

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of October, 2014

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



www.thecsspoint.com



DOWNLOAD

CSS Notes, Books, MCQs, Magazines



THE CSS POINT
Yes We Can Do It!

WWW.THECSSPOINT.COM

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

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

Email: info@thecsspoint.com

Table of Contents

Karachi operation..... 3
Pak-Afghan ties: the road ahead 4
A new approach? 5
Counterterrorism challenges 6
Militant monks..... 7
Price of inaction 7
Wazirabad scuffle..... 8
Unfair protections 9
Tahirul Qadri & polls 10
Counting losses the wrong way 11
PTI's hydel vision 12
Polio: our badge of shame 13
Sounding the alarm..... 14
LG poll mess 15
Flood assistance farce..... 16
Support for IS..... 17
Civilians in the crossfire..... 18
Liquor deaths 19
Rents and rackets 20
Absent civilian input on Fata..... 21
NSC meeting..... 22
Pakistan's braveheart 23

Closure of beaches 24
Protests and recovery..... 25
Cooperation on drones?..... 26
Yemen on the brink..... 27
No asylum..... 28
Transit fee accord..... 29
Flight from Balochistan 30
Powering profits 31
Jailbreak thwarted 32
Poor Turkish strategy..... 33
Impact of protests..... 34
Split in Taliban ranks..... 35
Assemblies ranked..... 36
More CNG licences..... 37
Blasphemy ruling 38
Afghanistan fatigue 39
Implications of Multan by-election..... 40
Woes of journalists 41
Ebola danger 42
Power reshuffle 43
Space for culture 44
The army's view..... 45
Targeting of non-Baloch 46
The drop in FDI..... 47

October, 2014

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| A national shame..... | 48 |
| Talk of nukes..... | 49 |
| Licence suspension | 50 |
| Tensions on Pak-Iran border | 51 |
| Confused priorities | 52 |
| Power fumble | 53 |
| Education in a shambles | 54 |
| Measures against Ebola..... | 55 |
| Attacks in Quetta | 56 |
| Food insecurity looms..... | 57 |
| Governance challenge..... | 58 |
| Information law | 59 |
| A familiar spat | 59 |
| Asia spawns a bank | 60 |
| Predatory cities | 61 |
| Saarc summitry | 62 |
| Textbook tinkering..... | 63 |
| Talks with the Taliban | 64 |
| Afghan reconciliation | 65 |
| Privatisation restarts | 66 |
| Tax deadline..... | 67 |

Karachi operation

Editorial

ON the face of it, the numbers appear impressive. A briefing on the Karachi operation, given by a Sindh Rangers official to the Senate Standing Committee on Interior, stated that the Rangers had conducted 3,696 raids, arrested 6,835 suspects and seized 5,214 weapons during the first year of the initiative.

Although the briefing, which claimed that the operation had wiped out the TTP network in Karachi, was coy on details of the crackdown's impact on various categories of criminal offences, police officials have often been quoted as saying the operation has brought down crime by 50pc, with the steepest drop in murders committed along political or ethnic lines. But Karachi is complex and Machiavellian, and has multiple stakeholders with often conflicting agendas.

Hence, these claims need to be placed in context to understand the larger picture and gauge whether the gains are sustainable.

While the decline in political/ethnic murders has indeed been marked, developments at home and abroad may have also played a role in reducing friction between political activists inclined to 'robust' means of conflict resolution.

For one thing, in the months following the 2013 elections, the main parties in Karachi, perhaps feeling vulnerable with a heavily mandated PML-N asserting its writ at the centre, made attempts to bridge their differences and these efforts culminated in their joining forces to run the province. This has been a fraught year for the MQM anyway with legal problems dogging its leader in London.

Meanwhile, nearly 400 raids on the People's Amn Committee during the course of the operation have brought down large-scale, gang-related violence in Lyari, but it is relevant to point out that almost as soon as the operation began, the gangs' top tier leadership fled the area — some, intriguingly, even made it abroad.

