

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of November 2016

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Chinese investor in K-Electric

A LONG journey might be about to end for Abraaj Group, the Dubai-based private equity fund that had made the bold move of acquiring a majority stake and management control in the beleaguered Karachi Electric Supply Company back in 2009. Those were troubled days as everyone remembers, when the first-ever privatisation of a power utility in Pakistan was floundering. Nobody really understood what Abraaj was up to and the move was met with a heavy dose of scepticism at the time. The new management took control at a time when the utility, renamed K-Electric, had been abandoned by its management, rolling blackouts in Karachi were a daily occurrence and a bruising battle with the state-owned power utility Pepco, which supplied almost half of the city's power, had just seen a massive disconnection that cut off the power supply to the entire city.

Given the circumstances in which the acquisition was made, the positive track record of the Abraaj-led team must be acknowledged. It has restored the utility to profitability and brought load-shedding under control, even if through the morally dubious policy of increasing the incidence of load-shedding in areas that had been designated by it as 'high loss'. They have weathered some powerful storms along the way, from rains and heatwaves that led to prolonged blackouts, labour unrest and more bruising conflict with government departments that did not pay their bills, to clashes with the Ministry of Water and Power. But to its credit, unlike the management that preceded it, the team did not give up and persevered through it all to reach this point.

Now comes the time for Abraaj to enjoy the fruits of its efforts, and the prize is a substantial one at \$1.7bn for divestment of its 66.4pc stake, described by Abraaj as "one of the largest private-sector transactions in Pakistan". At this time, it is imperative to bear in mind that there is a strong and abiding public interest in this transaction. So even though it is a 'private transaction', there is a significant role for public authorities to play. The public interest lies in determining whether the improvement in the utility's affairs is being evenly experienced by all segments of the city's population or whether it is a reality only for the elites whose neighbourhoods have seen an uninterrupted supply of power and the bulk of the investment made in system upgrades during the last seven years. It is also in ensuring that the new investor, Shanghai Electric Power, has the capacity to operate in Pakistan, where some amount of transparency and disclosure is the norm. The deal is still subject to approval from the state, and these matters ought to be thoroughly vetted before the Abraaj management is allowed to walk off with its prize.

Attack on majlis

AS the state scrambles to contain the menace of sectarian militancy, the extremists have resorted to using novel methods, and increasingly hitting 'soft' targets. Mass-casualty attacks have thankfully been averted this Muharram — thanks largely to the multilayer security cordon around mosques, imambargahs and mourning processions. Perhaps in reaction, terrorists have decided to go low-tech. On Saturday night, suspects on a motorcycle tried to barge into a women's majlis in Karachi's Nazimabad area. Unable to enter the house where the event was being held, the gunmen took aim at people gathered outside; at least five people have been confirmed dead in the attack. This was the fourth sectarian attack during Muharram in Karachi. In earlier attacks also, people were shot outside their homes, while an IED was lobbed at a women's majlis inside an imambargah. Lashkar-i-Jhangvi al-Alami, an offshoot of the dreaded sectarian outfit Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, has claimed responsibility for the Nazimabad attack. During the months of Muharram and Safar, countless religious gatherings take place across the country. While the major mosques and imambargahs are relatively easy to protect, securing majalis inside homes — estimated to run into the thousands by police officials — is a very difficult task.

While more intelligence-based operations are needed to bust militant cells seeking to spread terror, a much bigger challenge stares the state in the face if it wishes to end sectarian bloodshed: confronting the ideological forces that provide oxygen to sectarian militancy. For several decades, the state looked the other way as jihadi and sectarian gangs spread their wings and became entrenched in society. Now, uprooting these groups is proving a formidable task. But it is pertinent to ask how hard the state is trying. While notorious sectarian killers have been eliminated in 'encounters' and attempts have been made to limit the movement of rabble-rousing preachers, especially during sensitive religious periods, the fact is that overall, sectarian groups in Pakistan still have considerable liberty to operate. For example, last Friday, when the state was unleashing its might against political protesters in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the ASWJ, a banned sectarian outfit, was able to hold a rally in the federal capital unhindered, in defiance of Section 144. Some days earlier, the leader of this outfit had met the interior minister as part of a Difa-i-Pakistan Council delegation. If the state is serious about implementing NAP and eliminating sectarian terrorism from Pakistan, it must confront these glaring contradictions.

Hockey's fortunes

ONCE more, Pakistan has failed to break the Indian jinx. In losing the Asian Champions Trophy final 3-2 in Kuantan, Malaysia, on Sunday, the team, despite showing good form, failed to overcome the psychological barrier in a high-pressure game against its arch-rival and conceded the match in its final moments of the match. The Pakistanis appeared to be on track when they bounced back from 0-2 at one point to level the score, but the end result was in India's favour. Even as Pakistan embarked on the tournament some two weeks ago, many commentators had written off the team, its position as defending champions notwithstanding. That the national team managed to avoid embarrassment by reaching the finals had much to do with the performance of the ebullient Haseem Khan who almost single-handedly kept up hopes with a flurry of goals. However, in the final analysis, the Asian tourney could not be termed as Pakistan's litmus test.

While competitive victories over South Korea and Malaysia deserve praise, beating teams such as China and Japan are no feather in Pakistan's cap. It needs to play European giants such as Germany and the Netherlands more often, even Australia, to be rated as a force to contend with. But one does not see that happening in the near future since the Pakistan Hockey Federation has quite willingly allowed the game to become politicised while its officials have remained too engaged in ego battles and joyrides to concentrate on the game's development. The advent of the private hockey league in India a couple of years ago infused new spirit into the game in that country, besides making it commercially viable. For its part, the current PHF regime has envisaged putting together a similar league this year; that raised some hopes of a revival. Unfortunately, the government refused to issue NOCs to the foreign players set to feature in the league and the PHF has since been forced to relegate the idea to the back-burner.

Credit rating upgrade

IN the midst of the sound and fury of Pakistan's politics, the news that a major credit rating agency has upgraded the country's rating, and given it a stable outlook comes as a breath of fresh air. The action is in recognition of the country's growing fiscal and external buffers. Clearly, the noise and chaos on the streets have not made much of an impression on foreign creditors, which is the way it should be. Pakistan's ratings have been on a slow upward climb since 2008 when they hit rock-bottom, and the upgrade from Standard and Poor's is the third since then, with the last one coming in 2015.

Moody's also upgraded Pakistan last year in two quick actions taken between March and June, reflecting the pace of improvement in the underlying macroeconomic fundamentals.

The acknowledgement of such an improvement is now largely ubiquitous. The fiscal deficit has shrunk and reserves have risen. But whatever the outside creditors might say, it is important to look beyond this to the real economy for signs that the progress is stirring movement in the right places. And on this point, which is of not much importance to external creditors who are only interested in the country's capacity to service its debt in the medium term, the economy's scorecard remains bleak. Savings and investment are not picking up, and whatever acceleration in growth that we see is coming largely from short-term sectors like construction. Exports continue their downward slide while non-oil imports have picked up to eat away any breathing room created by falling oil prices. Meanwhile, the country's debt burden has increased and its outflows connected with its debt-service obligations are expected to rise steeply by almost 60pc by 2020, according to IMF data. These are not encouraging signs. The verdict of the ratings agencies, also reflected in the IMF's assessment, needs to be tempered keeping these realities in mind.

Crisis defused

A RAPIDLY deteriorating situation has been salvaged — for now. It should not have taken direct intervention by the Supreme Court to defuse a grave crisis and have the PML-N and PTI behave like responsible national political parties once again, but in troubled times all sensible inputs ought to be welcomed. There is further reason to welcome the Supreme Court intervention: a substantive, independent inquiry into the Panama Papers revelations is now imminent, with the government and PTI given a chance first to present mutually acceptable terms of reference, failing which the court itself will impose the ToR for a prospective judicial commission. That is how it should be. At the intersection of the law and politics, all political actors must submit to the authority of the law and its final interpreters. If wrongdoing has been committed, it must be legally established and legally punished. If the country seeks a different political direction, it must come through the ballot box. A democratic system based on the rule of law is the only way forward.

The correct way, however, will necessarily depend on some introspection by the protagonists in the latest crisis. The PML-N governments in Punjab and at the centre are led by a coterie of vastly experienced politicians. A three-term prime minister, a four-

term chief minister, senior federal ministers who have won multiple constituency elections — in terms of electoral, democratic experience, the PML-N's leadership is second to none. And yet there is a strain of authoritarianism and anti-democratic sentiment in the PML-N leadership that is visible all too often. The PTI's threat to lock down the federal capital may have been illegal and undemocratic, but nothing can justify the coercive and rough measures the PML-N took to try and thwart the PTI's plan. Using the might of the executive and the blunt force of civilian law-enforcement against political opponents campaigning essentially for action against perceived corruption is not the kind of democratic rule this country needs or can find acceptable. As the chief custodians of the democratic project in this parliament, the PML-N needs to uphold systemic values that go beyond parochial interests.

The failings of the PML-N, however, are mirrored, perhaps exceeded, by the PTI. Unacceptable as the government's response has been, the PTI has implicitly — and on some occasions, explicitly — used the threat of violence and anti-democratic intervention to try to bend the government to its will. That needs to stop. The PTI must make it clear to the public, to the Supreme Court and to the government that it intends to respect the judicial process that is to unfold and that it will accept a verdict from the highest court in the land. There should be no street protests and agitation while the court and an inquiry commission carry out their work. Democracy means accepting due process too.

Media under fire

DURING the last few decades, journalists have been at the receiving end of the most egregious kind of violence in Pakistan. Today is the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists, an occasion to once again highlight the danger, indeed sometimes the mortal peril, that media persons here have to contend with — and the sheer indifference by the state that ensures its perpetuation. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 56 journalists have been killed in Pakistan since 2000 for reasons confirmed as being related to their work; that is, either in direct reprisal, during the course of an assignment, or in crossfire while covering combat situations. The most recent to fall in the line of duty were TV cameramen Shehzad Ahmed and Mehmood Khan, killed in the devastating bomb blast at the Quetta Civil Hospital on Aug 8 which also claimed the lives of some 70 lawyers. The manner of their deaths in a terrorist attack is unfortunately one that many journalists in today's Pakistan have to risk on a regular basis, with their job — almost by default — putting them in harm's way even when safety precautions are taken.

But what to say of the targeted killings — murders that have silenced journalists investigating crime and corruption, or singled out those perceived as being ‘biased’ against one or other competing power centres — that go virtually uninvestigated, let alone punished? To date, only in three such murders, those of Daniel Pearl, Wali Babar and Ayub Khattak, has anyone been held accountable. It is a fact undeniable that this country is a minefield for journalists. They are menaced by a number of actors, both state and non-state, and in ways that can be unmistakably direct or subtly coercive. Either way, these tactics have led to far too many deadly consequences among the journalist community. A pernicious effect of the government doing little more than mouthing platitudes every time a media person is killed, is the pall that descends upon the profession as a whole. Stories that should be investigated — those that define the media’s oversight role — fall by the wayside; the shackles of self-censorship curb important critiques of the state’s actions and embolden obscurantist elements. Notwithstanding the many problems that beset the practice of journalism in Pakistan today and the raucous free-for-all that often characterises news coverage, an independent media that is secure in its role, is critical to a democratic polity.

Gadani tragedy

IT is most famously known as the place where ships go to die, but it seems that the Gadani ship-breaking yard is also a place where workers perish on the job. Tuesday’s oil tanker explosion, which killed almost 20 workers, injured scores and left many trapped, should awaken us to the callous treatment of labourers in the informal sector. A mere two days before the tragedy, a small group of labourers from the ship-breaking yard had come to the Karachi Press Club demanding better working conditions and more attention to their safety. The next day, some of them were ordered into the doomed oil tanker to begin its dismantlement; they were told to work quickly, even though the tanker had six feet of oil in its hold, according to one injured worker. The explosion that followed once the workers fired up their blowtorches to start cutting through the metal was so intense that some individuals were hurled over a great distance and their bodies recovered from nearby villages.

The numbing frequency with which such incidents occur should not take the focus away from the hellish conditions in which these men are made to work. A number of workers and their representatives on the scene of the burning tanker have spoken of how poorly equipped they are to handle the hazards of their job. According to one member of the Gadani Municipal Committee, it was impossible to ascertain the exact number of workers trapped inside the tanker. It is the height of callousness that workers in their hundreds can be given dangerous work, without any effort being made to record their

names, numbers or the specific task they have been assigned. The rescue and emergency response was equally appalling; according to a member of the National Trade Union Federation, the fire broke out at 9 am but rescue operations began at 3.30 pm.

What does it say for the authorities, and society at large, when not a whimper of protest goes up for workers who die under such hellish circumstances? In the case of Gadani, when workers have protested, they have met with police brutality. Meanwhile, the owners of these shipyards should be made to meet the families of each one of the dead and injured workers and give compensation. They should be made to sit with the union representatives and listen to their grievances — although that is perhaps too much to expect given that they reportedly did not even reach the site of the accident where scores of charred bodies were being recovered. However, they must now be made accountable for not maintaining acceptable standards of workplace safety. There is no sense in going on about accountability anywhere in the country if we cannot ensure it for those who toil so hard for a living.

After Quetta attack

THE pain of Balochistan, particularly Quetta, is such that even those not directly affected would find it difficult to contemplate the recent tragedies without a shudder. The violence-weary city had not yet come to terms with the killing of 70 lawyers in August, when on Oct 24 another unspeakable slaughter occurred. This time the assailants crept into Quetta's Police Training Centre and, under cover of darkness, laid to waste one of the four hostels on the 150-acre facility. The lives of 62 recently graduated policemen were snuffed out under the most terrifying of circumstances. Survivors — the young men had all been unarmed — recount hiding behind beds and of being unable to distinguish between their colleagues and the attackers. The latter had come dressed in camouflage and used the despicable tactic of pretending to be from the army to get their targets to unlock doors. What the victims' families are going through can only be imagined.

What need not be left to the imagination, though, is the callousness of the state and official apparatus and functionaries, which could not even ensure, for example, that all the fallen made their final journey back home with dignity and in ambulances. Their relatives have horrifying tales to report: where some families received no word at all from the authorities, others talk of having to delay the mourning and burial process because they had to wait until VIPs had wrapped up their photo-op visits. And of course,

there is the valid observation that the state was more focused on the dharna-related events in Islamabad than the Quetta tragedy. If this were not shameful enough, there are other, deeply troubling questions that the official apparatus must be made to answer. This was not the first time the academy has been attacked; why was security so weak when even the speech delivered by the Balochistan IGP at the facility's passing-out ceremony on Sept 6 referred to it? Then, the young men had graduated and gone home, but were compelled to return for no specified reason — only to meet their deaths. Their families, in fact the public at large, should be taken into confidence about where that order came from, and why. Ultimately, Pakistan needs to face the fact that our law enforcers as well as the general public are in mortal danger from unflinching groups that deal in terror; measures must be taken accordingly across the board.

Mosul campaign

IF Iraqi forces manage to liberate the city of Mosul — under occupation of the militant Islamic State group since 2014 — it will be, symbolically, a major blow to the fanatical movement. As per the latest reports, the Iraqi military, aided by an assortment of Shia and Sunni militias, Kurdish peshmerga, as well as American forces, has entered this key city, where IS 'caliph' al-Baghdadi once held forth from within its historic mosque. However, the task before the Iraqi security forces is far from easy as thousands of IS fighters are reportedly holed up in and around Mosul, along with over a million civilians. As the UN has noted, the militants could use non-combatants as human shields. Iraqi forces must, therefore, proceed with caution and ensure the safety of civilians as they march upon Mosul. While IS still holds some other parts of Iraq, the return of Mosul to state control will be a psychological blow to the militant group and its dreams of a transnational 'caliphate'. Ever since the group established itself in Iraq and Syria over two years ago, it has supported or inspired a devastating wave of violence affecting different parts of the world, including this region.

However, if IS is successfully dislodged from Iraq, its fighters can still seek refuge in the group's Syrian fiefdom. Already, there are reports of militants crossing the border into Syria to escape the Iraqi advance. Defeating IS requires a holistic response from the international community. But for this to happen, there must be a halt to the civil war in Syria, as this bloody conflict has helped spawn a plethora of extremist groups. Will major global powers be willing to abandon the great game in Syria and unite on a one-point agenda of eliminating IS and similar terrorist groups active in the region, instead of

focusing on regime change in Damascus? Unless IS and other terrorist groups are targeted in both Iraq and Syria, success in Mosul will be a pyrrhic victory.

Crippling smog

THE thick veil of smog that has engulfed large parts of central Punjab for the last few days may lift soon, but it should leave behind some realisation that when environmental issues are not taken seriously, nature's revenge can be brutal. The dangers go beyond health and disruption of day-to-day life, as the large accident, caused by the smog in Hafizabad, shows — at least 12 people were killed and over 70 sustained serious injuries. By all accounts, this smog is different from all other episodes of the Punjab 'fog', as it has come to be called. This year it has come in the early days of winter whereas it usually occurs in late December. More importantly, the volume of particulate matter and toxic chemicals mixed in the smog has made breathing difficult for citizens, especially children. If this trend means that air quality in Punjab is deteriorating and the contributory factors are going to be increased once coal-fired power generation takes off in earnest, then it clearly indicates that the problem will worsen.

The Punjab government has shown a cavalier attitude towards environmental issues, particularly the impact of its many 'development' schemes, which are throwing up enormous amounts of dust into the air, as well as industrial emissions. Nothing illustrates this better than the report that air quality-measuring equipment given to the city of Lahore by the Japanese government is lying dysfunctional because workers have not been trained in its use. Clearly, the Punjab government would prefer to close its eyes to the environmental impact of its myriad developmental fantasies rather than take a measured look and develop the right tools and procedures to mitigate the environmental damage caused by large-scale construction, growing vehicular traffic, and the widespread use of wood and rubber as industrial fuels in the face of gas shortages.

The time has come to act. Nobody is suggesting that development or industrial activity should cease, but two things are absolutely crucial to understand. One is that environmental impact studies cannot be reduced to a mere formality, and the provincial government departments tasked with preparing the assessments for each project need to be staffed with people who have sound technical skills in the area. Second, the smog is a cross-border phenomenon, and although past studies point towards certain trace chemicals as coming from power plants across the border, one cannot argue that it is entirely the result of cross-border particulate matter. Both India and Pakistan are struggling with the smog phenomenon, which is worsening by the year. Yet they cannot

deal with it on their own. The smog is indifferent to our political and boundary disputes. Both countries will have to find a way to work together in tackling this menace, or else face its intensifying wrath year after year.

Spy vs spy?

Once India had gone down the path of targeting Pakistani officials in the high commission in New Delhi, there was a weary certainty of a similar response by Pakistan.

Eight Indian diplomats in Islamabad have now been identified via leaks to the media as belonging to Indian intelligence agencies. It can be assumed that the individuals were in fact sent to Pakistan as undercover operatives; it is an established tradition, with carefully observed though secretive rules, that diplomatic missions the world over are partly staffed with intelligence personnel.

The same may be true for the Pakistani individual earlier named in India and it will remain true going forward — neither India nor Pakistan are going to be able to rewrite the rules of diplomacy as practised globally. The Indian action and Pakistani reaction, however, indicate a deeper problem at present: diplomacy has been overtaken by ‘spy wars’.

When the security establishments on either side of the border begin to take aim at diplomatic missions, the old rules of diplomacy can go out of the window, making it difficult to normalise the situation relatively quickly. In this case, deep anger and a sense of grievance appear to be animating both sides.

The Pakistani security establishment is enraged by the perception, manifestly encouraged by no less a person than Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, of Indian interference in Balochistan. Meanwhile, the Indian security establishment, perhaps to help deflect attention from its own failings and excesses in India-held Kashmir, has increasingly railed against alleged Pakistani sponsorship of militancy in IHK.

The suspicions on either side are not new. However, what makes them troubling is the renewed intensity with which they are being peddled and the willingness to take diplomatically disruptive actions based on those suspicions.

Compounding the problem is the civil-military dynamic in the two countries. In India, Prime Minister Modi and his national security team have explicitly played up the importance of the Indian military and intelligence apparatus and appear to have encouraged the trend of growing militarisation of Indian policy towards Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the overt tensions between the political and military leadership, especially over how to approach policy on India, have for now reduced the space for sensible, peace-enhancing decisions. Yet, whatever the new realities that shadowy forces may be trying to impose, the oldest of realities remains unchanged. India and Pakistan must eventually return to trying to resolve mutual disputes diplomatically and peacefully.

