to describe the situation in Pakistan, with an estimated 100,000 people dying annually due to tobacco use in the country. Not only is smoking rife in Pakistan, the use of concoctions that fall under the label of ‘smokeless tobacco’ — such as naswar and gutka — is also common. As data reveals, the vast majority of global tobacco-related deaths occur in low- and middle-income states, to which group this country belongs. Considering our creaking health infrastructure, the state should not ignore this epidemic. While steps have been taken to clamp down on smoking in public places more needs to be done where enforcement is concerned.

Activists have suggested using plain packaging for cigarette boxes to make them less colourful and attractive; they say in countries where this has been tried, smoking rates have come down. Apart from the ailments and health risks linked to tobacco use — hypertension, stroke, lung disease etc — it is also a drain on resources, with experts saying Pakistanis spend billions of rupees on cigarettes yearly. Also, second-hand smoke amounts to punishing non-smokers. Campaigners have called for raising the tax on cigarettes to discourage smoking, along with stricter enforcement of anti-smoking laws. Moreover, it is essential to crack down on vendors who sell tobacco products to minors, while the easy availability of gutka and related concoctions must also be addressed. Today is a good day for the state to renew its pledge for a smoke-free, healthier Pakistan.

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