As for breaking the back of the TTP in Karachi, the briefing stated that the Rangers had arrested 760 terrorists in 403 raids on militant hideouts, but a cursory glance at newspapers on most days shows that sectarian killers — one faction of whom is said to be closely associated with the TTP — are going about their business without let or hindrance.

Of late, relatives of prominent ulema have also been targeted, indicating a degree of planning which points to the existence of determined, well-organised gangs. Given these realities, it will take nothing less than a holistic approach — involving systemic, far-reaching reforms — to grapple with the criminal landscape of Karachi.

Published in Dawn, October 1st, 2014

Pak-Afghan ties: the road ahead

Editorial

THE history is so long and fraught and the problems so complex that the start of the Ashraf Ghani presidency in Afghanistan cannot immediately be seen as a new beginning in ties between Islamabad and Kabul.

There are though fresh possibilities now that the Hamid Karzai era is over. Mr Karzai in his final speech in office exemplified quite how impossible it had become to hope for major breakthroughs in ties while he was still around: the rancour and vitriol Mr Karzai directed at Pakistan was neither new nor surprising and had thoroughly poisoned all facets of the relationship.

President Ghani, meanwhile, is seen as a pragmatist who is aware that peace and stability in the region will depend on Pak-Afghan relations. Of course, with a power-sharing agreement in place in Afghanistan, it remains to be seen to what extent the Abdullah Abdullah camp — especially the hawks in the erstwhile Northern Alliance — impacts foreign policy and the national security choices of Afghanistan.

Despite Pakistan's reaching out several years ago, the remnants of the Northern Alliance, so influential in Kabul during the Karzai era, never really warmed to the idea. Much then could depend on how domestic politics between the Ghani and Abdullah camps shape Afghan policy towards Pakistan.

The immediate priority for both the Pakistani and Afghan sides should be to reduce the acute tensions along the border between eastern Afghanistan and Fata. Where security forces on both sides have targeted sites across the border, there needs to be an immediate cessation. But the problem is really one of sanctuaries

and cross-border attacks — so long as militants on both sides of the border are present and active, the risk of an escalation between Pakistani and Afghan security forces remains very real.

Eventually, the two countries, if they are ever to deal with the problem on a long-term basis, will need to move towards better border management in a way that makes it less porous but still accessible for legitimate people traffic. Yet, that surely does not mean putting everything else on hold, especially intelligence cooperation and re-energising military-to-military contacts across the border to make clashes less likely.

From there, there are the truly big issues. Pakistan facilitating an internal Afghan reconciliation between the government and the Afghan Taliban would be at the top of that list and the one measure against which much of Islamabad's intentions will be judged in Kabul and internationally.

The protracted Afghan election process has added to lost time so a big gesture may be needed to revive the reconciliation process — one that could be provided by Pakistan. If the goals are kept reasonable but clear and both Pakistani and Afghan sides show they understand the past cannot be repeated, there is a possibility for a shared, better future.

Published in Dawn, October 1st, 2014

A new approach?

IT could be out-of-the-box thinking, but to what end is unclear at the moment. What one can posit about the Balochistan Assembly's resolution to approach the Khan of Kalat, Agha Suleman Dawood Khan, to return from self-exile in London and assume a role in restoring peace to Balochistan is that the initiative could mean different things to different people in the province's fractured political landscape.

When the 2013 elections brought moderate nationalists to power in Balochistan, observers deemed it a positive development because the National Party was seen as better placed to address the many problems bedeviling the province, including the insurgency as well as the feelings of extreme alienation that decades of ill-conceived policies had engendered among its people.

Fundamental to any chance of reaching out to disaffected Baloch was that the establishment abandon its unconscionable kill-and-dump policy to crush the separatist movement. However, the powers that be have continued to follow the same playbook, in the process undermining the Balochistan government.

From his weak position, Dr Malik's oft-stated intention to reach out to the leadership of militant groups was scarcely viable.