Karachi train accident

THURSDAY morning's devastating train wreck in Karachi — the third crash in less than two months — should serve as a wake-up call for the railways authorities. In September, two separate train accidents had occurred on the same day — one near Multan, the other in Fateh Jang — resulting in a number of casualties. The loss of precious lives should prompt some soul-searching in this key ministry, so that Pakistan's railway infrastructure can be made safer. Over 20 fatalities have been confirmed in Thursday's crash involving two passenger trains, one of them stationary, near the Landhi station. There were conflicting reports in the media about what could have caused the crash; a Sindh government official said the moving train was given the green signal by mistake. However, the railways' minister, in reported comments, blamed the drivers for not following directions. As said countless times in such cases, a thorough, meaningful probe should be initiated to ascertain the exact details that led to the crash.

It would be callous and irresponsible for officials of the railways ministry to simply express regret over the tragedy, announce a probe and compensation for the victims, and then move on to business as usual. Considering the frequency of such accidents, and the loss of life, what is required is a determined resolve from the officials to ensure that maximum precautions are taken to prevent such tragedies. Perhaps the ministry should conduct a thorough safety audit of railways' infrastructure and equipment so that it can identify the lacunae that allow such accidents to occur. It is, in fact, quite surprising that few such efforts have been undertaken to make the railways safer. Secondly, a modernisation programme for Pakistan Railways' colonial-era system is essential. While some steps have been taken in this direction, the pace remains glacial.

The railways are a vital mode of transportation, especially for the average person in Pakistan. The nation deserves a network that is affordable, efficient and, above all, safe.

Corporate governance reform

GOING by the early hype surrounding the forthcoming Companies Bill 2016, it would appear that the proposed legislation is gearing up to fill a major gap in Pakistan's code of corporate governance. We are told by the SECP chairman that the bill will empower the government to demand information on the beneficial owners of foreign companies that are registered in Pakistan. The current law, passed in 1984, does not allow the SECP to ask any questions about the investors involved in the offshore parent of any locally registered company. The absence of these powers was cited by the SECP as a major hindrance to carrying out any investigations of private parties in the wake of the Panama Papers disclosure. If it is true that the SECP is now moving to plug this hole, then it could be a meaningful step towards an updated corporate governance regime that takes into account contemporary realities.

Over the years, as Pakistan's economy liberalised and opened up to greater participation by private capital, both foreign and domestic, a range of legislation was put in place to provide protections to owners of private capital. These included laws like the Protection of Economic Reforms Act (PERA) of 1992, cited today as the greatest hindrance to investigating money trails associated with offshore companies, as well as a failure with regard to updating the Companies Ordinance of 1984. Our money-laundering legislation was toothless, as well as the disclosure regime mandated upon non-listed private companies. Net result has been the gradual opening up of a vast space of unaccounted for, and unaccountable, money trails along which billions of dollars can travel with little to no scrutiny.

All our laws relating to the governance and regulation of companies with offshore ownership are now in dire need of being updated. Listed companies operate under a strong disclosure regime, but private companies with offshore ownership can enjoy the best of both worlds: the opacity of their disclosure requirements as well as the protections afforded to their foreign transactions. One thing the Panama Papers controversy ought to have taught us — unfortunately, the politics unleashed by the disclosures overshadowed this — is the importance of updating our legislation to ensure that clauses meant for protecting investors are not being abused to shield wrongdoing such as money laundering. The new bill apparently is trying to do some of this by mandating disclosure requirements regarding directors of offshore companies with registered offices in Pakistan, as well as holding the company and its directors

accountable for any money laundering either might undertake. If this turns out to be true, as promised by the SECP chairman, it would be a step to emulate in other legislation as well, starting with PERA.

NDTV blackout

IT does not augur well when the state plays a role in sanctioning the media for supposed transgressions. In the first-ever instance of an Indian television channel being subjected to a blackout by the government of India, NDTV has been ordered off the air for a day on Nov 9 as a penalty for its coverage of the Pathankot airbase attack earlier this year. An inter-ministerial committee concluded that the channel had disclosed “strategically sensitive” details about the airbase while broadcasting news of the incident that took place on Jan 2. The committee’s official report alleged that the information could potentially have been used to cause “massive harm” to the lives of civilians and defence personnel as well as military equipment at the site. The Editors’ Guild of India has issued a strongly worded condemnation of the action against the channel as being a violation of media freedom and demanded the decision be rescinded.

While we are not in a position to judge the veracity of the allegations against NDTV in this instance — and there are indeed certain protocols attached to covering terrorist attacks in a responsible way — it is unacceptable for the state itself to take punitive action in such matters. The media in both established and aspiring democracies has always been chary of government regulations pertaining to its conduct because of the obvious possibility of partisan intervention by the state. Last year, NDTV ran a blank screen for an hour in protest against the Indian government ban on airing a documentary about a notorious gang rape in Delhi, thus pushing back against government attempts at content control. In most instances, therefore, the media follows a system of self-regulation, with varying degrees of success. However, it cannot afford to be complacent about its freedom or resort to self-censorship that undermines its very *raison d’être* — that of being a mechanism of public accountability. Last month, during the nationalistic frenzy that suffused the Indian media over purported cross-border ‘surgical strikes’, NDTV — seen as more temperate than other Indian channels — engaged in the extraordinary feat of muzzling itself when it chose to not air an interview with P. Chidambaram, the former home minister who questioned those claims of military adventurism. As NDTV is now finding out, governments with an authoritarian streak will use any opportunity they can to encroach on the media’s independence and circumscribe its watchdog role in ways both subtle and otherwise.

Returning militants

AMONG the decisions taken by Sindh's apex committee during its meeting on Thursday in Karachi was the move to compile a list of people "who have been to Afghanistan, Iran and Syria" recently, with emphasis on madressah students. Presumably, the committee has taken this initiative out of concern that extremist fighters from the Middle East's battlegrounds — as well as other regional conflicts — may be planning to return to this country. This is a wise move and should be replicated across the nation. Media reports indicate that thousands of foreign fighters, hailing from across the globe, have headed to Iraq and Syria since 2011 to fight for the militant Islamic State group and other jihadi outfits. Many of these militants have returned to their home countries. And as reported in this paper in August, over 650 Pakistanis are believed to be fighting in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. In fact, the National Crisis Management Cell has sounded the alarm about local militants fighting abroad, while independent analysts have raised similar concerns. Along with locals, it is estimated that some foreign fighters may also try and seek refuge in Pakistan.

With IS on the back foot with the Iraqi advance on Mosul and with the terrorist group also being pounded in Syria, there is indeed a very real chance that Pakistani fighters — along with some of their foreign comrades — may be looking to return to these shores. As it is, the presence of many sectarian and jihadi non-state actors in this country is a troubling reality. The prospect, therefore, of battle-hardened and even more radicalised fighters returning to Pakistan is not a pleasant one. The state must actively monitor any inflow of foreign-returned fighters. Despite a number of mass-casualty attacks in Pakistan over the years, this country has been spared the type of brutal violence that has ripped Syria and Iraq apart. To prevent the situation from deteriorating, it is essential that foreign-returned militants do not open a new front in Pakistan.

Centralised decision-making

IN the minutiae, the government may have had a legal and a constitutional case to make: the laws governing the executive can be interpreted differently and all governments seek to maximise executive power and discretion. But the Supreme Court is unquestionably the final interpreter of what the law permits and it has sought to use its power to a manifestly good end: curbing political leaders' impulse to centralise decision-making and exercise power in office imperiously. In dismissing the federal government's review petition against a Supreme Court judgement limiting the prime

minister's ability to act in fiscal matters without consulting the federal cabinet, the court has pushed back against arbitrary decision-making by the chief executive of the country, the elected prime minister. The government may feel aggrieved and try and preserve what it sees as the prime minister's sweeping constitutional powers, but it — and the country — would be better served if a basic question was considered: why should consulting the cabinet on all fiscal decisions be so problematic?

If the government were operating smoothly, efficiently and routinely through the appropriate institution, it might make sense to contest the finer points of the law and seek greater constitutional space for the chief executive to act in certain areas. But this government in particular appears to have an arrogant, dismissive attitude towards institutional decision-making. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif himself encourages the trend with his attitude towards parliament and his own cabinet. Rare is the occasion that he visits parliament. When he does, his party gives the impression that he is doing parliament and the country a favour by making an appearance. The federal cabinet too is largely ignored and kept collectively idle, until there is political capital to be reaped. That the government made a point of convening a cabinet meeting on the day Imran Khan was to have laid siege to Islamabad tells a story of its own — the cabinet deployed as a political tool rather than a chief instrument of governance. Then there are the critical inter-provincial bodies such as the CCI that are routinely ignored. Public regulatory and oversight bodies are also understaffed, under-resourced and regarded as an inconvenience.

The government is occasionally right when it complains that sensible and efficient decision-making by the executive is compromised by excessive interference by other institutions and encroachment on the executive's constitutional domain. But there is a line between rule-based, constitutional decision-making powers and arbitrariness and authoritarianism. Too often this government gives the impression that it sees the structures of the state as inconveniences that are to be bypassed. Democracy is as much about strong institutions as it is about a legitimately elected government. Winning elections is not a pass to damaging institutions.

Market dynamited

APPLYING a draconian law dating back to 1901 at a time when efforts are under way to bring in more progressive legislation is counter-intuitive at best and counterproductive at worst. On Friday, local authorities in South Waziristan's headquarters of Wana dynamited a two-storey building known as Al-Muhib market in the town's sprawling Rustom bazaar. Around 130 shops were destroyed in the explosion, which was carried out under the collective responsibility clauses of the Fata-specific Frontier Crimes Regulation. The punitive action was in response to the death of a major and injuries to several others on Nov 1 when an IED was detonated during a search operation by military personnel at the same market. A curfew had been imposed on the entire bazaar since the incident, forcing the closure of 6,000-plus shops, with the security forces taking control of the area.

No one can deny that mopping up pockets of militancy still remaining in the northern areas is a complex task fraught with hazards. However, resorting to archaic concepts of retribution will only reinforce the grievances of Fata residents and underscore that they are unequal before the law in their own country. In fact, a redressal of this sense of alienation — engendered by virtue of living under a political, administrative and legal system divorced from the rest of Pakistan — was considered critical enough to be included in the National Action Plan. One of the FCR's many clauses that are an affront to notions of fundamental rights is the concept of collective punishment whereby an entire group can be made to suffer the consequences of transgressions by a few people, or even an individual. Decimating the livelihoods of scores of shopkeepers and the resulting hardship for their dependents will not win hearts and minds in a region that remains vulnerable to militant inroads, where those internally displaced from recent military operations are still in the process of returning home. The move towards integrating Fata into Pakistan's constitutional fabric has been far too long in coming. Although certain amendments were made to the FCR in 2011 to dilute some of its harshest clauses, it is only now with the Fata Reforms Committee having come out with concrete proposals that we may be on the cusp of seeing the sun set on that notorious piece of legislation. This is a historic opportunity to ensure that residents of Fata are never again subjected to primitive codes of conduct.

Karachi sectarian attacks

DESPITE efforts by the state to bring peace to Karachi, sectarian killings in the metropolis continue, putting a question mark on official claims. Within a week, over 10 people have been murdered in the Sindh capital in suspected sectarian attacks. On Friday, six people were gunned down in different parts of Karachi. Three men, reportedly workers of the banned Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, were shot dead while returning from a rally organised by the outfit. In the other incidents, two members of the relatively apolitical Tableeghi Jamaat, along with a prayer leader, were murdered in separate incidents. The killings come in the wake of the recent attack on a women's majlis in Nazimabad, in which five people, including three brothers, were murdered. Police say Friday's violence could be a reaction to the earlier incident. On Saturday, police took into custody former PPP senator Faisal Raza Abidi in connection with the killing of the Tableeghi Jamaat members.

It is hoped these acts of violence do not inspire more tit-for-tat attacks. Community leaders, ulema and the state must all play their role in ensuring communal harmony. However, it should be reiterated that there is no Shia-Sunni conflict at the communal level in Pakistan as such. This country has thankfully been spared much of the communal frenzy witnessed in certain Middle Eastern states. Here, outfits like Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (ASWJ's old name) and its more virulent spin-off Lashkar-i-Jhangvi have, over the past three decades, played an instrumental role in bringing the culture of takfir (declaring others as being outside the pale of Islam) to the mainstream, along with physically eliminating the sectarian 'others'. This, in response, gave rise to Shia militant groups such as Sipah-i-Mohammad. Throughout this period, the state's response to the growth of sectarian militancy has been dismal, as 'banned' outfits have operated with relative ease. Hence, to put an end to the recurring cycles of sectarian violence, the state must permanently dismantle the outfits that provide the ideological and material support for violence.

Thalassaemia screening

PROGRESSIVE moves that will have a positive impact on societal health deserve being supported whenever the opportunity presents itself. At the moment, under consideration is a draft bill which, if it becomes law, will make it mandatory for all citizens to have their blood tested before marriage, as is the case in some countries with a high incidence of the disease. The aim is to detect whether either or both of the would-be spouses are carriers of the thalassaemia gene, so that they can then factor into their decision to wed

the chances of their offspring suffering from the same genetic disorder. The move has been under consideration for a while, but has been opposed by religious circles on the grounds that it would run counter to cultural norms. The Council of Islamic Ideology too has opposed making mandatory a blood test for those about to wed. Given this, the fact that the draft is being supported by Minister of State for Religious Affairs Pir Aminul Hasnat takes on greater significance. On Friday, in a joint meeting of the Senate standing committees on religious affairs and law, Mr Hasnat asserted that the issue was not related to religion but to improving the health of the nation. Replying to an objection raised by the chairman of the religious affairs committee, Mr Hasnat added that in case there were limited facilities for blood screening in the country, they should be increased.

This is just as it should be. Thalassaemia is a serious condition, and the incidence of it is not just high, but increasing, in Pakistan. As officials of the health ministry informed the Senate meeting, there are about 100,000 patients with thalassaemia major — they require regular blood transfusions — in the country, with an annual addition of 7,000 new patients. Regular blood transfusions are a lifelong necessity for persons afflicted by thalassaemia major, while there are thousands of others who are carriers of the gene but may not even be aware of it. The suffering of children with thalassaemia is heartrending, as is that of their families. Blood screening before marriage is the logical way forward, if only to make would-be spouses aware of any risks they or their children might face. Mr Hasnat's stance deserves full support; the draft bill ought to be passed into law in a timely fashion, with the state establishing blood-screening facilities wherever they are lacking on an urgent basis.

Shuffling CPEC

THE constant changes being made to the bouquet of power projects under the CPEC umbrella shows the weak state of planning that went into the whole affair. Latest reports suggest that two more projects may have been knocked off the list due to reservations about the use of imported coal. In one case, a 660MW initiative has been disallowed completely, and in another, the project sponsors have been told to arrange foreign financing and shift to local coal, meaning their timeline has been disrupted, putting a question mark on the entire project. At the same time, the government is rushing to commission a new 1200MW plant to run on imported LNG.

The changes come after similar midcourse alterations to the terms in the solar tariff, as well as the collapse of the Salt Range coal-fired power project. Given these frequent changes, it is becoming clear that foresight and planning were missing from the launch

of one of the biggest series of energy-sector investments ever in this country's history. This is one reason why calls for greater transparency in CPEC are so pertinent. Clearly, the impact of imported coal on the external account of the country ought to have been studied long before the projects were approved, granted an upfront tariff, and issued letters of support and generation licences. The change of mind came at the Private Power and Infrastructure Board sometime in October. This is the same body that approved the projects and granted them letters of support earlier in the year. Perhaps such a strong emphasis on coal-fired power plants was never a good idea to start off with, due to their impact on the external account as well as the environment. But the way the government is changing its mind in the middle of the project timelines sends a signal to investors that Pakistan remains a high-risk country, and dampens investor enthusiasm further.

US presidential polls

ELECTIONS in two-party systems are meant to provide the voter a clear choice, ie alternative paths to the future that the electorate must choose between. Rarely, however, has there been an election where the choice has been so stark. Tomorrow, the US will elect as its next president either Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton or Republican nominee Donald Trump. A bitter, divisive and lengthy campaign season has exposed both candidates in a manner that is both remarkable and alarming. Both candidates are manifestly flawed at a personal level — Ms Clinton because of her closeness to a moneyed American establishment; Mr Trump because his garish life as a television celebrity and high-profile businessman has exposed a predatory mindset against women and entrenched discrimination against minorities and special-needs groups.

It is at a policy level, however, that America does have a meaningful choice between the two candidates. Ms Clinton represents a worldview that America is not fundamentally broken and on the wrong path, but it does need to adjust its economic, trade and social policies to nudge the state towards a fairer, more equitable place on the back of a strong economy. She is in many ways a continuity candidate, perhaps a sensible, safe approach in a deeply divided polity. Mr Trump is a protest leader, a candidate who has explicitly positioned himself as an avatar of the general discontent that America is suffering from. The answer, as with so many other countries suffering from economic slowdown and a reconsideration of liberal immigration and social policies, for Mr Trump is straightforward — a return to a nativist, nationalist politics built on a rejection of free trade, a return to a muscular American military posture abroad, and a social vision that

returns so-called old America, read as white America by critics, to the centre of national politics. Ms Clinton is still the favourite to win, but the very fact that Mr Trump has the support of at least four out of 10 Americans and the warning by experts that polling forecasts could be wrong suggests how bitterly divided America is. It would be wrong to assume that had either party chosen another, more liked candidate, victory for that party would have been assured tomorrow.

What, though, of the day after? It is a tradition in American politics for the winning candidate to pledge to work for all Americans and to heal wounds. But the deep, gashing wounds of this extraordinary election will be difficult to heal. If Ms Clinton wins, she will still be confronted with an America that is the most divided since perhaps the Civil War. Where President Obama had to try and rescue the economy and America's standing in the world, a Clinton presidency will have to try and salvage the very fabric of American democracy from the destructive forces that have grown inside it. If Mr Trump wins, he will have to prove he is a completely different man to the candidate who has violently marched towards the presidency. The world anxiously awaits the results.

Respecting the court

THE Supreme Court is not a circus. It is the highest court in the land and it must be respected as such — no matter what kind of political theatre some are determined to create. The Panama Papers issue is now a matter before the Supreme Court, and the various positions of litigants and respondents are being heard by a bench led by no less than the chief justice of Pakistan. The court has indicated its seriousness of purpose and the politicians and respondents embroiled in the matter have publicly declared their willingness to submit to the court's adjudication on it. There must rest the issue until the court delivers its decision — and certainly the circus-like atmosphere created by competing political statements made to the media on the steps of the court needs to end forthwith. If the court itself is rightly reluctant to be seen to be casting a chilling effect on free speech, especially of the political variety, perhaps the politicians themselves should reconsider their behaviour on the sacred space that is the Supreme Court.

Inside the Supreme Court, on its premises generally and in the immediate vicinity outside, politicians should refrain from bickering and making unseemly political statements. It may not be their intention but the net effect is creating a perception that the Supreme Court is being politically influenced and coming under undue pressure. To be sure, the decision of the court could be career-altering, and perhaps life-changing, for some of the country's political leaders. But it is firm tradition and the sound

institutional practice of the Supreme Court that litigants and respondents speak through their lawyers alone. When the court wants to hear directly from political leaders, the court will ask them to speak. What applies inside the court should also apply immediately outside it. Hard-hitting political statements, exchange of barbs and jibes, and political banter with the Supreme Court building up in the immediate background of politicians making such statements, unacceptably drags the court into the political realm.

Where politicians are failing, it could have been expected that the country's senior legal fraternity would behave in a more dignified manner. But there too there is a spectacle being created as senior office holders of apex legal associations trade barbs and attack each other for alleged political affiliations and politicisation of the superior judiciary. Where lawyers are representing political clients, they can and should forcefully defend their clients' legal position. However, legal associations and regulatory bodies must not be run as political parties. Much like politicians contest politics, but must respect the sanctity of parliament, elected leaders of the legal community can take rival positions but must show regard for the sanctity of the judicial process. Let the Supreme Court continue its work in an environment free of undue pressure, threat or intimidation.

Khanani's arrest

THE arrest and subsequent guilty plea submitted by what was once one of Pakistan's biggest currency dealers raises important questions about the abilities of the country's law enforcers. Many members of the Khanani and Kalia families were involved in their currency business and arrested back in 2008 for involvement in hundi/ hawala transactions that allegedly led huge sums of money to be ferried out of the country. Estimates provided by the FIA at the time suggested that almost 40pc of all currency transfers from Pakistan were managed by Khanani and Kalia International, and in the months leading up to the arrest of some senior company officials, including owners and employees, in November 2008, billions of dollars had been flown out of the country. Even though the FIA raided their premises and confiscated their computers, meticulously going through the records, and filed multiple cases against the company and its owners and directors, there was not a single conviction.

Yet, within two years, the US authorities not only carried out a simple sting operation but were able to arrest and persuade Altaf Khanani to plead guilty in one of their courts. How did the Pakistani authorities lose this case so badly and the US act on it so fast? The answer is not simple, and the manner in which the cases were mishandled reveals

a lot. Across the board, a series of simple and difficult-to believe errors of this sort added up to acquittals for all accused and their eventual release. We could attribute this to incompetence, but it would take a very methodical sort of incompetence to achieve such a feat. Clearly, there were powerful forces at play to thwart the course of justice, and those forces apparently operated the machinery of the law very deftly through a series of interventions that were small enough to be invisible yet sufficiently meaningful to kill the case. It is difficult to point a finger at the political government of the time considering it had itself ordered the raids and investigation. The whole case presents an abiding mystery, and the recent arrest and guilty plea tell us that there was a fair amount of wrongdoing at work. It is imperative that the case be revisited in this country, and the government make a renewed attempt to seek justice in the matter in light of all the facts that have been revealed in the US court.

Nighat Dad's award

WHEN campaigning for democracy, digital governance and security, Pakistan needs determined individuals to lead from the front. In this respect, the achievements of Nighat Dad, a lawyer and digital rights activist, are valuable. Her Digital Rights Foundation supports women victims of online violence and educates the public about online privacy settings — especially significant as information is misused online. Over the weekend, Ms Dad was awarded the Dutch government's Human Rights Tulip Award 2016 — a well-deserved honour for upholding the right to internet expression and promoting women's rights. Founded in 2012, Ms Dad's not-for-profit organisation teaches women how to respond to online harassment; it has also campaigned against cybercrime legislation that gives the state powers of online surveillance. The citation explains how Ms Dad, despite receiving threats, has fought to improve adherence to human rights in a "unique and innovative way".

In 2012, when she started talking about online privacy, women and technology were perceived an uneasy fit in Pakistan. Since then, not much has changed for women internet users who are repeatedly harassed and trolled. Given societal conservatism, shame and 'honour' stop women from reporting trolls. With some 23m Facebook accounts registered in Pakistan, it is primarily women, especially those in the public domain, who are subjected to cyber bullying — for instance, journalists in unpoliced spaces. With cases of online sexual harassment increasing and the FIA investigating hundreds each year, online insecurity is reflective of misogynistic offline behaviour and can contribute to a culture of real-world fear. Uncovering the identity of trolls will not always stop the abuse, although naming and shaming them often works. In the longer

term, the state will need to consider, in partnership with digital rights groups, how social media can create proper online protections and a safe environment without focusing on censorship. Meanwhile, when determination drives innovation and human rights protection, it calls for praise. So does Ms Dad's promise of realising her next project — Pakistan's first cyber harassment helpline.

Repression in India-held Kashmir

IT was incredible defiance in the face of a horrifying loss: 16-year-old Srinagar teenager Qaiser Hameed, abducted and allegedly murdered in police custody, was buried last Saturday wrapped in the Pakistani flag. Then the mourners at the funeral itself were attacked for participating in the brave act of defiance and political protest — at least 35 individuals were injured, including several women. India seems determined to crush the very people that it falsely claims are an integral part of it; it has adopted a violent, ahistorical, inhumane approach that the world at large is, shamefully, all too willing to ignore. Yet, despite the world's silence and the state of India's atrocities against the people of India-held Kashmir, there are two facts that will not go away.

First, Indian repression in IHK does not work. Repression may push dissent and resistance further underground temporarily, but they eventually rise back to the surface. Kashmir is fundamentally a political problem, not a security one — the state of India cannot bludgeon its way to a new reality. Second, the Kashmir dispute is real and lies at the root of the dissent in the occupied territory and the troubles between India and Pakistan. Only a political settlement can pave the path to stability in all of Kashmir and general peace in the region — a reality that successive Indian governments, whether right-wing or otherwise ideologically inclined, have eventually been forced to recognise. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears to be doubly stubborn: it does not recognise the futility of repressive measures in IHK and it does not appear to accept the inevitability of dialogue with Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute. That has helped create a dangerous instability not only in the Kashmir region, but between India and Pakistan themselves. Unless Mr Modi is willing to reconsider his approach to both IHK and Pakistan, there is little hope of the situation becoming more stable across the region.

Here in Pakistan, the Indian intransigence should necessarily be condemned and solidarity demonstrated with the people of held Kashmir. Yet, care must be taken to not allow Indian wrongs to translate into fresh mistakes by the Pakistani state. The Indian repression in IHK must be forcefully highlighted at all diplomatic forums that Pakistan can access; lack of immediate progress and absence of international sympathy for

Islamabad's diplomatic position should not mean that this path be abandoned. Indeed, the diplomatic path should be reinforced rather than embarking on futile tit-for-tat spy wars that inevitably draw attention away from the central problem. Both the political and military leadership of the country have a sensible approach on India and Kashmir: no to even the possibility of war; yes to political dialogue without preconditions. That should continue to be the approach, no matter the provocations from India.

Women judges' quota

AFFIRMATIVE action, for all its merits in addressing systemic imbalances based on gender, ethnicity, etc cannot be justified in all situations. That realisation, it would appear, rightly clinched the debate on Monday in a meeting of the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Law and Justice to examine the Islamabad High Court Act (Amendment) Bill 2016. Introduced by the MQM's Nikhat Shakeel Khan, the bill proposed that a quota be instituted for women to be appointed judges in the Islamabad High Court. Aside from one, all the other committee members, including women legislators elected to the National Assembly on reserved seats, rejected the proposed amendment, asserting that appointments to the bench be made strictly on merit. It was also pointed out that there existed no precedent anywhere in the world for such a practice.

It may be tempting to draw parallels between the reserved seats for women in the legislatures and the suggested quota for women judges — particularly so given the objections to the proposal by female lawmakers elected on a quota — but such a comparison does not jibe with logic. Considered dispassionately, it is also frivolous. As vital as the job of legislators is to a functioning democracy, it is not a profession that demands the specialised skills required of members of the judiciary. Moreover, in professions such as law, medicine, etc where decisions can have a direct bearing on the lives of individuals, merit alone should be the touchstone of decisions about promotions. However, the lopsided gender balance in the legal profession as a whole is certainly a matter of concern. One way to address it is to institute affirmative action at the level of law colleges/universities with a quota for female applicants in order to bring more women into the legal fraternity. But for that to pay real dividends, it should go hand in hand with efforts to clean up the rough-and-tumble environment in the country's courts which also deters many female lawyers from going into litigation practice. There must be more initiatives along the lines of the committee set up by Lahore High Court Chief Justice Mansoor Ali Shah to look into matters relating to women judicial officers, including the hostile and boorish behaviour sometimes directed at them by lawyers and

litigants alike. Bringing gender equality to the bench and bar is much required, and deserves more attention from the legal fraternity than it has so far given to it.

Communal peace

THE past few weeks have seen sectarian tensions rising in Karachi. While the situation on the sectarian front has been fragile even in relatively 'normal' times, the most recent trouble began after five people were gunned down outside a women's majlis in the city's Nazimabad area on Oct 29. Last Friday, there was more sectarian bloodshed as six people were shot dead in different incidents. The victims included workers of the banned ASWJ as well as other religious outfits. Over the weekend, police detained several high-profile Shia leaders and clerics, including former PPP senator Faisal Raza Abidi, and separately, an ASWJ leader. However, on Monday, things boiled over as protesters in the Malir area calling for the release of Shia detainees clashed with police. The protesters were blocking the National Highway and a railway track; things went awry when attempts to end the blockade peacefully failed.

The current troubled times call for cool-headedness and rational thinking by all sides; specifically, community leaders and ulema must make an effort to ensure that all protests — which are the people's democratic right — remain peaceful. Confronting law enforcers in the streets will only aggravate problems. Individuals have indeed been arrested on questionable charges in this country in the past. However, the affected parties must let the law take its course and put up a solid legal defence. Moreover, the Sindh chief minister has said the ongoing operation is "across the board" and aimed at all elements "that want to destroy peace and sectarian harmony in this city". To prove the veracity of these noble intentions, the chief minister must ensure two things: firstly, all those involved in targeted killings, bombings and other acts of sectarian violence must be apprehended and punished regardless of their affiliations. Secondly, the ideological and political supporters of such killers, the so-called banned groups — who, at present, enjoy the freedom to organise themselves and spew sectarian venom across the country — must also face justice and be put out of business.

New Sindh governor

THE continuing fissures in the MQM appear to have claimed yet another victim. On Wednesday, after 14 long years at Karachi's Governor House, Ishratul Ibad found himself preparing to vacate the palatial colonial-era mansion to make way for Saeeduzzaman Siddiqui, a former chief justice of Pakistan. In his long innings, the outgoing Sindh governor weathered many a political storm, retaining his post despite several changes in Islamabad. Appointed in the Musharraf era, he kept his job during the PPP's rule and a large part of the current PML-N tenure. Perhaps the secret to Mr Ibad's longevity lies in his masterly and pragmatic conduct of politics; he served as mediator between political parties and also between politicians and the establishment. Originally a dedicated MQM man, holding high elected and party offices on behalf of the Muttahida, over the years the governor's ties with the party — particularly its unpredictable supremo Altaf Hussain — became more and more tenuous. In fact, in an outburst last year, Mr Hussain publicly excommunicated Mr Ibad from the MQM. Considering the factional crises currently afflicting the Muttahida, Mr Ibad's departure appears to be a natural outcome of these problems.

Seemingly, the first sign of real trouble came last month, when Pak Sarzameen Party chief Mustafa Kamal — who also owes his political origins to the MQM — launched a vitriolic attack against Ishratul Ibad, accusing him of 'corruption' and of serving Mr Hussain's interests. Mr Ibad responded to the stinging allegations in kind and after a second salvo fired by Mr Kamal, the matter appeared to be buried. However, while many would say that a new governor was long due in Sindh, it would be interesting to know if this nasty exchange — together with disagreement over how to control Karachi's politics among the powers that be — was responsible for the change of guard. After all, apart from Mr Ibad's reported association with the establishment, Mr Kamal was also alleged to have been launched by non-political 'scriptwriters'. The days ahead will tell what shape Ishratul Ibad's political ambitions take. Certainly, the new Sindh governor does not have the political background of his predecessor, though Mr Siddiqui is considered close to the PML-N. However, he will have to maintain a fine balance between the political and establishment actors that have influence over Sindh's politics, particularly the affairs that govern its metropolitan capital — indeed, a delicate and challenging task.

Iqbal Day closure

THIS is a country characterised by abysmal rates of literacy and school enrolment figures. It is also a developing nation with a population skewed heavily towards the young, which means that it is desperately in need of not just all hands on the deck, but for those hands to be trained and able too. It would, therefore, have been reasonable to expect that no temptation would be succumbed to that might impede the task of education; that schoolgoing children would be given every possible opportunity to carry on with their studies. But, as has been amply demonstrated time and again, a reasonable approach cannot always be expected from the state and its administrative apparatus. The latest example of this came when Sindh and Balochistan decided that educational institutions would remain closed on Nov 9 to mark the birthday of the national poet Iqbal. As the news spread, across the country parents were left puzzled; would the other provinces follow suit? Why had they not received notifications from the schools themselves, and in advance? In the event, most schools in these provinces were closed yesterday (though a handful continued as normal), but thankfully, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa refrained from taking this ill-advised step.

Despite the enormous challenge to make progress that lies ahead of the country, Pakistan seems to persist in encouraging working people and students to take time off. Add to these shutdowns that are brought about by strikes or violence, and educational institutions across the board complain of being unable to complete the academic course on time. Sindh and Balochistan may argue that, given the centrality of Iqbal's philosophy, a day of commemoration is required. But would the purpose not be better served by encouraging special programmes, seminars and discussions to be held in schools and colleges on this day, and ensuring that students are active participants? Surely, that is better than a day wasted by hundreds of thousands of students, to no identifiable gain.

Editorial: Trump's victory

THE American voter has demanded change — radical, wrenching and searing change.

In electing Donald Trump as the next president of the United States, change is what the American voter, and the world at large, is on the threshold of getting.

It is impossible to know at this stage what a Trump presidency will mean in practice, but with the Republicans retaining a majority the House of Representatives and the Senate and Mr Trump sweeping to an impressive victory in the electoral college, it seems likely that the new president will try and quickly deliver on his signature campaign promises.

Building a wall along the US-Mexico border; imposing severe curbs on immigration from Muslim countries; dismantling Obamacare; rewriting major trade deals; ramping up the fight against alleged Islamist militants abroad while pursuing an isolationist policy elsewhere — Mr Trump has every reason and likely congressional support to implement the agenda he promised the voter on the campaign trail.

Why has the US decided to change direction so abruptly and wrenchingly? Surely, some of the factors are international such as the growing and recognisable opposition in swathes of the developed Western world to the post-Cold War, neoliberal economic order.

Long-term economic stagnation suffered by large sections of the populations compounded by the great recession triggered by the financial crash in 2008 has undeniably helped create a volatile constituency for change. Yet, there does appear to be identity and racial politics at work too in the US case — so-called Old America rejecting the rapid social and cultural changes being pushed through by the more diverse liberal America.

Trumpian slogans ‘Make America great again’ and ‘Take back your country’ converged in a way where the desired American future is rooted in a perceived glorious past and now president-elect Trump has the mandate to try and effect his and his voters’ vision for America.

Undoubtedly aware of the anxiety his election has triggered inside America and in the world at large, Mr Trump’s first comments since winning a historic election in the early hours of Tuesday morning struck a conciliatory and empathetic note. Perhaps Mr Trump will seek to govern in a radically different manner to his divisive campaign strategy — he has consistently surprised many and surpassed the expectations of all. But it must also be acknowledged that all freshly elected presidents, including the incumbent, Barack Obama, set out promising to heal wounds and bring the country together, while immediately pursuing policies that do the opposite.

The facts are stark in America today: on the right and the left, the American voter is deeply unhappy about the path his country has been on and violently opposed to the political establishment across the ideological spectrum.

To Mr Trump have gone the electoral spoils; America and the world can only hope he will be a responsible leader.

Ties with Trump's America

INTO the void of uncertainty that is the policy outlook of US president-elect Donald Trump, has stepped Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

In congratulating Mr Trump on his election victory, Mr Sharif has struck a sensible note: recognising the essential democratic nature of his soon-to-be American counterpart's victory; noting the long-standing relationship between the two countries; and mentioning the need for the US and Pakistan to work together for the common causes of peace, stability, security and prosperity in this region.

Yet, there ought to be a clear-eyed understanding of the potential challenges ahead. The American voter has installed in power a US president and Congress that are neither drawn to the idea of deepening ties with Pakistan nor necessarily willing to continue the old ways of doing business between the two countries.

With Mr Trump, the major concern is obvious: he may choose to see Pakistan predominantly through an Indian, or perhaps even Afghan, prism.

The vexed issue of hyphenation — Pakistan on some issues wanting to be considered in the same policy breath as India and regarded separately in others — has long bedevilled the Pak-US relationship.

Complicating that issue are at least two factors. First, there is a government in India that may not only see a natural ally in Mr Trump, but could move quickly to try and cast Pakistan as a common rival of India and the US. Second, Mr Trump's campaign rhetoric on China and his need to perhaps reassure the world about some policy continuity could translate into a quick embrace of the current Indian government's priorities.

Certainly, the triangular Pak-India-US relationship is not a zero-sum game and Pakistani policymakers should not fall into the trap once again of viewing it so.

However, policymakers here should prepare for both possibilities — that a Trump presidency may seek to positively influence the Pak-India relationship, help defuse regional tensions and possibly nudge India towards addressing the Kashmir dispute, or

that it may veer towards seeing Pakistan as a problem rather than part of regional and international solutions.

Vital as the White House may be in steering US policy, the role of Congress should not be disregarded. With Republicans controlling both the House of Representatives and the Senate, Pakistan could be set to face more difficulties there.

The US Congress has in recent years seen a growing hostility towards Pakistan among its ranks and some congressmen have already achieved notoriety with their vocal and visible hostility towards this country. Policymakers and diplomats here may have contributed to the problem with their lack of outreach to Congress, but policy tensions go potentially deeper than simply trying to improve the interfacing between the two sides.

The US is a vital country for Pakistan's security and prosperity; policymakers here must approach the months and years ahead sensibly and with sensitivity.

Doctors on the rampage

IT seems that Lahore's hospital corridors have turned into venues for shouting matches and ugly scuffles. Starting as a dispute between the Young Doctors Association and Punjab government over the absence of a proper and fair service structure a few years ago, a full-blown battle is now raging in the city's public-sector hospitals. In the latest episode, a heart patient died at Mayo Hospital. The patient's son blamed his death on the strike that had apparently been extended to previously off-limit areas such as emergency. Over time, a cohesive group of Young Doctors has been divided into factions and sub-factions. But if the ensuing clashes are the outcome of a government policy to deny doctors their due, as is claimed by some, the real price is being paid by the sick. A sadistic culture now prevails in Punjab's government-run hospitals, particularly those in Lahore; it has left patients with no choice but to fend for themselves.

At the start of the Young Doctors' movement for better wages and greater service privileges, many had sided with the protesting medics. But for some time now, the doctors have been deprived of much of the sympathy they once commanded. This is something that should worry them as should the evidence about the several splits in their organisation. They might go on complaining that they have been outmanoeuvred by a system run by wily operators. But the fact remains that their reputation will be

further tarnished if they continue to indulge in violence and strikes of the sort that can lead to a disruption of even emergency services. Even now, their detractors are painting them as villains violating their oath. The doctors must try and remove the ordinary goons from the educated group pressing for its professional rights. They must sort out their differences with the government, refrain from coming to fistcuffs and ensure treatment is not denied to patients. Or else they will be looked upon as a cruel lot that has no regard for human life.

Taxing real estate

IT is becoming increasingly clear to those watching the negotiations between the government and the property market lobby that some sort of an amnesty scheme is going to be announced soon as a way to break the impasse. This is how things always play out in this country, and there is little reason to suppose that it will be any different this time. The new valuation tables announced by the government in summer, and the assumption of the prerogative to determine real-estate prices for tax purposes by the FBR, have set into motion a long-drawn slump in property prices, and transactions have fallen. But the government should not allow this to be used as a pressure tactic by the builders, who are arguing that the property market will not revive until the valuation tables are redrawn with lower prices. The property market is not like the retail sector; its closure or a persistent slump in it does not have large ramifications for the rest of the economy, nor does it disrupt day-to-day life in any meaningful way.

The massive amount of black money being transacted within the sector, on the other hand, does grave damage to the economy. For one, property dealings have become a safe haven for all manner of ill-gotten gains, from tax-evaded wealth to money earned from illicit activity. Moreover, speculation in property markets distorts the allocation of land in densely populated cities, and more often than not, results in depriving the poor of their fair share in the urban housing market. And finally, the kind of returns that property speculation offers creates a disincentive for investment in productive activity like manufacturing. It is abundantly clear by now that the property market has turned into a racket, and must be normalised for the greater good of the economy. The government's initiative to do this through the FBR is one way of tackling the problem, but it will not be enough. The market is too large and speculators have too much power for one government department to sort out by itself. The government should not allow itself to be blackmailed by the builders. An amnesty of some sort will probably be essential at some point, but if it turns out to be just another short-term revenue measure, the whole effort would have amounted to little more than a joke.

Protection of sources

THE print media watchdog in this country, the Press Council of Pakistan, has emphatically upheld a cardinal rule of journalism; that is, the right of journalists to protect the confidentiality of their sources.

It may well even be a precedent-setting decision where journalism in Pakistan is concerned. In its meeting on Thursday, members of the PCP unanimously concluded that the committee set up by the government to investigate the source behind Dawn's Oct 6 story should neither proceed against this newspaper or its staff nor demand that it divulge its source of information.

Further, it expressed its dissatisfaction with the manner in which the government-led inquiry had played out, saying that the matter fell within its jurisdiction and should have been brought before it, as stipulated by the Press Council of Pakistan Ordinance under which it is constituted.

The significance of the PCP's stance can scarcely be overstated at a time when the Pakistani media is being subjected to pressure on various fronts in order to suppress its voice or manipulate its agenda. Protection of sources has a direct bearing on press freedom and thereby on the media's very *raison d'être* — its oversight role vis-à-vis the state.

Not surprisingly, governments and power centres in many parts of the world are tempted to erode what is known as the reporter's privilege, through both subtle and strong-arm tactics. While journalists must exercise restraint in extraordinary situations, such as in times of war, efforts by the state to intimidate them, if allowed to succeed, would have a chilling effect on public-interest journalism.