His support for the resolution could be another attempt in this direction, taking into account the Khan of Kalat's standing in Balochistan, both in terms of tribal hierarchy as well as for historical reasons. The latter go back to the pre-Partition days when the princely state of Kalat, then ruled by the present Khan's grandfather, held a pre-eminent position in the tribal confederacy that included much of central and southern Balochistan.

However, Dr Malik may be clutching at straws, for many insurgents in the province consider the Kalat rulers as 'traitors' to the Baloch cause for having signed the Instrument of Accession to join Pakistan in 1948.

As such, the militants may see overtures to Dawood Khan as further evidence of the state's strategy of using proxies to further its ends. Indeed, the establishment has much to gain if the Khan can be persuaded to return; it is not in Pakistan's interest for other regional players to be able to approach him or for him to go to the ICJ with Baloch grievances as he vowed to at a grand jirga convened after Akbar Bugti's murder in 2006.

Whatever the motives behind this recent resolution, the Khan's return could be a catalyst for starting a crucial dialogue on important issues; that in itself would be a welcome change from the present suffocating impasse.

Published in Dawn, October 2nd, 2014

Counterterrorism challenges

Editorial

THE National Counter-Terrorism Centre near Kharian, Gujrat, inaugurated by army chief Gen Raheel Sharif on Tuesday is a good time to raise an old question: what is the civilian-led law-enforcement and intelligence apparatus across the country doing to play its part in the fight against militancy?

Expectedly, the military has talked up its purpose-built facility meant primarily to train army troops, but also foreign troops and local paramilitary and police personnel. While the military does have a legitimate and necessary role in specialised counterterrorism operations, the consensus in the world of anti-terrorism expertise is that dense, urban and built-up environments require civilian-led law-enforcement and intelligence operations.

Consider though the state of that civilian-led apparatus across the provinces. In Punjab, an abortive and ill-advised attempt to create a parallel counterterrorism police force has been followed up with no real reforms of the existing police force.

In Sindh, the operation in Karachi has seen the Rangers play a much bigger role than the police themselves.

In Balochistan, the old problem of so-called A and B areas has left the police irrelevant and operationally confined to a tiny percentage of the province's land mass.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a strong police leadership freed from the most intense aspects of political interference has restored some morale, but the police force as a whole has been battered and bruised by years of attacks by the Taliban.

In Islamabad, the increased terror threat earlier this year required police from Punjab to be drafted in and, unhappily, Muhammad Sikander, the lone gunman on Jinnah Avenue in August 2013, has come to define the capital territory's true policing potential.

If a picture of weaknesses — and severe ones — on the civilian front were not dismal enough, the sense of near failure is reinforced by the drift in the policy arena.

Nacta, the much-touted but mostly neglected National Counter-Terrorism Authority, remains in limbo, despite repeated promises by successive governments to re-energise it. The National Internal Security Policy launched with much fanfare by the PML-N government appears to have been forgotten altogether.

Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan, who propelled the creation of the NISP and is principally responsible for its execution, disappears for stretches of time over matters of politics. The revamped and renamed Cabinet Committee on National Security (formerly the Defence Committee of the Cabinet) was launched with much fanfare but has become a victim of civil-military discord and civilian apathy.

Where then is counterterrorism policy to be debated and articulated on the civilian side, much less led operationally by the civilians? Is it any surprise then that the military is seeking to take the lead in yet another area where international experience and logic suggests the civilians ought to be leading? Winning the fight against militancy is as much about the right leadership as it is about the right strategy.