Sources and potential whistleblowers would shy away, and media practitioners themselves would be wary of reporting on any 'controversial' topic. In countries with inadequate right to information laws such as Pakistan, sources are doubly important, particularly to uncover situations where public trust has been betrayed.

At the same time, the duty to protect sources is not a licence for journalists to indulge in wild speculation or rumour-mongering. Information gleaned through sources must be put through a process of cross-checking and verification — not to mention filters such as gender-sensitive language — before it is placed in the public domain.

This principle of ethical journalism applies across the board, both to the ephemeral world of electronic media as well as the comparative permanence of print. It is also the foundation upon which the media must build a relationship of trust with its audience.

Women in the police

AS women's perceived role in Pakistani society changes — and it is changing, albeit slowly — it is the state's task to keep up by ensuring that legislative and administrative frameworks continue to evolve. The country has in recent years seen several progressive pieces of legislation aimed at protecting women. But this is just one half of the task; the other is implementing the law, in which a pivotal role is played by the police force which is an aggrieved party's first point of call. Unfortunately, this area of operations has not seen the required degree of evolution, with the police continuing to be perceived as chauvinistic, male-dominated and unsympathetic to women's concerns. This evolution, as pointed out by speakers at a workshop held in Mingora on Thursday, requires a drastic increase in the number of women employed in the force. The workshop brought up the point that the presence of women in police stations would not just turn around the image of the law enforcers it would also encourage women to report crimes and transgressions.

Without doubt, increasing the number of policewomen will bring only benefit. And a precedent has already been set by the KP police department, which with seven 'model' police stations across the province has established women's desks staffed by female police officers. These have seen appreciable success, with a sharp increase in the number of women coming forward to report their complaints and the happy resolution of several cases. These policewomen have handled disputes ranging from domestic violence to land grabbing; it appears that women complainants display greater trust in them when reporting crimes such as rape or harassment. Given its effectiveness, this model should be replicated across the country as quickly as possible. Enforcement of the law is essential to deterring criminality, while strong state forums are needed to encourage victims to come forward with their grievances. Where anti-women crimes are concerned, the greater involvement of policewomen can only help.

Banking on growth

AS with all reports issued by multilateral lenders, the real message is usually couched between the lines. The diplomatic language used by the IMF and the World Bank can sometimes be so dense that it takes close scrutiny to decipher. This is also true for the latest such publication launched by the World Bank on Thursday, titled the Pakistan Development Update. A quick read of headline items from the report would suggest that things in Pakistan are excellent. Growth is picking up and expected to reach 5.4pc by year-end after languishing at less than half that figure since the crisis of 2008. Investments are pouring in from China and the public sector, and the economy is enjoying a rare period of stability with reserves rising and fiscal deficit shrinking. In this sense, the report's assessment is not very different from that of the IMF given in its final review of the recently concluded facility, and echoed by the managing director during her visit.

But read a little closer and one finds troubling signs. Key human development indicators have shown no progress since 2010, suggesting that whatever improvement has taken place in the economy has yet to filter down to the most vulnerable segments of the population. The largest hope for reviving the economy — the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects — could be impeded by significant delays as well as problems from revenue mobilisation. Exports are projected to continue sliding as they are hit by volatilities in key export markets such as the UK and EU. Remittances could also come under pressure given the impact of low oil prices on the economies of oil-producing countries that account for a large share of total remittances. The power sector has seen considerably improved management, but to put this on a sustainable footing, further reforms in public-sector entities that comprise this area are needed along with more investments in transmission and distribution, for which the mobilisation of revenue will be a key factor. The fiscal deficit has shrunk to a nine-year low, but these gains could be reversed if the tax base is not broadened quickly.

So where should our focus lie when we read the report? On the achievements or caveats? Clearly, much has been achieved in the past three years, but it is far too early to declare victory and head to the polls. Each of the achievements mentioned by the government — fiscal stabilisation, reserve accumulation, power sector management — must be followed up by tough and far-reaching reforms if we are not to repeat our own past history of squandering moments of opportunity by becoming complacent. The government still has time, and the political capital, to undertake some of these tasks, and that is where its focus should be for the remainder of its term.

CNIC reverification furore

IT was never going to be an easy task, but the National Database Registration Authority, which otherwise enjoys a reputation of general efficiency, seems to have driven citizens round the bend. The issue here is the campaign to reverify citizenship details that are needed for the CNICs that are issued to all Pakistani nationals, and are interlinked on the Nadra database, thus identifying families and family trees. The system has been in place for years, and it was thought that it was functioning efficiently. But in early summer, soon after Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour was killed in a drone strike in Balochistan, it was discovered that he had carried with him a CNIC identifying him as Wali Muhammad. Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan conceded at the time that Nadra's database had been compromised and that a large number of non-Pakistanis had managed to obtain CNICs, implying the collusion of unscrupulous elements within the ranks of Nadra employees — the recent detention and deportation of Afghan national Sharbat Gula, and the arrest of Nadra officials who allegedly helped her obtain an identity card being a case in point. That led to the massive though necessary exercise of reverifying CNICs and checking the family trees of some 25 million households in the country so that identity cards issued to aliens could be cancelled.

The exercise was projected to last two months, but now, with nearly half a year having gone by, it appears to have descended into a farce. Thousands of CNICs have been blocked by Nadra, many belonging to apparently bona fide nationals, causing citizens all sorts of serious inconveniences such as the inability to have passports issued or to open a bank account. At the level of the Nadra staff manning the reverification desks, instructions coming from the top are either being misinterpreted or misused, so that people are complaining of having to produce decades-old documents to prove their citizenship — documents that may not be available. The queues of those waiting to undergo the reverification process are endless, with the aged and infirm being particularly badly affected. No wonder, then, that thousands are frustrated and angry.

The matter has achieved such proportions that on Friday, the interior minister was constrained to step in and order Nadra to unblock within three months the CNICs of all genuine citizens. This comes as a relief. There is no doubt that there is a dire need to identify all illegal aliens and ensure that only Pakistani citizens are in possession of national identity documents. But equally, the general public must not be punished for a lapse that originated from Nadra itself: it was, after all, corruption or collusion within the ranks of its employees that led to foreigners being able to obtain CNICs in the first place — just as the Sharbat Gula case demonstrates.

Shady land deals

WE have been told time and again that CPEC is our passport to progress and prosperity. Yet some of what is transpiring in the planning stages of this \$51 billion project is straight out of the old playbook, and it will reinforce traditional resentment of power elites who exploit their political connections for personal gain. Several individuals in Mianwali tehsil in Punjab have been left seething after learning recently that the land they had sold at market or slightly higher rates in the last few months is to be part of CPEC, as a result of which its value has shot up overnight. The realisation that they had been deprived of a fair price came about after a compulsory land acquisition award notification was issued in connection with CPEC for nine revenue estates in the tehsil. The buyers, who reportedly include business tycoons and politicians, had evidently taken advantage of advance information — although some have denied this — they had gleaned about the forthcoming development to position themselves to reap huge profits from their new, value-added investment. Even those who still have ownership of the land slated to be acquired by the government are complaining about land value assessments that are not only discriminatory but also based on unfair and unrealistic parameters.

Local revenue authorities involved in land acquisition and price assessment are notoriously corrupt, and provincial governments must ensure that transparent systems of land transaction are adopted and compensation fairly decided. To allow some individuals to profit at the cost of others by virtue of their being privy to confidential information is no different from the crime of insider trading. There are a number of instances where this is believed to have happened before, such as the land along the route of the Islamabad-Lahore motorway. Individuals have also made overnight fortunes on the backs of small landowners and farmers in Pakistan by using their connections within the establishment to get the local bureaucracy to manipulate land records and, where necessary, law-enforcement agencies to strong-arm rightful owners into giving up their property. The government has played the CPEC cards very close to its chest, and the suspicions of other provinces — especially KP — that they are being short-changed by the centre are growing stronger. The example of Mianwali illustrates how the damaging perception of discrimination in the fruits of CPEC is beginning to make itself felt at the micro level.

Ban on ASWJ candidate

THE Lahore High Court has barred two candidates from taking part in the Jhang bypoll for a Punjab Assembly seat scheduled to be held a fortnight from now. The barred contestants include the emir of Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, Ahmad Ludhianvi. There were uneasy murmurs among the public that wondered what magical trick a member of an outfit banned in the government's records had performed to be allowed to contest the election for an assembly seat in the first place. But it is the reason, on the basis of which the court barred Maulana Ludhianvi from contesting, that is surprising: he has not been stopped because of his association with the AWSJ, but because he has some criminal cases pending against him. Besides there are alleged discrepancies in the details of the assets he provided in his nomination papers. There is apparently no mention of his ties with the AWSJ that the government has often said is proscribed. One such pronouncement was made by the interior minister in the Senate last December; the minister had provided a list of 61 groups banned in the country. It included the AWSJ. Then why was he not barred from filing his nomination papers? Is there no arrangement under which the government can ensure this?

The affairs at the time of nomination for an assembly seat have drawn sporadic input from legal minds over the last many decades. There have been occasional demands for reviewing nomination rules under the Representation of the People Act, and even for a look at the relevant articles regarding the eligibility of a candidate in the Constitution (Articles 62-63). The nomination papers must reflect the details of a candidate as accurately as possible, but it is a sensitive exercise. At the same time, the system has to guard against 'over-empowering' the returning officer. An improvement in the rules, which is needed, must evolve within the limits set by these two considerations.

More carnage in Balochistan

THE blight in Balochistan continues. This time a shrine in a remote, mountainous region of Khuzdar has been attacked and the death toll and number of casualties are devastating. It was the third monstrous attack in the span of three months – lawyers killed by the dozen in August; policemen killed by the dozen in October; and, now, members of the public killed by the dozen. The numbing scale of the disasters is difficult to process even in terms of a province that has been in the throes of every possible kind of violence for over a decade. Perhaps one day the people of Balochistan will be able to ask why they were cursed to suffer the violence of state and non-state actors alike, a

macabre circularity that has seen them experience bloodshed in the name of security and insecurity.

Then post-attack rituals too are wearily familiar. In the immediate aftermath, the state stands exposed. Neither is the state able to deliver an acceptable level of security that prevents such devastating attacks nor is it able to quickly arrange for the kind of medical attention the victims require and material attention for the victims' families. It usually takes the extraordinary intervention of senior government or military leaders for medical care to be made available. Afterwards, it does not seem to occur to that very same leadership that what is really needed are stronger institutions and better service delivery so that if — when — another attack occurs, medical care automatically swings into action. Difficult as it may be to strengthen institutions in the midst of long-term conflict, actual performance is so dismal as to call into question the very competence and priorities of the country's leaders. As ever, it is the citizenry that has to suffer because of the leadership's failings.

A day later, the devastation at the Shah Noorani shrine was already receding and a congratulatory narrative taking its place because of the Gwadar port inauguration. To be sure, the potential for the economic uplift of the Gwadar region, much of Balochistan and the country itself ought to be highlighted. It is possible that the trade and transit potential of the country is on the verge of receiving a transformational boost. But security and prosperity are intrinsically linked and if the benefits of economic growth are to be equitable and fair, surely swathes of Balochistan cannot be allowed to remain under the threat of militant violence of every hue. It seems that the only constant in Balochistan is violence — political and military leaders have come and gone with several already forgotten, but somehow militancy and endemic violence appear to have found a way to normalise themselves.

World-class Karachi?

THE city of Karachi is something of an enigma. While it is Pakistan's largest city and commercial hub, bad governance and lack of vision have turned it into an ever-expanding, lawless sprawl. The World Bank, in its Pakistan Development Update, launched on Thursday, has broken down the city's problems in a systematic manner and offered solutions as well. It would be worth recalling what ails Karachi. Among other things, the report points out Karachi's ad hoc planning and weak financial and institutional capacities. If we were to ask the common citizen of Karachi, he or she would offer a long list of what exactly ails this chaotic metropolis — high crime, no public

transport system to speak of, monstrous traffic, water woes, broken roads, and mounds of rotting garbage strewn across town would probably top the list of complaints. It is not just the multilateral lender that has pointed out Karachi's many faults; many respected Pakistani urban planners have been highlighting issues such as weak infrastructure and growing informality for years. But what is to be done? The World Bank says Karachi has the potential to be a "world-class" city; to achieve this, "pillars" need to be erected to put the city on firm foundations. These pillars include "coordinated institutions" and "closing infrastructure gaps". Indeed, Karachi is blessed with many bounties, such as a natural harbour and a large populace with a variety of skills. The primary challenge is channelling its energies in a positive direction.

The solutions offered by the bank — as well as the suggestions of other experts — must all be considered. However, until there is the political will to transform these suggestions into concrete realities, the fate of this city is unlikely to change. And an empowered local government is the only solution capable of giving practical shape to these suggested remedies. Unfortunately, the Sindh government prefers to keep key local government powers, resulting in toothless and unresponsive civic institutions that are incapable of running this city. Elected local bodies — answerable to the people and overseen by the province — indeed have the potential to create a sustainable city that provides shelter to all income brackets and social groups. But unless things change on the governance front, the fear expressed in the World Bank report that "The city may be headed towards a spatially unstable, inefficient, and unliveable form", may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Pakistan's frail children

ALTHOUGH figures for child survival between 1990 and 2015 have improved, the MDG that aimed for a two-thirds reduction in under-five mortality rates was not achieved. Regrettably, Pakistan is among the 10 countries in Asia and Africa where 60pc of the world's 5.9 million children died before their fifth birthday last year, according to a new Lancet study. Focusing on 194 countries, this report identifies premature birth and pneumonia as factors in child mortality. Because the death of 2.7m children under age five occurred in the neonatal phase around the time of delivery or due to infection, governments must now focus on improving vaccination programmes, breastfeeding and water and sanitation awareness. In Pakistan, at least 10pc of all under-five deaths are caused by pneumonia. However, pneumonia vaccination coverage is inadequate with 54pc inoculated countrywide. Children with pneumonia suffer malnutrition and cognitive impairment. According to the National Nutrition Survey 2011, one-third of all children are

underweight and nearly 44pc stunted. That these figures have hardly changed over two decades is shocking. The government must be held accountable because it is failing yet another generation, stunted and starving to death, and often unable to access life-saving treatment.

Malnutrition has staggering consequences for economic productivity. Adults who are stunted as children will earn 20pc less than those who are not. Improving child health in vulnerable communities as in Sindh is the task of the provincial government — and its abysmal failure is starkly visible in frail children. Given that malnutrition is attributed to reversible factors (food insecurity, early marriage etc) prevention through well-planned interventions is necessary. Harnessing existing poverty alleviation programmes to identify those in need of nutrition is critical. The Lady Health Workers programme can promote nutrition advocacy with its widespread reach. More important, and because women's health is key to reducing child mortality, girls' education must be accessible, especially where women are least empowered.

Antibiotic resistance

HUMANKIND is on the cusp of losing the battle against one of its most primaevial foes: bacteria. We are at a juncture where antibiotics, one of the most potent tools with which to fight these pathogens, have become nearly — in some cases, completely — ineffective against them. What seems certain to follow is described as no less than an apocalypse, a 'post-antibiotic world' where even a minor cut or routine surgical procedure will be a high-stakes gamble with death. Antibiotic resistance could kill 10m people per year by 2050. Pakistan's alarming situation in this unfolding nightmare was put into context on Saturday by Dr Nizam Damani, a consultant with WHO's Global Infection Prevention and Control Unit in Switzerland during a medical conference in Karachi. Citing preliminary results of an ongoing study, the infectious disease specialist said that out of 2,000 patients at the city's Civil Hospital, 95pc had tested positive for bacteria that was resistant to a wide range of antibiotics. These findings are cause for action on a war footing. The already dire health indicators in Pakistan and the shambolic state of public health infrastructure here amplify the risk immeasurably.

The tendency to overprescribe antibiotics as though they are a cure-all for all kinds of illness — the drug is completely ineffective against viral infections — is the primary reason the world is confronted with this scenario. In developing countries like Pakistan, where antibiotics can be obtained across the counter and lack of awareness means they are perceived as a silver bullet for infections across the board, their abuse is very widespread. Antimicrobial resistance is a Darwinian struggle in which pathogens evolve

and acquire genes that strengthen their defences against drugs that target them. The process has been taking place ever since sulphonamides, the first antibiotics to be used systematically, were introduced in the late 1930s. But it accelerated dramatically through overuse of antimicrobials in the last few decades. The result is a slew of bacteria that are either multidrug-resistant or even pan-resistant. Multidrug-resistant tuberculosis is making itself felt in Pakistan, a nightmarish prospect if it is allowed to get out of control. Regulatory authorities should waste no time in taking measures to address the issue. They should clamp down on the easy availability of antibiotics, advise medical professionals to prescribe them judiciously and educate the public about the catastrophic consequences of taking antibiotics unthinkingly.

PTI's boycott

THE assertion by some of Imran Khan's detractors that his proclivity for street politics demonstrates a lack of commitment to parliamentary politics may ruffle a number of PTI feathers, but no one has done more to reinforce this rather unfortunate opinion than the PTI leader himself. As a political tactic to put pressure on the PML-N government, both during the months-long 2014 sit-in and the recent Islamabad 'lockdown' campaign, Mr Khan's form of protest — though legitimate — left many unconvinced of his intentions. Even so, he must be credited for his concentrated focus on two major challenges ie electoral rigging and corruption among politicians. But the PTI decision on Saturday to not attend a joint session of parliament that will be addressed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is hardly a sign of mature politics. Speaking to the media, PTI's Shah Mahmood Qureshi said the party's MNAs and senators would boycott the session on Thursday because of the presence of a prime minister facing corruption charges. That Mr Sharif has been facing such allegations for long, and that the latest charge, the one concerning the Panama Papers, is before the Supreme Court, should not obscure the fact that Thursday's session has nothing to do with domestic politics and that Mr Erdogan, however controversial his own politics may be inside Turkey, is head of a country with which Pakistan has long-standing ties.

If Mr Khan and his aides had bothered to read Pakistan's constitutional history, they would have come to know of a better example set by the opposition when Hashemi Rafsanjani visited Pakistan in September 1992. The opposition was conspicuous by its absence when speaker Gohar Ayub called the session to order, but when the Iranian president rose to speak, the opposition led by Benazir Bhutto returned to the house. The PTI leadership could have done the same in this case. The party should reconsider

its decision and attend the session to prove that it will not allow its differences with the government to overshadow the state's bilateral ties.

Attacks on shrines

SATURDAY evening's massacre of devotees at the remote dargah of Shah Noorani in Khuzdar, Balochistan, makes clear that despite continuing counterterrorism operations, jihadi and sectarian groups remain a potent threat to national security. It also highlights the fact that the region of upper Sindh and the bordering districts of Balochistan have been experiencing a sustained wave of terrorism that, if not checked, may transform the area into yet another hotbed of militancy. The target — a revered Sufi shrine — was not an unexpected one; the militant Islamic State group, which claimed 'credit' for the atrocity, and those of its ilk, harbour a visceral hatred of the shrines of Muslim saints and holy men. According to their worldview, such places are centres of 'deviance'. As opposed to this, arguably many Pakistanis hold Sufi shrines in high esteem as these sacred spaces have been part of subcontinental Islamic culture for centuries. The list of Sufi shrines attacked by militants in Pakistan is a long one; some of the country's most iconic dargahs have been desecrated. In 2005, a suicide bomber caused carnage at Islamabad's Bari Imam while 2010 witnessed attacks targeting Abdullah Shah Ghazi's dargah in Karachi, Lahore's Data Darbar and the shrine of Baba Farid in Pakpattan.

As mentioned above, the Sindh-Balochistan borderlands have witnessed a number of terrorist attacks. A suicide bomber targeted an imambargah during Eidul Azha prayers in September; one of the suspects had reportedly passed through Wadh, Balochistan. A suspect in the Safoora Goth massacre was also said to have spent time in Khuzdar. Moreover, one of the suspected handlers in the bombing that targeted a Friday congregation in a Shikarpur imambargah in January 2015, came from Dera Murad Jamali, while the deadly 2013 attack on Dargah Ghulam Shah Ghazi also occurred near Shikarpur.

Clearly, while the militant threat in Fata has been largely neutralised, and the extremists in south Punjab have been identified (but not acted against), upper Sindh and eastern Balochistan remain a blind spot in the national counterterrorism strategy. Whether it is IS, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi al-Alami, or any other militant actor with similar ideological and theological persuasions, the region needs greater attention in order to root out the menace of extremist terrorism. Also, the Balochistan government has announced the closure of the Shah Noorani dargah "until proper security arrangements" are made. We hope this is not an indefinite closure. After all, despite the passage of over a decade

since the Bari Imam shrine was attacked, urs celebrations at the dargah have yet to resume with the zeal that once marked the event. While security is essential, people must be free and able to participate in religious events without the fear of encountering terrorism. Limiting these activities would only hand the militants what they want: the elimination of such rituals from national life.

Cross-LoC aggression

THE death of seven Pakistani soldiers, announced by the military's media wing on Monday, as a result of cross-LoC Indian shelling is tragic and deserving of the strongest condemnation. The incident once again underscores the dangerously frayed state of Pakistan-India relations in the aftermath of September's Uri attack. Disturbingly, there are no signs that the belligerence will end soon. Ever since militants attacked a military facility in the India-held Kashmir town, there has been regular exchange of fire across the LoC and the Working Boundary, with numerous military and civilian casualties. The latest tragedy is said to be the deadliest incident of firing involving military casualties in a single day in a decade. In addition, some 26 civilians have been killed due to Indian shelling on the Pakistani side since the Uri attack.

The reaction from the state to this provocation has been swift though expected, with the prime minister reiterating his resolve to defend the country. The Indian high commissioner was also summoned to the Foreign Office and told that further belligerence could lead to a "strategic miscalculation". While open talk of war has died down to a large extent post-Uri, the constant LoC and Working Boundary violence has the potential of escalating into a more dangerous confrontation. There may be little appetite for war in the two establishments — if one ignores the shrill cries of the super hawks and armchair warriors in the media. But, unless the guns fall silent, further loss of civilian or military life caused by such aggression could see temperatures rise further, exacerbating the current diplomatic stand-off — over the past few weeks, both India and Pakistan have expelled each other's diplomats for indulging in "undesirable activities". If not checked, this exchange of vitriol on the diplomatic front, coupled with the exchange of firepower across the LoC and Working Boundary, could also result in similar aggression along the international border.

As we have stated previously, the only way to improve relations and end the hostility is for Islamabad and New Delhi to talk to each other. Unfortunately, India does not appear to want to sort out differences with Pakistan. Whether it is India's concerns about the alleged use of Pakistani soil by non-state actors to launch militant activities inside its borders, or Pakistan's belief that New Delhi is fomenting trouble in Balochistan, all

issues need to be discussed frankly. Over the last seven decades, both states have failed to resolve their outstanding issues on the battlefield; this indicates that the only path to peace is via the negotiating table. Meanwhile, the international community, specifically the UN, needs to play a more visible role in ensuring that there is no more violence along the frontiers and that both states resume the dialogue process as soon as possible.

Organs for sale

TO become acquainted with the stories of people who sell their organs is to realise that 'choice', stripped of context, has no meaning. Otherwise those who resort to such an extreme step would not be drawn from the poorest strata of society, lured by the hope of at least temporary relief from dire financial hardship. The accounts given by five victims of an organ trafficking ring operating in Rawalpindi highlight the exploitative nature of this practice in which there is a vast power differential between those who offer their organs for sale and those who make a living from such a trade, including middlemen and medical professionals. In recent months, there have been a number of revelations about organ trafficking in Pakistan which reveal the extent of the ruthlessness that underpins the enterprise. A detailed investigation by this paper that exposed some of the players involved in this criminal activity was followed by shocking reports about some two dozen individuals — most of them labourers and brick kiln workers — who had been illegally detained in a building in Rawalpindi allegedly for the purpose of having their kidneys extracted at a private hospital in the city.

The spotlight needs to be maintained by the media not only on the police inquiry that is currently under way but on the issue as a whole. It is well known there are a number of kidney specialists in several cities in Punjab who carry out illegal transplants, even though they may not be as brazen about it as apparently were the individuals at the hospital in Rawalpindi at the centre of the recent cases. This investigation provides the beginning of a trail that can, if pursued diligently, unearth the vast network that sustains organ trafficking. After all, this reprehensible activity has been thriving in recent years simply because those tasked with implementing the law have chosen to look the other way. This must now stop. The province's political leadership should ensure that the guilty, regardless of their connections, are punished so as to deter continued violations of the organ transplantation act. Contravention of the law has led to Pakistan once again being considered, shamefully, as one of the top destinations for 'transplant tourism'. At the same time, oversight authorities, with the media's assistance, need to work on strategies to encourage altruistic donation and develop the deceased organ

donation programme. The demand for organ transplantation must be met through ethical means.

Cinemas in the doldrums

THE current low point in Pakistan-India relations has not just been damaging in terms of diplomacy. The fallout is also evident in cultural ties. While Indian producers refused to have Pakistanis work in their films, the fledgling cinema industry here has also felt the impact. Nearly a month ago, the cinema owners' association decided to halt the screening of all Indian films. Whether this was an independent decision or influenced in part by those eager to beat the drums of war in the country remains a moot point. The reality is that as a result of this decision by stakeholders, cinema houses in major Pakistani cities are losing money. Several cineplexes that were a short while ago doing booming business have had to shut screens down because of the lack of footfall. Certainly, domestically made films and those from abroad are being screened, and there are proposals to, for example, bring in Iranian or Turkish films. But in terms of being crowd-pullers on a large scale, nothing beats the content being generated by the mammoth industry next door.

It is unfortunate that the thrust against Indian content on Pakistani screens was given added momentum by leading lights of the culture industry here in the misplaced assumption that this would create space for Pakistan's own cinematic productions to flourish. Such cultural protectionism vis-à-vis India has been tried before, and failed in rather spectacular fashion — Indian films were formally banned here for years, which is arguably what led to the demise of the cinema-going culture in the first place. It is only recently that cinemas have become decent investment, and the culture of going out to watch a movie has shown revival. Unfortunate as it is, the Pakistani cinema industry is not yet in a position to support the film business as a whole. Political concerns are indeed genuine, but they should not come at the cost of cultural exchanges that bring benefits to both sides of the border.

CPEC controversies

ONE thing that the departure of the first cargo under CPEC has established is that a western route to Gwadar port does indeed exist, and the port is indeed operational. To demonstrate that point, the convoy was deliberately brought down to the port from the western route, crossing the Indus at the new bridge at Khushalgarh, down to DI Khan and Zhob and onward to Quetta. There was a lot of talk in days past about the western route being neglected, and resources meant for Gwadar port having been spent in Karachi instead. It is not clear what grounds gave rise to such talk, but the fact that some of it echoed inside parliament gave it a significance it would not otherwise have had. We now have an actual demonstration of the existence of a western route, as well as the functionality of the port in question, so perhaps the time has come for the critics to be more specific about what exactly their grievances are.

Some critics might argue that the western route was supposed to run through Khuzdar to DG Khan, and onward to the Karnal Sher Khan interchange in Swabi district of the Peshawar-Islamabad motorway. From there it was supposed to travel through Swat and link up with the Karakoram Highway. That route, according to a map of the National Highway Network, would cut almost 350km of travelling distance compared to the route through the motorway. There was another route, running from DI Khan to Peshawar, that has also yet to be built. Work on the Swat Motorway kicked off in August of this year.

People can be excused for becoming a bit dizzy when reading the details of all these routes. It can become difficult to keep track of what is being talked about. Given how vituperative the rhetoric surrounding the issue can become, it is difficult to believe that the whole controversy is simply about ensuring that the benefits of future CPEC flows should be shared equitably. Raising the spectre of Kalabagh dam, or worse still, the dismemberment of the country as some have done, over some stretches of road is so far over the top that it certainly inspires questions as to where such animus is coming from, especially given the fact that much work is indeed being carried out. A conversation is definitely needed around the benefits that will flow from CPEC in the future, and who they will be shared with. But that conversation needs far more focus on the specifics of the projects than is currently the case. There are several dimensions to CPEC projects: the road network, the power projects, the assorted industrial zones, language teaching centres and other paraphernalia for the promotion of connectivity. All of these deserve attention, not just the stretches of roads being built.

Pak-Turk schools saga

TURKEY'S President Erdogan is a welcome and honoured guest to Pakistan this week and we hope his visit will deepen investment and development ties between the two countries. However, his visit has coincided with a controversial decision taken by the government here: the Pak-Turk Education Foundation's Turkish staff and their families have been given three days to leave the country, causing the foundation's management to move court against the orders. The Pak-Turk schools are administered by a foundation linked to Fethullah Gulen, once an ally of Mr Erdogan. However, since July's abortive coup attempt, the Turkish leadership has blamed Mr Gulen for sponsoring the overthrow attempt, resulting in a global crackdown on the religious and educational network led by him. While the coup attempt in Turkey may or may not have been instigated by Mr Gulen, Islamabad's arbitrary decision is uncalled for. There are thousands of Pakistani children who have benefited from these schools since the 1990s, and there are thousands who will now suffer if their teachers are sent home. True, there is nothing wrong with closer government scrutiny if it is felt that teaching methods or the syllabus content is flawed. But the sudden move to issue marching orders, and that too on the eve of Mr Erdogan's visit, smacks of intentions that may have nothing to do with the quality of teaching or education.

There are two aspects to the unfortunate situation that must be highlighted. First, while the coup attempt in Turkey was an event that was justifiably condemned by all those who believe in democracy, the Turkish government's response has been unduly severe in several aspects, including the pressure on Pakistan to close down the schools. Pakistan would have done well to dispassionately assess the situation, especially because it concerned the fate of so many students who might have been worse off in other schools, given the overall state of education here. Second, many among the staff now being asked to leave have been working in these schools for several years. They had no visa issues previously, and there was not even a hint of their being linked to any illegal activity. Many have now voiced concerns they might be victimised by Turkish authorities on their return. It would be better then for Pakistan and Turkey to see this issue as one impacting the studies of thousands of boys and girls, and address it keeping in mind the future of these students.

‘Zap’ fishing

IN the north of the country, a riverine delicacy is the ‘sher mahi’. It is found only in the Kabul River, and even there it is rare — thus is it the source of livelihood for hundreds of poor fishermen living in the villages around the Peshawar, Charsadda and Nowshera districts. But a glance at this mini-industry leaves one wondering which player to feel more pity for. The men who use legal methods of fishing must swim for hours with inner tubes, dragging their nets behind them to catch only a few kilos at a time — a brutal means of meagre earning. No wonder, then, that many have resorted to illegal methods that are not only astonishingly inhumane and dangerous for the fishermen but also decimate the fish population. These include ‘zap’ or ‘electro’ fishing, which involves running an electric current into the water using rickety generators to stun the sher mahi. Another method is using dynamite in the water to blow the river’s secrets into the open. A third is to spray pesticides into the water. And what of the fisheries department government officials that are tasked with stopping this sort of activity? A team of only nine people covers the Peshawar district, including the 70km-plus stretch along the Kabul River, with no vehicles, boats and scarcely any equipment. The teams in Charsadda and Nowshera districts are even smaller. And though these teams managed to lodge cases in 2015 and 2016 against more than 60 fishermen for using illegal methods, and confiscated nearly two dozen generators, not one has been resolved.

It is no surprise, then, that the entire fish population of this section of the river is in danger of being eliminated. Intervention is sorely needed from higher levels of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government, which must educate fishermen and provide support so that opportunities can be found for expanded sources of livelihood, while providing the fisheries department the resources it needs to clamp down on illegal methods of hunting.

Panama Papers and media ‘court’

THE significance of the Panama Papers hearings in the Supreme Court is enormous. Potentially at stake is nothing less than the political future of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the strengthening of the democratic order in the country. The court is moving ahead sensibly and determinedly, the cacophony of competing political interests being expressed before it notwithstanding. Regrettably, sections of the media are compounding the challenges for the court with a kind of coverage of the Panama Papers hearings that in some cases can be seen as attempting to influence the court and prejudging the outcome of the hearing. Freedom of speech, especially in the news

media, is a critical part of a democratic order — no state or society can plausibly lay claim to being democratic if speech itself is curtailed. This newspaper has and will continue to robustly defend the interests and rights of a free media.

But there is a difference between media censorship — whether imposed from the outside or done internally — and what are reasonable expectations of how the judicial process must be covered. To be clear, the judicial process is an exceptional case. When what is at stake is the liberty and rights of an individual and, in the present case, the broader political and institutional process, the media has a great deal of responsibility. Unhappily, few in the media, especially among the large tribe of TV anchors, appear interested in the more subtle though vitally important distinctions of the profession. Instead, a circus-like atmosphere has been created and TV studios have been seemingly converted into faux courtrooms where anchors, analysts and politicians appear to be playing the role of judge, jury and, yes, executioner. In several instances, the coverage has amounted to a thinly veiled attempt to influence the court and prejudge the outcome of the hearings. That ought to be a red line that should never be crossed.

That Prime Minister Sharif and his family have serious questions to answer since the Panama Papers were revealed to the world is more than obvious. Also true is that every step of the way, with each new revelation by the first family to try and explain the creation of offshore companies and the use and acquisition of foreign property, the claims and court submissions have raised further questions. But it is precisely the job of the court to separate fact from fiction and to apply the law to the information that it is able to establish. No less a bench than one headed by the chief justice of Pakistan is seized of the matter at the moment. There has not been even a trace of partiality or unfairness so far. All parties have been invited to make their case before the court. The media must refrain from interfering in the judicial process and creating the appearance of undue pressure on the court.

Mayor's release

WASEEM Akhtar, the mayor of Karachi, is finally a free man. On Wednesday, the MQM-Pakistan leader was granted bail in the last of 39 cases registered against him. In fact, the veteran politician won the city's mayoral election while he was still in jail in August. While his legal troubles may not have gone away entirely, Mr Akhtar will now have a much freer hand in running the affairs of the chaotic metropolis. Upon his release, he said all the right things, promising to work for the betterment of the city and

to engage with various political players active in Karachi. Indeed, to ensure holistic and even-handed development in the metropolis, the mayor will have to take its various ethnic and political groups on board and work for the welfare of all Karachi's citizens. While the mayor's release is welcome, the challenge before him is formidable and will require strong will to tackle. MQM-P leader Farooq Sattar was not wrong when he noted that Karachi needs 'targeted development'.

Due to its vast size, large population and decades of governmental neglect, Karachi is an extremely difficult city to govern. Waseem Akhtar knows this well, since he has been associated with the MQM, which considers Karachi its power base, for over two decades. And while millions of people will keenly be watching the mayor's performance to see if he can lift the metropolis out of the doldrums, the fact is that even Mr Akhtar's best efforts will be insufficient until full local government powers are transferred to the mayoralty and city council. At present, the Sindh government jealously guards key areas such as solid waste disposal and control of the water board — areas that should be solely under the city administration's purview. The provincial government's role in municipal affairs should be to provide the legislative framework and oversight of civic institutions; it should not be concerned with micromanaging Karachi in the presence of an elected mayor and council. Moreover, several agencies control land in Karachi, limiting the city administration's jurisdiction. Many observers — including the World Bank — have pointed to the need for coordination among institutions in the city. So while input from the provincial government, cantonment boards and other land-owning institutions is important, key decisions about Karachi must be taken by its elected representatives. The city's problems are too numerous and complex to be handled in a fragmented manner.

Gas shortages

THAT time of year has returned, and once again we are facing a cold winter with unending shortages of gas that is a vital fuel for heating homes in the northern parts of the country. Once again we face the consequences of our neglect of this crucial sector, and the careless manner in which we have squandered the vital resource. Each winter sees a familiar ritual: gas allocation schedules are drawn up, the business community complains that it has to bear the brunt of the shortage while domestic consumers are privileged in the merit order list, and the government talks about its achievements in trying to arrange future supplies to ensure that the dwindling supply does not become a permanent feature of our lives. We muddle through the winter, protests are held in some towns of Punjab and receive media attention, the government becomes defensive —

and then once again the temperatures begin to rise and the heaters are switched off. The issue thus falls off the radar

There is a side, however, that is always neglected, even though it is a vital element in the policy mix through which the growing gas shortages need to be addressed. And that is raising efficiencies. An entire cottage industry has come into existence across Punjab producing substandard heaters that waste most of the gas they use, so much so that bad habits have become ingrained, such as leaving a window open while the heater is running, simply to allow the unused gas to escape. The immense amount of wastage we see in the utilisation of natural gas is criminal. Two things are vital to address this. One is greater awareness, and the other is price reform of natural gas so people are incentivised in its judicious use. Unless this happens, no amount of additional supplies through imports will be enough to break out of the annual ritual that marks our descent into the growing deficit between the supply and demand of gas.

Destination Syria

THE Syrian conflict today has become what the Afghan ‘jihad’ was for many Muslim men in the 1980s: a magnet for radicalisation and extremism, with thousands of fighters from a variety of countries abandoning their homes to participate in a ‘holy’ war. And Pakistan — no stranger to religiously inspired militancy — is also in the thick of things where the latest conflict is concerned. Fighters, both Sunni and Shia, are heading for the battlefields of the Middle East, while militant cells have been formed on Pakistani soil. As reported by our correspondent on Friday, sources in Damascus have said that “hundreds” of Pakistanis are fighting in the conflict, both for and against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Various independent analysts also assert that Pakistanis are amongst the thousands of foreign fighters in Syria, while earlier this year, the National Crisis Management Cell said that over 650 Pakistanis were believed to be fighting in various conflict zones, including Syria and Iraq. The Counter Terrorism Department in Lahore has added to these fears. On Thursday, the department claimed it had busted an eight-member cell of the militant Islamic State group. The cell was reportedly responsible for sending fighters to Syria and Afghanistan.

Fighters from over 80 countries are said to be present in Syria. These include the offspring of Muslim immigrants in Europe — born and raised in that continent — as well as those from Muslim-majority states. However, the disclosures about the presence of Pakistanis in Syria are particularly disturbing for two reasons: firstly, local fighters are getting involved in an intensely bloody and complex foreign conflict. Secondly, their participation threatens communal peace in Pakistan. There are various reasons why

Sunni fighters would be drawn to Syria. For example, factions of the TTP, who are pan-Islamists, would be drawn to a 'transnational jihad', while Lashkar-i-Jhangvi cadres would be attracted to IS's virulently anti-Shia rhetoric. Others may be inspired by the idea of a 'caliphate' or be self-radicalised. Many Pakistani Shia fighters, on the other hand, would be motivated to travel to the Middle East to defend holy shrines in cities like Najaf, Karbala and Damascus. Whatever the motivation, this flow of fighters must be checked before a new, full-blown sectarian crisis erupts in Pakistan.

For long, the state's reaction to the presence of IS or its sympathisers in Pakistan has been one of denial. But the arrest of IS cadres and reports of the presence of Pakistani fighters in Syria should be enough to shatter the illusion that the country is immune from the fallout of the Syrian conflict. Greater effort is needed to both stop the flow of fighters proceeding abroad, and to keep a check on groups or individuals who are keen to bring the fight home.

Erdogan's visit

The government pulled out all the stops for the two-day visit by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Pakistan. That is indeed as it should be.

With an increasingly bellicose geopolitical environment in the region, this country needs to sustain and deepen its ties with nations with whom it has traditionally enjoyed stable alliances.

To signal the importance that it placed on the potential for the Turkish president's visit to enhance bilateral ties, the government invited him to address parliament. It was the third time that Mr Erdogan had done so, a record for a foreign dignitary.

However, coming four months after the attempted military coup against him, the Turkish head of state this time around was speaking from a very different perspective, and it was evident in his words to the Pakistani legislators.

Mr Erdogan denounced what the Turkish government refers to as 'Feto'— the organisation led by US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, the alleged instigator of the failed coup — as a terrorist outfit comparable to Al Qaeda and the militant Islamic State group, and expressed his appreciation of Pakistan's decision to expel the Turkish staff of the Pak-Turk schools — allegedly run by Gulen-linked elements — on the eve of his visit.

While Mr Erdogan may have his reasons for branding his political opponents as terrorists, it is problematic that he expects Pakistan to fight his battle with them on its turf. It is even more problematic that the government has obliged him with alacrity at the cost of thousands of Pakistani schoolchildren's educational future.

The abortive coup against his government last July met with strong and justifiable condemnation from the media in this country, the same media that our esteemed guest criticised for not being unstintingly on board with the expulsion of the Pak-Turk school staff.

Mr Erdogan's crackdown in his country against not only those suspected of being directly involved in the coup attempt but also against tens of thousands of teachers, judges and journalists perceived as Mr Gulen's supporters is evidence of Turkey's disturbing drift away from democratic traditions towards autocracy.

Meanwhile, our government must remember that Pakistan's relations with Turkey are broadly with the state of Turkey; not with the present dispensation alone. It should refrain from actions that may require radical course correction under another Turkish government.

Measures such as the recently announced expulsions inhibit people-to-people contacts, the only constant in relations with any nation.

Lack of internet freedoms

IT is an indictment, but an unsurprising one. According to the Washington DC-based research firm Freedom House, Pakistan is at the lowest tier of its Freedom on the Net 2016 index. It stands in the company of several countries that have earned notoriety for tight controls over the dissemination of information and access to the online world, including China, Iran and Saudi Arabia. With a zero ranking signifying greatest freedoms and 100 the least, Pakistan is placed at a depressing 69. The report notes that internet penetration stands at only 18pc; there have been several instances where content has been blocked and social and political commentary censored. Further, it points out that the passage of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act this year, despite strong objections from civil society, contains clauses enabling censorship, surveillance and rights violations. Pakistan's ranking would have been even worse, but the end of the years'-long ban on YouTube affected the overall score.

The sad reality is that the voices of a handful of internet activists notwithstanding, the impediments to online freedoms have become so entrenched as to have been rendered 'normal'. There is the tug of war over the control of narrative, with laws continuing to refer to nebulous concepts such as the 'national interest'. Then there are hurdles of a technical nature, such as the reliance on mobile technologies as opposed to the more reliable broadband internet. In view of this, the very least that needs to be done is to ensure greater transparency in the decision-making process of blocking content, which at the moment is arbitrary; and greater heed should be paid to the reservations of activists. Further, there must be more reflection on the fact that no one is disputing the need for a law such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, but the latter remains seriously flawed. As the primary piece of legislation regulating the online world, all subsequent legislation will rest upon its failings.

State Bank report

THE latest annual report of the State Bank of Pakistan echoes much of the same view held by the IMF and other independent economists: the economy has stabilised, but a lot of the work needed to mend it remains to be done. At the heart of the stabilisation are two central facts. The fiscal deficit has shrunk to 4.6pc of GDP, down from the 6pc plus average it had maintained for the previous half decade, and down by 0.7pc from last year; and foreign exchange reserves have risen to cover seven months of imports, the most comfortable position they have been in for more than half a decade. Taken together, all that these two data points tell us is that some breathing room has opened up, but that if key structural reforms are not undertaken, the situation could reverse quickly. This is the central message of the annual report and it deserves to be heeded.

The report shows how much of the improvement has been gained through short-term measures. The improvement in the fiscal situation, for example, owes much to a rise in consumption of petroleum products as well as adjustments in the structure of its taxation. Moreover, "the share of withholding tax has increased further, which downplays the role of revenue authorities on the one hand, and increases the compliance costs of businesses on the other". Broadening of the tax base has seen no progress, and measures to impose a cost on nonfilers of tax returns "had unintended negative fallout", such as a growth in currency in circulation by 2pc of GDP and a fall in deposits. Broadening the base remains a priority, "without further burdening the already compliant taxpayers", says the report. Expenditures were restrained "primarily from low interest rates, which significantly reduced [the government's] debt servicing burden" on domestic debt. These measures are fine, but they are not enough to build our future fiscal strength on.

The story is similar for reserves and external debt. Interest payments fell to 34.5pc of tax revenue, down from 43.2pc last year, accounting for much of the drop in the fiscal deficit, on the back of lower interest rates. But the quantum of debt increased rapidly, both domestic and external, despite a lower deficit. At least 20pc of the new debt acquired last year was parked in deposits with the banks, which points towards poor debt management. The real worry is about the external debt, which is high-cost and a growing amount of which is short-term. Given that exports are shrinking, FDI is not encouraging, and remittances are coming under pressure, we can expect trouble on the external front if something does not turn around soon. The report makes clear that much work remains to be done to put the economy on a sound footing, and declaring victory would be premature.

Rescue services

DISASTERS, large and small, are not uncommon occurrences in Pakistan. Unfortunately, our level of preparedness to deal with them remains inadequate. Despite the existence of disaster management bodies at the state level, the emergency response to both natural and manmade calamities is insufficient and uncoordinated. Were it not for philanthropic institutions such as the Edhi Foundation, citizens living in the affected areas would suffer even more from state inefficiency. Sadly, the bureaucratic mindset often creates hurdles in the way of those providing much-needed services. As reported in this paper yesterday, the Edhi Foundation has been unable to sell over 300 obsolete vehicles and buy replacements with the funds generated because the Federal Board of Revenue and the finance ministry have apparently not given the charity the go-ahead for the sale. Faisal Edhi, who heads the foundation, told this paper that the scarcity of new heavy vehicles is affecting operations; for example, the charity faced difficulties in conducting rescue efforts at the remote Shah Noorani shrine in Balochistan, after the recent bombing there, because of lack of heavy vehicles.

Considering the sterling service that the Edhi Foundation has performed over the decades, there is no reason why the authorities should hold up the sale of its vehicles if all legal formalities are in place. In fact, the state needs to supplement the efforts of the charity and others like it. And it should be directing its resources towards improving disaster-response mechanisms. The Shah Noorani bombing, as well as the Quetta police academy attack last month, have exposed the government's poor ability in handling emergencies. Only Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have the Rescue 1122 set-up in place; this provides emergency services in cases of fire, medical crises,

building collapse and other calamities. Launched under Pervaiz Elahi's watch in 2004 in Punjab, the service has been praised for its work, though there have been calls for better pay for staffers and more equipment. KP launched the service during the previous ANP-led government. However, it is shocking that such an official first-response body is absent in Balochistan and Sindh. This is unacceptable and must be remedied immediately. Both provincial administrations must activate Rescue 1122 services and attempt to replicate the emergency model to effectively respond to disasters in bustling cities as well as the more remote regions that are often neglected in official plans.

Anti-Rohingya violence

WHEN it comes to dealing with the Rohingya, a beleaguered Muslim community living in Myanmar, it seems both the formerly ruling military junta, and the present civilian set-up under Aung San Suu Kyi, have a similar approach. Seen as illegal Bengali migrants by Myanmar and deprived of fundamental citizenship rights, the Rohingya lead a stateless existence. This 'othering' paves the way for unconscionable repression of the entire community. In the latest wave of officially sanctioned repression, reports have emerged of an army operation under way in the troubled state of Rakhine, which in the past has witnessed communal violence between the Rohingya and Buddhists. The latest bout of trouble was sparked last month after insurgents attacked police and soldiers near the Bangladesh border — a number of security men were killed. The Myanmar government's response has been brutal. While it says it is fighting 'terrorists', it appears as if the entire Rohingya community is being targeted. In fact, Human Rights Watch has described the state's response as "scorched earth". Media reports say around 130 people have been killed in the last month.

Even if we were to accept the official version that terrorists had infiltrated the Rohingya, the fact is that if any community is systematically deprived of its fundamental rights for decades, some of its members will opt to take the deplorable path of militancy. What has been most troubling is the fact that Ms Suu Kyi, who effectively runs Myanmar's government, has been silent on the oppression of the Rohingya people. The iconic activist and Nobel laureate is considered a champion of democracy and human rights; however, it is difficult to understand why she chooses to ignore the atrocities committed against the Rohingya. Any set-up that claims to be democratic must respect the human rights of all communities and ethnic groups. The world community needs to do more in order to convince Myanmar to change its attitude towards the Rohingya, and deal with them with humanity and compassion.

Pak-India tensions

Is it brinkmanship or something more? With the decade-old ceasefire along the LoC already in tatters, India appears determined to find new avenues of provocation against Pakistan.

Over the weekend, first an Indian submarine attempted to intrude into Pakistani waters, according to official accounts, and then a small Indian surveillance drone was knocked down after it strayed across the LoC, again according to official statements.

While each incident may individually seem small and both sides will likely dispute what really occurred, it is alarming that incidents, especially one involving a submarine, are taking place at the moment.

Pakistan-India ties are not merely in a deep freeze, but appear to be further unravelling. Seemingly that is the intention of the Indian leadership. Do both sides truly understand the risks they appear so willing to stoke?

While it is difficult to definitively ascribe motives to the actions of an external rival, it does seem that the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has rejected the idea of engaging Pakistan in dialogue and is determined to go down a path of increasing military tensions.

Perhaps this is because the Indian state wants to deflect attention from its troubles in India-held Kashmir or because a strong, militaristic nationalism is the campaign platform of choice for the BJP, which faces crucial state elections once again in the year ahead.

With the election of a hawkish Donald Trump in the US, Mr Modi may even now be gambling that the year ahead will see closer cooperation between India and the US and more pressure on Pakistan from the new American administration to address US and Indian concerns about specific militant groups allegedly operating on Pakistani soil.

So the combination of pre-existing preferences and the introduction of a new, unpredictable factor in the election of Mr Trump may be the cause of a fresh spike in Pakistan-India tensions.

Perhaps all sides, including the incoming US administration, should pay heed to the words of the outgoing team in Washington.

Commenting on the efforts by some anti-Pakistan elements in the US Congress to declare Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism, the US State Department spokesperson suggested that it is better to engage with Pakistan on counterterrorism issues than to seek punitive measures. In the words of John Kirby, the spokesperson, there should be a “focus on the importance of regional, collaborative, and effective counterterrorism operations”.

While the current US administration’s policies in the region have hardly been ideal and certainly more than a little lopsided, it is worth paying heed to sensible advice at this uncertain juncture in regional dynamics. Pakistan too must promote sensible and peaceful policy outcomes.

Ban on militant groups

WITH the latest round of bans, the total number of proscribed militant groups in the country has now touched 63. The Jamaatul Ahrar and the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi al-Alami certainly appear to have earned their respective bans: each has claimed responsibility for several of the more grotesque militant attacks in recent times in various parts of the country. Separately, investigations by the security apparatus appear to have confirmed many of the claims of responsibility by the two groups, according to reports in the media. The status that the two banned groups have acquired ought to trigger action against them. But there lies the problem: what exactly are the steps that are required to be taken and how will progress towards those goals be measured? Or to put it bluntly, how many of the 61 previously banned groups have been made extinct ie verifiably put out of action as their banned status demands? Few examples exist and it is virtually impossible to identify any group that has truly been dismantled and made operationally extinct. Instead, the record suggests that most of the banned groups reconstitute under different names or split and fragment into a number of sub-groups with even more violent agendas. The Jamaatul Ahrar and Lashkar-i-Jhangvi al-Alami are themselves examples of that phenomenon.

While there are specific instances of aggressive actions taken by the state, the general experience is of few successful prosecutions of members of militant groups and virtually no leaders being captured, prosecuted and successfully imprisoned. Indeed, some of the more high-profile militant leaders roam the country with impunity and in several places appear to be afforded official security while their public activities are facilitated by the state at the local level. Why, for example, does the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat leadership continue to hold public gatherings where the group’s patently illegal and

violent agenda is openly propagated? In other cases, why do leaders of groups facing international sanctions and on local watch lists seem to fearlessly give statements to the media that espouse explicitly violent agendas? While the questions are many, the answers are few. Part of the problem certainly is the very repository of the list of banned militant groups: Nacta. Seemingly, no government is capable of mastering the riddle of an agency that everyone agrees is vital to the counterterrorism and counter-extremism fight but that somehow has not been able to evolve beyond institutional infancy.

Exhumation of bodies

ONE would imagine that after years of suffering terrorist attacks in which tens of thousands of Pakistanis have lost their lives, criminal investigation authorities here would have put in place procedures to streamline their work. Not so, apparently. It has emerged that this week a medical team, under the supervision of a judicial officer, is to exhume the bodies of the 10 attackers killed during their assault on the Karachi airport on June 8, 2014. The four-member team will collect samples to carry out DNA tests for the purpose of establishing the identity of the assailants, who were buried in an Edhi-run graveyard in Karachi.

The airport attack, which was claimed by the banned TTP, was carried out — or so the investigation appeared to determine — by Uzbek militants, with local elements having provided them with logistical support, funds and weapons. Three men are presently on trial for being accessories to the crime. While the purpose of the impending exhumation is not yet clear, it may be linked to the recent arrest of a member of the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, who is very much a Pakistani and has claimed that his brother was one of the attackers killed during the assault. It is inexplicable that DNA samples were not taken from the 10 men as a matter of course, and that over two years later, exhumation has to be resorted to for the purpose. In the West, decades-old cold cases are being solved through latest forensic science techniques simply because investigators all those years ago had the foresight to preserve the evidence. Here, on the other hand, there remains an alarming lack of protocols for processing crime scenes. Scarce attention is paid by police to preventing the public from contaminating evidence, which can fatally compromise a successful prosecution — particularly in an environment where witnesses are reluctant to testify. This haphazard, lackadaisical approach to gathering and preserving evidence must be replaced with strictly professional methods reinforced by access to the best forensic tools.

Army chief's retirement

GEN Raheel Sharif will retire next week, the first army chief to do so on time and after a single, three-year term since Gen Waheed Kakar in 1996. Moreover, in the last 18 years, the Pakistan Army has been commanded by only three men — a dismal rate of turnover that had harmed the reputation of the institution and undermined much else. Now, a fourth general will assume command next week and hopefully he will build on the commendable example set by Gen Sharif and will abide by the institutional norm of a single three-year term for an army chief. Certainly, Gen Sharif will be a hard act to follow.

After the stasis of Gen Ashfaq Kayani's second term, the army needed a jolt in the right direction on the anti-terror front. Gen Sharif was that jolt — an indefatigable traveller to the front lines and redirecting his institution for a relentless fight against the banned TTP and sundry anti-Pakistan and sectarian militant groups. Zarb-i-Azb and the Karachi operation are the two counter-insurgency and counterterrorism legacies respectively that Gen Sharif will be remembered for. While the PML-N belatedly embraced Operation Zarb-i-Azb, it remains the case that the North Waziristan action was originally the plan and vision of Gen Sharif. Once Prime Minister Sharif authorised the operation, it was Gen Sharif who worked tirelessly to sustain the morale of the troops on the front lines and, later, to try and accelerate the return of IDPs to various parts of Fata. The Karachi operation has been an altogether more controversial affair, especially since its scope widened beyond narrow counterterrorism goals. But the role played by Gen Sharif in stabilising the country's largest city and pulling it back from the edge of the precipice is undeniable.

While some policy aspects and parts of the strategy and tactics used can be debated, it remains the case that the current army chief has played an important part in returning the country to a significantly more stable and secure place. In time, the full legacy and impact of Gen Sharif will be evaluated in the proper context. For now, however, it is necessary to acknowledge the precedent-setting decision to retire after three years in an era where old institutional norms appeared to have been abandoned. In January, Gen Sharif had announced he would retire at the end of his term this month. The subsequent 10 months have been some of the longest in recent memory. Urged by friends, allies, politicians and activists to reconsider his decision, the army chief did appear to waver. The Panama Papers, the PTI's abortive Islamabad lockdown, plummeting ties with India — opportunity after opportunity came for public pressure to be put on the government to consider requesting Gen Sharif to continue his command. But good sense has prevailed in the end and a good officer can be given a fond and formal farewell this week.

PPP's quest

THE truth is that nobody knows what the truth is. The topic, once again, is how to revive the PPP. The territory is Punjab, where the party was born almost five decades ago. The choice is between those who promise to bring in a few 'electables' and those who want to or who can revamp the party and turn it into a truly popular outfit. Both sides — the feudal and the awami — have taken turns to guide and manage the PPP. Both have failed because the image of the top leadership of the party remains tainted. For the moment, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari is shown to be in charge of the latest push for the renewal of the party's fortunes in the country's biggest province. But the presence looming large over the proceedings is that of his father. Even if such a desire existed somewhere deep in the PPP's consciousnesses it has been next to impossible to take out Asif Ali Zardari from the PPP. Indeed, he continues to form the nucleus.

In this case, the change that Mr Bhutto-Zardari is attempting, presumably with his father's active guidance, can be seen as a positive one: Qamaruzzaman Kaira as PPP president for central Punjab and someone as promising as Nadeem Afzal Chan as his general secretary. That is as good a partnership as the party in a crisis could hope for. The two men enjoy some respect, not least because they have defied predictions of departing and have remained by their party's side under dire conditions. There are expectations of them given the energy they have displayed in pursuing their choice of politics. The biggest asset at their command is perhaps their refusal to be embarrassed by the smear-and-taunt campaign the PPP has been targeted with. But as they prepare for the challenge, they have no previous model to bank on. In tackling the current crisis, there is no example from the past they could be inspired by since at no time during the last five decades was the PPP image as dark and gloomy in the province as it is today. It is a distant third contestant, trailing the PML-N and PTI by a long margin. That is how difficult it is and maybe the PPP's cause will be helped by starting from zero, and by party leaders refraining from raising old slogans. The new PPP must try and find a new rallying slogan, or be doomed.

Punishing children

SEEN in educational institutions, madressahs, homes and workplaces, corporal punishment is one of the most pervasive forms of violence against children in Pakistan. Most cases go unreported because of tacit cultural approval of acts of violence against children for disciplinary purposes. The fact that such physical punishment has often resulted in serious injuries, and even death, means little to society at large. When 14-year-old Mohammad Ahmed Hussain, an eighth-grade student studying at Cadet College in Larkana, was severely thrashed, allegedly by a teacher in early August, he was left paralysed — unable to talk or walk. The fact that an FIR is yet to be registered against the perpetrators and the victim has not so far received medical care from the state is shameful, especially when the government is bound to protect the rights of children. Then, Cadet College is no ordinary educational institution, preparing students to serve and protect their country. Therefore, the preservation of human rights and dignity is integral to its ethos. Whatever behaviour is witnessed inside the college will serve as an example to graduating cadets.

Additionally, prohibiting the culture of corporal punishment requires the implementation of existing legislative protections such as the Sindh Children Act, 1955. The Larkana incident must serve as a catalyst for enacting the pending Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Bill, 2013. Indeed, Pakistan is obligated to do so under international covenants. Judging by the severity of ‘punishments’ reported in places of learning — whipping, beatings on the head and face, sexual abuse, etc — one is able to discern that such behaviour is traditionally sanctioned by parents and teachers as disciplinary measures. Unicef research in 2014 found that 81pc of children, from one to 14 years, in Punjab and Sindh were violently ‘disciplined’ through forms of psychological aggression and/or physical punishment. For that reason, public awareness about the harmful effects of corporal punishment is imperative with the objective of shifting attitudes towards promoting positive forms of child-rearing and education.

Census urgency

AFTER promising to hold the census in March this year, the government is now giving assurances it will be held next year. But its words ring hollow at this point. The last time, too, we were given assurances that the exercise would be held on time, and then a postponement was announced, with the authorities citing the unavailability of army personnel needed for security and supervision during the population count. To most observers though, a delay was expected long before the last-minute announcement;

little groundwork had been done, and funds had not been released. In fact, it was baffling to see the government trying to convince parliament that the census would be held on time when there was no sign that preparations were under way for the count.

This time, once again, parliament has been assured by the law minister that the census will be held next March. Several questions naturally arise: have the requisite funds for the exercise been released? Has the preparatory work for such a mammoth exercise begun? After all, the census is not like counting chickens in a coop. And how exactly does the government intend to ensure that this time there will be enough military presence for security and supervision? Considering that the last census was held in 1998 and that subsequent dispensations shied away from conducting a population count, one would not be surprised if the government were once again to go back on its commitment.

If we remain stuck on the question of availability of military personnel, the census will never be conducted. It is unlikely that the myriad engagements the military is caught up in will subside in the near future. It is also difficult to believe that there is no way around this issue. It is common knowledge that compelling political considerations revolve around a census exercise due to the ramifications it has for provincial seat shares in parliament. Even here a solution can be found in the model that freezes provincial seat shares for a certain number of years, irrespective of the outcome of the census. The point is that the state is largely working blind in its policy formulation, given that the census data it relies on is 18 years old. If, with its majority in parliament, the government cannot muster the will to rectify matters, and can only put up an appearance of being keen to hold the census, only to back down at the last minute, then it cannot expect its governance track record to be taken seriously. The census is a priority for the state, and it must be conducted within the next few months — before preparations start for the general elections due in 2018. The rulers should not leave this unfinished business for the next government.

Poll reform

THE transfer of electoral rolls from Nadra to the Election Commission of Pakistan may seem like an obscure bureaucratic exercise that has little substantive relevance to the holding of free and fair polls at the time of the next general election. In reality, however, the process of transferring electoral rolls — done as per an agreement between the ECP and Nadra — indicates just how far off the agenda poll reforms and the holding of meaningfully free and fair elections have fallen. According to a recent report in this newspaper, no less than an ECP member himself raised concerns about the electoral

body's capacity to handle an electronic databank of approximately 100m voters. Moreover, the procedure for adding new voters to the electoral rolls has yet to be determined. These developments reiterate at least three flaws with the electoral process in the country. First, the holding of free and fair polls, while vital to the democratic process, is inherently a technical and bureaucratic exercise. Within that process, the sanctity and accuracy of electoral rolls is paramount — if the list of voters itself is compromised, tampered with or in some way incomplete, voters are disenfranchised and the electoral process is damaged. Incomplete and inaccurate electoral rolls are a historical problem that surely should now finally be resolved.

Second, the stalled ECP reforms continue to be a troubling road block in the quest for free and fair polls. While parliament has gone to the extent of passing a constitutional amendment to modify the composition of ECP membership, the quantum of resources, the staff and the powers at the disposal of the body are still areas of significant problems. Ultimately, the ECP can only be effective if the orders issued by its members are implemented scrupulously and in a disciplined manner across the country. The ECP apex consists of four members and a chief election commissioner, but below it sits a vast implementing system — and it is often at those tiers, especially at the local level, that problems arise. Thus far, the very valid needs and enhanced resource allocation for the ECP are matters that have largely been ignored. Third, are overall electoral reforms really a part of the government and combined opposition's agenda? While some persistent MNAs continue to pursue specific electoral reforms, the parliamentary committee responsible appears to have all but run out of steam. Electoral reforms cannot happen without parliament's interest and attention.

CII's irrelevance

SOMETIMES, reform is not the answer. A case in point is the resolution unanimously passed by the Senate on Tuesday recommending that women be given increased representation in the Council of Islamic Ideology. The strength of this constitutional body is stipulated to be between eight and 20, which must include at least one woman member. The fact that a PPP senator, Sehar Kamran, had moved the resolution was particularly curious. Only a few months ago, another PPP senator, Farhatullah Babar, had called for the CII to be disbanded altogether. Along with some other members in the Senate committee on human rights, he had denounced the CII's misogyny and its inordinate focus on issues pertaining to women and marriage.

The CII is among several elements of a regressive legacy that continue to bedevil Pakistan. With the Constitution containing the proviso that no law shall be framed contrary to the Quran and Sunnah, a body tasked with assessing whether laws conform to Islamic principles or not, is entirely redundant. The argument that it has only an advisory role is specious, for even in this capacity the CII has derailed or, at the very least, watered down attempts at legislation seeking to empower women. It serves as a platform for representatives from right-wing groups outside parliament to exercise influence over the process of legislation and introduce confusion in the public debate often through misinformation and flawed reasoning. In an environment where violence against women can take the most horrific forms, the CII uses its bully pulpit — not to mention its Rs100m budget — to try and further rob women of their agency. It has denounced a minimum age for marriage as un-Islamic, rejected the use of DNA as primary evidence in rape cases and slammed Punjab's new women's protection law — and this is only a sampling of its recent ponderings. Having more women on the CII is no solution: the council should be written out of the statute books.

LoC violence

THE Line of Control is exploding, and once again the potential for greater conflict is growing. With low-level, cross-LoC violence seemingly ignored outside security circles in both countries and overshadowed by other events globally, there was always the risk of an escalation at a time when neither India nor Pakistan appear to be interested in anything other than hurling accusations at one another. Now that escalation appears to have arrived with several civilian and military casualties on the Pakistani side — including three soldiers and nine bus passengers killed by Indian firing and shelling on Wednesday — and the Indian military claiming one of its soldiers has been beheaded. While the present violence is similar to several other episodes in recent years — and each episode saw better sense eventually prevail — when it comes to Pakistan-India relations, and especially the LoC, nothing should be taken for granted. Moreover, the Uri attack in September and the so-called surgical strikes by India in response may have altered the previous dynamic and created dangerous new expectations on the Indian side.

What is clear is that the 2003 ceasefire ought to be returned to at the earliest. It proved to be durable not only because it was sensible and both sides were committed to its implementation, but because it was rooted in an understanding that LoC violence hurts local populations and always carries the risk of a wider conflagration. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared to not understand or appreciate the delicate balance in place along the LoC when, soon after assuming office, he not only ordered

disproportionate Indian military responses across the LoC but also allowed government officials to boast about it. Now, with India-held Kashmir roiled by protests and under a suffocating curfew for months, New Delhi is making a thinly veiled attempt to shift domestic and international — to the extent it exists — attention away from India's problems and towards the old ruse of escalating Pakistan-India tensions.

Here the temptation may be to believe that the imminent transition at the top of the army leadership and the election of a hawkish presidential candidate in the US has given Modi-led India further incentive to test Pakistan's resolve. It is a temptation because, whether true or not, it deflects from what Pakistan does need to do: hold its nerve along the LoC; work towards a quick de-escalation of the latest violence; and continue with the diplomatic mission of highlighting the Kashmir dispute and the latest repressive measures by India in IHK. If, instead, the language of brinkmanship, retaliation and counter-retaliation is allowed to prevail, Pakistan too will be hurt. Internal security priorities are paramount while the external situation is brittle — the state of Pakistan must not allow itself to be goaded or distracted by Indian provocations.

Amnesty scheme

AS a general rule, tax amnesties are a bad idea because they rarely work and end up penalising honest taxpayers. In Pakistan, the track record of such amnesties has been particularly bad. Therefore, the recommendations made by a National Assembly committee for an amnesty for those with undeclared real-estate wealth should be rejected. Instead, the advice of the FBR opposing the move should be heeded. The government had announced its intention of beginning documentation of the real-estate sector this year, and the FBR valuation tables to be used for tax purposes were a step in that direction. Expectedly, the move met with fierce resistance from the powerful property market stakeholders, since a large amount of the country's 'black money' is parked in real estate. Thus far the government has not backed down, even though the move has caused property prices to drop and transactions have come down sharply. But the recommended amnesty, provided people availing themselves of its provisions agree to pay 3pc of the total amount they are unable to reconcile, would be a step backwards.

The figure of 3pc makes a mockery of the whole exercise. On top of that, allowing a one-time waiver to whiten black money is unlikely to serve the cause of documentation of the economy. The government should learn from its experience of a similar amnesty plan offered to traders earlier this year, which drew a dismal response, and it should not

repose so much trust in the scheme recommended now. The earlier move against traders turned out to be little more than a revenue measure. But this move is unlikely to yield any revenue, or result in people declaring the full value at which property deals are being made. If neither the revenue interest of the state, nor the documentation of the economy is served by the recommendations, then they amount to little more than a backdoor exit for the government to end its stand-off with the property dealers. The property market is not as central to the day-to-day life of the economy, nor does it disrupt people's lives by much if it has to suffer a prolonged slump. The government should not fear the consequences of dragging the affair out and should firmly stick to its original plan. Any climbdown at this stage will only signal weakness on its part and damage its credibility.

Chronic traffic issues

THE IDEAS 2016 exhibition got under way in Karachi on Tuesday, and while thousands of ordinary citizens may or may not have agreed with its slogan, 'Arms for peace', invariably most were left frustrated as the event caused a massive traffic logjam. Vehicles, including ambulances and school vans, remained stuck for hours, with traffic police personnel rendered helpless. Where, on the one hand, there was lack of planning on part of the senior traffic management authorities, on the other there was a lawless public. Unfortunately, gridlock in the congested heart of the city has become a chronic problem. But nothing has been done to address it, even though solutions are available. For instance, the Lyari Expressway is a major alternative route. One track of it is operational, but the other has been left dangling for years in a state of near-completion. Why can't the government finish the job, given the extent to which it would ease the daily commute of tens of thousands of people?

In fact, the problem is evident across the country's urban landscapes that witness millions of vehicles on poorly maintained road networks creating all sorts of civic and environmental problems. The state's response is overwhelmingly to either widen the roads — as though this can be done endlessly — or try tricks and stratagems such as signal-free corridors, craftily placed U-turns, or diversions. But the central problem remains. There are simply too many vehicles on the roads, with thousands more being added every day. This is the result of the government's failure to put in place workable public transport and mass transit systems. Two big-ticket systems have in recent years been created in Lahore and Rawalpindi-Islamabad. But they too have attracted controversy for not being the best bang for buck, and they cover just a tiny portion of the

commuting routes. Until the state bestirs itself, the citizenry must carry on fending for itself as best as it can, under the most testing of circumstances.

Pay raise for lawmakers

PERHAPS if one thinks hard about the justifications given for the recent pay increase that the government has approved for members of the National Assembly and Senate, one can see a glimmer of logic in the move — but nothing more than a glimmer. The raise is as high as 146pc of the pay they were getting until now. Most people, including civil servants, have to wait many years before their pay is doubled, let alone increased by 146pc. The government offered the justification that this pay has not been adjusted for 14 years and the lawmakers were having trouble managing household expenditures within the current salary. When asked about the wealth of these parliamentarians, the government spokeswoman said that most of them were “from the middle class” and their wealth statements were available on the ECP and FBR websites.

This last part strains credulity. If we are expected to believe that people who own multiple mansions and arrive at the National Assembly in vehicles that cost more than the houses in which most middle-class people live, own or control nothing more than the meagre wealth shown on their asset declarations then the government has clearly no confidence in the average citizen’s intelligence. In fact, the asset declarations are a joke given the visible lifestyles led by most of the members of parliament, as are whatever declarations they file regarding election expenses incurred during campaigning, and their tax returns. It is a sad fact that one can live the lifestyle of a billionaire in this country while appearing like a pauper in one’s declarations before the state. But it adds insult to injury when these same people vote for a pay raise for themselves, the likes of which most middle-class people can only dream of, and then expect citizens to believe they are using their salary to meet household expenditures. The government should have used its time to tend to more important matters that are genuinely in the public interest.

Karachi operation

ALTHOUGH the outgoing army chief’s counterterrorism efforts in the tribal areas have been widely cited as his biggest success, many have also lauded his involvement in bringing a semblance of peace to Karachi. On a recent farewell visit to Corps V, Karachi, Gen Raheel Sharif told his men that the results of the ongoing law-enforcement

operation in the Sindh capital must not be reversed with the change of command in the army. The president also echoed these concerns on Wednesday. Indeed, most residents of Karachi will concur that ever since the Rangers-led operation began in September 2013, the levels of violence in the metropolis have come down. The number of terrorism-related incidents, extortion bids, kidnappings and political murders all appear to have dropped as compared to the days before the operation. Police officials say 3,000 criminals have been apprehended, while business activity has also picked up.

However, Karachi still has many miles to go before it can be declared a safe city. For example, despite the reduction in violence overall, street crime remains endemic — a fact that has been acknowledged in the highest echelons of government. People are held up during traffic jams and in markets and other public places by armed men who do not hesitate to pull the trigger should their victim resist the mugging attempt. Without a sustained campaign against street crime, the gains of the operation will remain limited. Also, while incidents of sectarian terrorism may be down, militant cells are clearly still active in the city, as the killings during Muharram have demonstrated. The operation then has not been without criticism, especially when there have been reports of staged encounters and the torture of suspects in custody.

To truly consolidate the gains of the three-year-old operation, the authorities — specifically the provincial government, the elected mayor, the police force and the military — must look at the bigger picture. While a militarised approach to policing — by having the Rangers spearhead the operation — may have brought temporary respite, in the long term, peace in Karachi can only be established through a depoliticised, professional local police force recruited on merit, and that knows the city and its problems. Also, law-enforcement efforts must be complemented by good governance, something the city has been lacking for decades. Arguably, Karachi's vast ungoverned spaces and growing informality provide oxygen to a plethora of rackets, including criminal and militant enterprises. Along with a strong police force, it is critical that the elected local government — led by the city mayor — has genuine powers to govern all aspects of civic life. The provincial cabinet and bureaucracy cannot be expected to assess the conditions and needs of Karachi's sprawling neighbourhoods; this is the job of the representatives elected from these areas. Good governance and law and order have a symbiotic relationship and cannot work in isolation.

Empowering women

GIVEN its multidimensional context, women's empowerment in Pakistan is defined as the power to effect socioeconomic change if structures that dictate social, political and economic power-holding are altered. Because economic empowerment is intertwined with gender equality and equity, changes in policy and social structures, such as land and labour reforms, educational opportunities, and autonomous decision-making for women, are prerequisites. According to the Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre's report, Empowering Women in South Asia, two out of every 10 women participate in the labour force in Pakistan, with the majority working in low-quality jobs, unrecognised and unaware of their rights. In fact, with 12 million women home-based workers in Pakistan and more than 3m concentrated in urban areas and 8.5m in rural districts, the government's failure to improve working conditions and workers' rights has widened labour inequity. This gross negligence will impact economic development projects if fiscal policies do not include gender-based budgeting plans. The fact that increasing women's pay to equal that of men would raise per capita income by 14pc in 2020 in developing countries is an interesting observation in this context. Moreover, pending issues of low wages, the lack of social security, including discriminatory laws and poor working conditions, persistently impede women's socioeconomic indicators. In the case of home-based workers, they toil long hours at the cost of their health, and have little access to and knowledge of the market. Even so, these invisible women are unrecognised in official statistics, with no minimum wage or health benefits. Although their abject working conditions are known, the government has yet to work on a national policy that focuses on legal protections for them.

Meanwhile, with 12.5m children in the labour force deprived of an education and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, the government must develop child protection mechanisms and legislation to ensure children go to school. Child labour will only contribute to disillusionment over lost opportunities among a generation liable to go towards militancy. Allocating increased resources to support families to keep children out of income-generating activities is another recommendation. While Vision 2025 is the PML-N's golden blueprint, it is capacity-building and implementation of ideas for inclusive and pro-poor macroeconomic policies that are crucial. Reducing the wage gap and lending directly to women will set the direction for future progress.

Forced conversions

ON Thursday, Sindh did Pakistan proud. The provincial assembly spoke with one voice, resoundingly and with conviction, for minority communities living in Sindh when it unanimously passed a law criminalising forced conversions. Tabled last year by a PML-F lawmaker, Nand Kumar Goklani as a private bill, the Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Act, 2015 stipulates a sentence of between five years and life imprisonment for those found guilty of forcible conversion, along with a fine to be paid to the victim. Anyone who performs or facilitates the marriage of a victim of forced conversion is liable to a three-year prison term as well as a fine payable to the victim. Where forced conversion is alleged, the victims will be given 21 days by the court to arrive at an independent decision regarding their change of faith before action under this law is initiated. And a change of religion by minors will not be recognised until they reach the age of majority.

Although the Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion, the situation demanded the passage of such a law. Forced conversions have long been an unfortunate reality here, an inevitable consequence of the ideological narrative that has pervaded the public space over the past few decades. In such an environment, it is difficult, even risky, to argue that compelling a person to change their faith through duress or pressure, whether physical, emotional or psychological, is immoral and unethical. For the same reason, forced conversions are almost impossible to reverse: if victims assert their adherence to their original faith, it can attract accusations of apostasy and leave them vulnerable to religious vigilantism. Human rights organisations estimate that around 1,000 women and young girls — largely from Hindu and Christian families, in Sindh and Punjab respectively — are forcibly converted every year after being kidnapped, and then married to Muslims, often the abductors themselves. While it is admittedly not always easy to determine if a conversion is forced or whether the individual has taken the step of their own volition, a law such as the one recently passed addresses the circumstances in which forced conversions usually happen and ends the impunity with which the perpetrators practise it. Unlike many other laws that address social ills, it should also be comparatively easier to implement.

However, this progressive legislation will almost certainly draw the ire of self-appointed guardians of the faith, the same lobby that creates an intimidating atmosphere in courtrooms where families of women and young girls allegedly converted by force seek justice for their loved ones. Not only should the lawmakers hold their ground, but other provinces should follow suit. By signalling so decisively to the nation that coercion in matters of faith is unacceptable, Sindh has laid down a framework that can enable us to be a better people.

Iraqi massacre

AS the militant Islamic State group gets pounded on the battlefield, it has resorted to a familiar tactic: the mass slaughter of civilians. On Thursday, around 100 pilgrims returning from Arbaeen — as Imam Hussain's chehlum is also known — in Karbala were killed as a massive truck bomb ploughed into buses in the Iraqi town of Hilla. Most of the victims were reportedly Iranian. Between 17 million and 20 million people had gathered in Iraq over the past few weeks to march to Karbala for Arbaeen. Protecting this mass gathering of humanity was indeed a challenge for the Iraqi forces; around 25,000 troops had been dispatched to Karbala for security. However, while the administration managed to protect the holy city, the terrorists struck a relatively more vulnerable spot. Some commentators have said the Hilla attack could be a diversionary tactic to take attention away from Mosul, where the Iraqis are leading the operation to liberate this key city from IS clutches. The Iranians are playing a major role in assisting Iraqi forces, which is why, in its claim of responsibility, IS boasted it had targeted Iranians. Another major motivation for the attack is, of course, the rabidly sectarian nature of IS. Earlier this year, after the Iraqi government had freed Fallujah from IS's grip, the terrorist outfit carried out a devastating bombing targeting a market in Baghdad's Karrada area. Over 340 people were killed in that atrocity in July.

For Iraq to turn the page on its recent blood-soaked history, it is essential to ensure that IS does not have any space to operate from in the country. In order to prevent more horrific loss of life, the Mosul operation must be taken to a successful conclusion; the administration must remain on guard as IS has pledged to carry out more attacks on Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf. In the aftermath of the Hilla tragedy, Iranian President Rouhani has called for an "all-out fight" against terrorism. Indeed, this is a call that all countries in the region should support. However, for such a fight to be successful, the Syrian quagmire needs to be resolved, as it has become a magnet for extremist fighters. Naive as it may sound in this world of cunning geopolitics, regional countries as well as global powers must put aside their political differences and concentrate on the defeat of IS for the security of the entire region.

Tobacco menace

DESPITE the passage of laws such as a ban on smoking at public places, ridding Pakistani society of this nuisance has proved difficult. Ensure success in one place — for instance, smoking rooms have disappeared from major airports — and the menace pops up somewhere else. The latest trend in this regard was pointed out in Islamabad

on Thursday, when the Network for Consumer Protection launched its report Monitoring of Tobacco Advertising, Promotion, Sponsorship and Point of Sale Advertising. Compiled after a survey conducted around schools in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Lahore, Karachi and Quetta, the report said that multinational cigarette manufacturing companies are now targeting children as young as six. This is being done by placing advertisements and products in shops around educational institutions. Some 83pc of the shops surveyed had cigarettes displayed behind cash counters, 50pc had placed cigarettes alongside candies and snacks, and 14pc were even offering incentives such as limited time offers or free gift on purchase. Yet the most worrying violation was that 89pc of the shops do not display the 'no sale to minors' signage mandated by the law.

Behind these numbers is a serious, ongoing healthcare crisis. Time and again, around the world, it has been shown that the best way to reduce the incidence of smoking is to ensure that new generations are not attracted to the habit or held hostage by it. But even a cursory glance at marketplaces around the country shows that very little effort is being made to shield youngsters from the dangerous habit — in fact, the sale of cigarettes is rampant. Tobacco is big business, and taxing the sector heavily around the world has been employed as a method to discourage its consumption. But that in itself has given the tobacco lobby the means to put pressure on governments, Pakistan being no exception. Urgently needed is not just enforcement of the law and sustained awareness-raising campaigns, but also higher taxes with strong political backing.

New army chief

ON Tuesday, Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa will start his tenure as chief of army staff, the fourth individual in Pakistan to do so in the 21st century.

His predecessor Gen Raheel Sharif has given Gen Bajwa an excellent platform to build on, though circumstances will also shape how the chief will be able to proceed.

Certainly, a priority must be to wind down large-scale military operations and retool the army for the next phase of counterterrorism operations.

The rehabilitation of Fata, the return of IDPs and a new constitutional scheme for the war-ravaged tribal areas are other important tasks in which the military will have an influential role.

Then there are the national security and foreign policy arenas in which the military has an outsize role, a de facto situation made all the more important because of severely strained relations with India and Afghanistan and a growing focus on ties with China and CPEC.

While the army is an institution, the personality, preferences and personal relationships with leaders of other institutions of any army chief do matter.

In this, it will remain to be seen what kind of leadership style Gen Bajwa has — the mould of the thinker that Gen Kayani cast himself in, the no-nonsense, action-oriented leader that Gen Sharif has been, or something else?

But once again, the direction that is needed is relatively clear — the focus on counterterrorism and the need to initiate action in Punjab beyond the superficial steps taken so far. Clearly, there are matters of law and Constitution to navigate here.

It is the prerogative of the elected government to decide policy and the military must abide by decisions taken.

However, just as Gen Sharif was able to impress on a reluctant PML-N government the need to fight the banned TTP and abandon the foolhardy path of seeking negotiations — a view the centre belatedly embraced — Gen Bajwa may be able to persuade the government of new steps to be taken.

It must certainly not be done in a way that the government is seen to be under orders; there are cooperative ways to persuade the need for a change in policy.

Finally, there is the issue of military interference in politics. To some extent, Gens Kayani and Sharif have distanced the army from the Musharraf era of total control of the political process.

That has been a sensible and pragmatic repositioning that Gen Bajwa must try and further.

Where the civilians themselves seek military input and advice, the army chief can play a role that is democracy-enhancing and system-strengthening.

Beyond that, however, all army chiefs need to be mindful of institutional separation and the constitutional scheme of things.

At no point would Gen Sharif have gained more than he would have lost had he opted to wade deep into the political process. Politics for politicians, army for national defence.

Adios Fidel

SUMMING up the life of Fidel Castro in this space is indeed a difficult task, for the Marxist revolutionary was an international icon whose appeal transcended cultures and ideologies, and whose feats were numerous. Indeed, today, his ideological comrades, such as Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela, as well as unabashed right-wingers including Narendra Modi are mourning his loss. Castro struggled to build a new Cuba from the wreck of the Batista dictatorship, and while this endeavour saw many ups and downs, his passion for constructing a more equal society was beyond doubt. The late Cuban leader was a hero for revolutionary movements the world over, as well as a strong voice from the global South, standing up, as he did, to the US — a superpower barely a hundred miles to the north of his country. Though this confrontation was an unequal one from the beginning, Castro stood firm, refusing to budge from his ideological foundations. There were, of course, consequences, most notably the decades-long crippling economic blockade of Cuba enforced by the US, which remains in place. Castro managed to keep Cuba afloat financially even after the USSR — Havana's principal foreign patron — crumbled at the end of the Cold War. He was accused — primarily by Cuban exiles and members of the Western bloc — of brooking no dissent and trampling on rights. While he was far from perfect, it should be realised that much of the criticism was ideological, directed at Castro because he had abandoned the twin gods of the market economy and liberal democracy.

In an age where ideology seems passé, is Fidel Castro still relevant? After all, even during the old warrior's lifetime Cuba, under his brother Raul Castro, had begun experimenting with limited market reforms and began a rapprochement with the US 'empire'. Perhaps Cuba will go the Chinese way, staying communist only in name and political structure, otherwise embracing capitalism. However, Cubans, and the world, are aware that amongst Castro's most enduring legacies is his country's healthcare system. This system has been held up by the World Health Organisation as a model for others, and is free and universal. In fact, Pakistan witnessed the Cuban humanitarian spirit first hand, when over a million people were treated by Cuban doctors in the aftermath of the 2005 Kashmir earthquake. This struggle to create a less exploitative, more humane world will ensure El Comandante's spirit lives on.

Wahid Baloch case

IT is a case that has been registered with the Sindh High Court simply as incident number 4,247. Missing since July 26, social activist and writer Abdul Wahid Baloch was allegedly taken into custody by two men in plainclothes while travelling on a bus en route to Karachi with a friend. His distressed family was obstructed from registering an FIR — a legal requirement for investigation — until the court finally instructed the police to do so. It is revealing that in an unusual move, the FIR was registered against “covert law-enforcement agencies” on Sept 28 with the help of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. When HRCP wrote several letters to government officials, the Supreme Court and international bodies, including the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, calling for the recovery of Mr Baloch, it received no response. This shameful official silence is damaging for the country’s human rights record. It also demonstrates the all-too-familiar disconnect between military-led and civilian law-enforcement agencies — one or more of which may be responsible for Mr Baloch’s disappearance. If Mr Baloch has violated the law then charges must be filed against him, rather than the government remaining indifferent to his whereabouts.

As a publisher and bibliophile, Wahid Baloch felt advocating peace and justice meant offering young writers the opportunity to embrace pluralism — and this narrative does not seem to gel well with the establishment’s thinking. Meanwhile, the government’s failure to investigate his disappearance and that of countless others is a travesty of justice given that enforced disappearances are attacks on dissenting individuals and must be criminalised. And regardless of whether this arbitrary practice is the work of covert intelligence agencies or civilian law enforcers, it is the state’s duty to protect detained persons from torture and to produce them before a court of law. Protecting fundamental rights is, after all, the cornerstone of a parliamentary democracy.

India’s dangerous politics of water

IT has been discussed in fringe and jingoistic circles for years, but since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi threatened to use water as a weapon against Pakistan, India’s rights under the Indus Waters Treaty has become a mainstream topic in India — a disturbing and unwelcome development that needs to be handled with utmost seriousness and care.

The IWT is the most durable and effective of dispute-resolution mechanisms that India and Pakistan have; the treaty has survived wars, conflicts and long periods of diplomatic and military tensions between the two countries.

That is all the more remarkable given that the two countries have been for most of their history agrarian societies and the Indus is Pakistan's primary riverine irrigation system. But two factors appear to be changing a right-wing Indian government's approach to water politics.

First, the state of Punjab in India is set to hold elections early next year and water politics is playing a crucial role.

Not only are farmers agitating in the state, but a water dispute with neighbouring Haryana has accentuated the problems. Seemingly hoping to take advantage of the possible electoral turmoil, Prime Minister Modi has waded into the water disputes in a politically advantageous manner.

The suggestion that somehow India's rightful share of water is being lost to Pakistan and that the BJP government can use diplomatic and legal muscle to give the Indian farmers an advantage may appeal to a domestic audience.

Second, water appears to be a tool that India may want to implicitly threaten Pakistan with in the debate on counter terrorism. In fact, the first ominous mention of water and Pakistan's reliance on the Indus water system by Prime Minister Modi came after the Uri attack in September.

The connection was dangerous and immediately clear: if Pakistan did not address the concerns India had about terrorism, the latter country would turn to tough means to try and exert pressure on Pakistan.

Never mind that the IWT is a time-tested framework, India has tried to send a signal that it may not stop at anything to get its way.

In the face of fresh Indian provocation, Pakistan has responded in a sensible manner. The adviser to the prime minister on foreign affairs Sartaj Aziz's calm and measured response may not suit bellicose hawks, but diplomacy must go beyond the emotional and look to the overall situation a country faces, both internal and external.

Rejecting tit-for-tat responses is a sensible approach that will help keep attention where it is needed, ie on the continuing repression in India-held Kashmir.

Indeed, it is entirely plausible that a great deal of India's actions and threat towards Pakistan are designed to elicit a response that pushes the repression in IHK further down the international agenda. Furthermore, while the so-called surgical strikes were a clear attempt to deflect domestic pressure in India, Pakistan should be mindful to not let India's diversionary tactics become something more.

Travesty of justice

IT is better that 10 guilty men go free than one man be wrongly convicted — the words of the English jurist William Blackstone in the 18th century encapsulated a basic precept of criminal justice. That precept was found desperately wanting in the case of Mazhar Farooq, a death-row prisoner convicted for a murder that took place 24 years ago in a village in Punjab's Kasur district. On Friday, after hearing his appeal against his sentence that had been upheld by the Lahore High Court in 2009, a Supreme Court bench found him not guilty and ordered his immediate release. By this time, the prisoner had spent two decades of his life on death row for no fault of his own, but because an appallingly flawed criminal justice system let him down every step of the way.

It may be cold comfort, but Mr Farooq can at least take solace in the fact that he can finally breathe the air of freedom. In October, the apex court acquitted two brothers in a 2002 murder case, only to find that the men had already been hanged one year back. Miscarriage of justice is not exclusive to Pakistan, but in countries like ours, where the criminal justice system is riddled with shockingly fundamental problems, the chances are that much greater — which is one of the reasons why this paper has consistently opposed the death penalty. People without means or connections are disproportionately impacted. Convenient scapegoats for corrupt law-enforcement officials wanting to demonstrate 'results', once they are ensnared in the slow and torturous legal process, there is no telling what the outcome will be, even if the investigation is obviously shoddy and the evidence wholly unconvincing. Indigent accused who cannot afford to hire defence lawyers have to make do with state-appointed counsel who are already overburdened and unlikely to be the cream of the crop. Trials take inordinately long because of repeated adjournments; sometimes also on account of logistical issues such as shortage of transport to bring prisoners to court. Corruption at the trial court level is endemic, with witnesses, police and sometimes even judicial officials susceptible to financial blandishments to influence the outcome of a case. It bears thinking then, that in such a defective system where miscarriage of justice is inevitable, how much of it

goes undetected? Or to put it another way: how many people have we executed for crimes they did not commit?

Monetary policy

THE State Bank is continuing to hew to a cautious stance while acknowledging an improvement in the environment supporting the growth momentum. Its latest monetary policy statement provides a glittering assessment of where the economy is going, with the only risks identified as an adverse movement in oil prices or “non-trade flows” in the external sector. It is not clear what this term refers to. All we are told is that an “unpredictability of non-trade flows will influence the current account in particular and the external sector in general” for the rest of the fiscal year. What does influence mean in this formulation, and what sort of unpredictability are we talking about?

The State Bank reads an uptick in inflation as a sign of healthy consumer confidence, along with an uptick in private-sector credit offtake as a healthy sign of investor confidence in the economy and its nascent return to growth. This runs against the grain of what the bank’s own annual report tried to suggest only a few weeks earlier, by pointing towards the narrow bases upon which the fiscal situation rests and the growth momentum is riding. Perhaps prudence explains the small but significant gap between what the bank is saying and what it is doing. Or perhaps there is a slight hint of dissonance in the messages it is putting out. Because if inflation is rising and liquidity conditions are easy in the financial system, a case can be made for an upward adjustment in interest rates. We do not know if anybody within the monetary policy decision-making apparatus is advocating a rise in the discount rate since the minutes the State Bank puts out are largely opaque. But the decision to keep rates steady can be read both ways, as prudence or compromise, given the explanation offered in the statement. In any event, we are entitled to a more clear-eyed assessment of where the economy stands than what this statement gave us.

NFC deadlock?

THE latest meeting of the National Finance Commission held on Monday saw the government asking the provinces to bear a greater share of the burden of growing security expenditures. Meanwhile, the provinces made their demands for more revenue lines to be devolved in the next NFC award. The makings of a deadlock are now apparent. The provinces are unlikely to yield to the centre's demand, while the finance minister's suggestion that other routes can be sought to limit the quantum of resources that flow to the provinces under the last NFC arrangement could take on the appearance of a threat to act unilaterally. Given the powerful imperative that the government has put behind its demand for sharing the growing costs of the burden of security expenditures, it will be difficult for the provinces to make a clear case against the proposal.

The finance minister has proposed that 3pc of the federal divisible pool be set aside to be used to meet the growing expenditures arising from the creation of new security wings, some for CPEC's safety and some others for internal duties. The argument for creating a larger security force is a separate debate for another time considering the stark challenges that continue to bedevil the country despite the improvements of the past few years. But this manner of arranging resources should be carefully considered for the precedent that it sets, and for the possibilities of upward creep it creates for the future.

When considering the proposal, it is imperative to point out that we are in this position because of a failure to mobilise domestic resources to pay for the expenses of a modern state, advice that has been repeatedly given to us by the rest of the world at every forum for well over three decades now. The resource constraints are now biting harder and harder as the government has tapped out all other revenue lines, whether ad hoc taxes on banking transactions, or greater reliance on withholding taxes to burden compliant taxpayers further, or even surcharges on utility bills such as power and gas. The failure to build a revenue base to sustain the state's growing resource requirements has driven the government to ask the provinces to share the burden as well, after having made it as difficult as possible for those paying their bills and taxes. And on that count, to begin a long-drawn process of mobilising a new source of revenue that taps undocumented incomes and can credibly grow to become a major revenue source in the future, the government's failure is manifest. It is the cost of this failure that it is now bringing to the provinces and asking them to share the burden of. The NFC award was supposed to devolve further resources and responsibilities to the provinces, but now it appears to be heading towards a deadlock.

PTI and parliament

OFTEN fighting it out in the streets, both the PML-N and PTI have been taken to task over how little importance they accord to the proceedings in parliament. The ruling party has often been accused of ignoring the two houses until forced to occasionally return to the ultimate forum of democratic solution-finding in a dire moment. Meanwhile, where parliamentary debate is concerned, the PTI leader has shown similar arrogance. Indeed, as someone who claims to have been denied his rightful numbers in the assemblies, Imran Khan has often been found bristling at even the mere suggestion that his party was doing no one any favours by continuing to stay away from the elected houses in Islamabad. It is a surprise then that the PTI has allowed its lawmakers to take part in the working of the standing committees of the Senate and National Assembly. Sceptics biased against Mr Khan and his politics may be inclined to see this as part of a grand strategy. They might want to project it as opening a face-saving avenue for the PTI in the event it is left with no option but to commit to working within the system at some future point. Suppose the opposition party cannot do anything else and is forced to retrace its steps to the Assembly. In such a scenario, as opposed to moving from total isolation, working with the committees would make it just a little easier for it to make the otherwise tough transition.

There is definitely a problem. The PTI must go on pressing with its campaign that is, above and over all recent corruption stories, ultimately based on the complaint that the party was hard done by in the 2013 election. This is a perception which seems to be shared by large enough sections of Pakistanis to have provided the central point of politics in the country for so long. Mr Khan is obviously aware of his support base and would be inclined to make statements aimed at keeping this capital secure. However, side by side exists a most pronounced, even unprecedented chorus that speaks about the need to not waste the democratic parliamentary thrust that exists today in Pakistan after decades of going astray. The PTI as a major party must keep this second reality in mind. It cannot stay too far away from the Senate and National Assembly. Preferably, it must be inside parliament.

Cabinet expansion

IN both established democracies and evolving set-ups — such as ours — a variety of interests have to be accommodated by those in power. There are campaign promises to fulfil, special interest groups to satisfy and ‘electables’ whose calls must be heeded. In Pakistan, biradari, regional and tribal interests must be added to this mix. One way of

pleasing different interest groups is to accommodate them in the cabinet, and Pakistan has a hallowed tradition of jumbo cabinets, even though the 18th Amendment has sought to control the size of government. In keeping with this political tradition, the Punjab government expanded the cabinet on Sunday; 11 ministers, as well as a number of special assistants and advisers, were added to the provincial cabinet. This brings the number of ministers in Punjab to 31, while the cabinet also contains special assistants and advisers. Seemingly, Punjab is following in the footsteps of Sindh, as the latter has a cabinet of over 40. However, both these administrations pale in comparison to the jumbo set-up Aslam Raisani once managed in Balochistan; over 50 worthies were part of the cabinet in a house of 65 MPAs. It is difficult to understand how the provincial high-ups manage such fuzzy maths, for the 18th Amendment expressly limits provincial cabinet size to 15 ministers, or 11pc of the assembly, “whichever is higher”.

In Punjab’s case, the expansion apparently took place to accommodate disgruntled elements who could not be fitted into the new local government scheme, as well as to accord southern Punjab greater representation, though the region still remains

under-represented. Moreover, the N-League has an eye on 2018; various interest groups have to be pacified and cajoled to ensure the party puts up a solid performance in the next national polls. Whatever the justification, there is valid criticism that Shahbaz Sharif should delegate authority as despite the large cabinet, the Punjab chief minister prefers the one-man style of governance. Voters would also be justified in expecting better service delivery from the enlarged cabinet.

Pak-India dialogue

IN the midst of jingoism and false bravado, it can be difficult to remain restrained, sensible — and diplomatic.

But despite New Delhi’s excessive brinkmanship and emotional calls within Pakistan to respond in the same manner, the Foreign Office continues to hew to a measured and dialogue-driven approach towards India.

So not only is the prime minister’s adviser on foreign affairs, Sartaj Aziz, set to visit Amritsar next week for a Heart of Asia conference, but Pakistan’s high commissioner to India Abdul Basit has let it be known that the foreign adviser’s schedule is flexible and that if bilateral talks are made a possibility, Mr Aziz could extend his daylong trip if necessary.

In continuing to keep the door to dialogue open in the face of blatant rejection by India and somewhat strong opposition at home, the government is doing the politically difficult but diplomatically necessary thing.

What remains to be seen is how India reacts. The signs are not good at the moment, but the possibility of a surprise change in attitude should not be ruled out.

Unhappily, India seems to be more in a mood to test Pakistan's resolve and to try and find chinks in its diplomatic armour internationally.

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi declined to attend a heads of government Saarc summit in Islamabad, the Indian diplomatic machine went into overdrive to play up other withdrawals from the summit and suggest that Pakistan is isolated regionally.

But that is not the case and perhaps India should consider that it has drifted further away from its original goals.

Indeed, given India's long-standing demand for a completion of the 2008 Mumbai attacks-related investigation and trials in Pakistan and the progress that was made on the Pathankot probe earlier this year, it ought to be apparent that slamming the door shut on dialogue will see little progress even in areas where both sides have long pledged to cooperate.

The Heart of Asia conference would be a welcome forum in which to pick up the threads of bilateral dialogue because security, economic and political cooperation in the region are at its core objectives, while Afghanistan is a country that Pakistan and India need to have an open dialogue about.

While Mr Modi has shown alacrity in trying to whip up domestic support for electoral purposes, he has proven himself to be an unexpectedly positive risk-taker externally. After all, it was last Christmas that the Indian prime minister briefly stopped in Lahore on his way back to New Delhi from Kabul.

A handshake with a visiting senior Pakistani official should not be impossible a mere 11 months later.

Arguably, given Mr Modi's own hawkish bent, now is the time for another opening: if Mr Modi believes the Pakistani military dictates India policy, then why not see what a new chief has in mind first?

Consensus on economy

THE Pakistan Business Council has issued a call for a national consensus on economic matters which merit detailed attention from the political leadership. As the government celebrates its achievements on the economic front, more and more voices are pointing out that the real work on the economy needs to begin now. The PBC points out that neglect of the domestic industry must be addressed, and capacity building and reforms at the FBR are necessary for a more meaningful revival of growth and a robust revenue effort that will broaden the tax base rather than burden compliant taxpayers further. Appeals for a consensus on a core set of economic reforms have been sounded in the past as well, such as the famous effort to have a charter of economy. The PBC's call for a consensus is much less ambitious than that, and for that reason perhaps more practical.

Some of the demands of the business community are impossible to meet, such as one window through which business can interact with government. But other demands are far more practical, such as the simplification of tax returns and the rationalisation of tax policy so that the growing burden being placed on compliant businesses can be mitigated. The super tax, for instance, has been pointed out by numerous business leaders as an arbitrary and ad hoc measure that ought to have been eliminated this July, but was instead renewed for another year, with all indications that it will now become a permanent feature. Arbitrary and ad hoc revenue policy of this sort, in the face of growing expenditure requirements, whether for security or infrastructure, dampen the growth engine and defeat the purpose of massive public investments that are designed to kick-start growth. Future growth cannot be built on large public-spending programmes alone, especially in the face of falling exports and the neglect of domestic industry serving the national market. The government needs to use its remaining time in power to focus on domestic industry and exports and embark upon a reform path forward. On top of that, it needs to utilise its political reflexes to build a consensus around a core set of economic policies, including reform of the power sector, public-sector entities, and the tax machinery, so that the changes that are needed do not fall victim to politics. Instead of celebrating macroeconomic stability, this would be better utilisation of its energies.

Edhi's imperilled legacy

IT is no secret that much in Pakistan is driven by personalities and patronage politics. There are not really that many instances where a concerted attempt has been made to strengthen institutions, so that their functioning remains independent of those who happen to occupy the seats of power. As such, it is tragic that an absolutely crucial institution is in danger of falling victim to the personality phenomenon. The Edhi Foundation has for decades taken up the challenge that an unresponsive, inefficient state has no interest in tackling, or lacks the capacity to do so. It has earned worldwide renown for the role it plays in serving the poorest, most vulnerable and most abused sections of society, and for building up its vast network solely on donations and with admirable transparency. And yet, with the passing of its founder Abdul Sattar Edhi in July, things seem to have changed. At a conference organised by the Pakistan Islamic Medical Association in Karachi on Saturday, Faisal Edhi — on whose shoulders the mantle of leadership has fallen — said that donations have decreased steeply since his father's death, which is obviously causing great hurdles in the humanitarian work being undertaken.

The fact is that while the elder Edhi may have been the most widely recognised face of the foundation, the work that was and is being done has involved the efforts of thousands of selfless individuals moved by compassion, and inspired by their leader. It is nothing short of unfair to assume that with Edhi gone, things will no longer be the same at his foundation. Faisal Edhi has, in fact, demonstrated the will and capacity to take both his parents' work forward, putting in long man-hours on the ground at grim scenes during his father's lifetime and afterwards. The foundation still has large numbers of people to serve; it would be a shame indeed if the death of Edhi marked a downward turning point for it.