Published in Dawn, October 2nd, 2014

Militant monks

Editorial

RELIGIOUS zealotry mixed with xenophobic nationalism can create a toxic ideology that has the ability to tear societies and nations apart. And when the state fails to check the growth of groups espousing such ideology at the initial stage, soon enough these outfits become too complex to handle. In both Sri Lanka and Myanmar, over the past few years ultranationalist Buddhist extremist groups — led by monks — have seen their profiles rise as they have campaigned, often violently, against the Muslim minorities in their respective countries. On Tuesday, two extremist groups, Sri Lanka's Bodu Bala Sena and Myanmar's 969 movement, signed an accord on the island nation to "protect Buddhism". Yet the track record of both these groups indicates that the agreement may be about more than just exchanging notes on spiritual matters. Monks from both groups have led anti-Muslim mobs which have looted and plundered at will. For Sri Lanka, this is an especially worrying development as relations between the island nation's Muslim and Sinhalese Buddhist communities have remained largely peaceful, while the country also faces no known threat from Islamist extremists. Yet if anti-Islam demagogues are allowed to preach hatred, it could lead to reactive radicalisation within the Muslim community. In Myanmar, the sufferings of the Muslim Rohingya are quite well-documented. Though Myanmar's foreign minister has said the state has started the "verification process" that could lead to granting the Rohingya citizenship, the authorities will have to do far more to rein in Buddhist extremists that often target the Muslim minority.

In both Myanmar and Sri Lanka, the state has been accused of turning a blind eye to the Buddhist extremists' activities. We in Pakistan know that if demagogues and rabble-rousers are allowed to plant the seeds of hatred, the results can be highly destructive for communal and sectarian harmony. Narrow

nationalism cloaked in the guise of religion can spell the death knell for pluralism. That is why both states need to confront the extremist threat before it grows out of control.

Published in Dawn, October 2nd, 2014

Price of inaction

Editorial

PAKISTAN'S drift towards international isolation is only matched by the state's denial of this truth.

On Wednesday, the joint US-India statement issued at the end of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington D.C. contained direct language seemingly focused on Pakistan.

It is worth reproducing the relevant part of the text: "The [US and Indian] leaders stressed the need for joint and concerted efforts, including the dismantling of safe havens for terrorist and criminal networks, to disrupt all financial and tactical support for networks such as Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, the D-Company and the Haqqanis. They reiterated their call for Pakistan to bring the perpetrators of the November 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai to justice."

On the same day, the US Treasury department announced sanctions against three Pakistanis, including Fazlur Rehman Khalil, and two Pakistan-based entities for links to the LeT and Harkatul Mujahideen, the foremost of the Kashmir-orientated militant groups in the country. Certainly India has its own reasons for trying to build an anti-Pakistan alliance, but our refusal to address militancy concerns has created more space for Delhi's anti-Pakistan rhetoric.

October, 2014

Take the official reaction by the Foreign Office yesterday in which the FO spokesperson focused on a UN terrorist watchlist and denied that the US move is “binding” on Pakistan.

Therein lies the problem: while Pakistan continues to balk at acting against certain militant groups, the countries under threat from those organisations are moving closer to each other in order to counter the threat.

Consider that the joint US-India statement also refers to “dismantling” terrorist safe havens: is that an ominous sign that however remote the possibility at the moment, the US and India have begun contemplating the possibility of targeted counterterrorist operations on Pakistani soil at some point in the future?

Surely, that would be nothing short of a catastrophe for Pakistan with unknowable consequences for peace and security in the region. Yet, the country’s national security and foreign policy apparatus remains indifferent to or unaware of the storm that appears to be brewing.

In truth, many of Pakistan’s problems are self-inflicted. The best that has ever been managed when it comes to pro-Kashmir militant groups is to put the state’s sponsorship of jihad in cold storage, as was done by Musharraf in the early part of the last decade. But, a decade on, the security establishment seems bent on continuing the policy of politically mainstreaming the leadership of groups such as the LeT, HuM and now even the Punjabi Taliban.

That is what allows Hafiz Saeed and Fazlur Rehman Khalil to address rallies, appear routinely on TV and to go on organising their ranks and developing their organisations with a brazenness and confidence that has the rest of the world looking on with alarm. Truly, the outside world can legitimately ask why the Mumbai-related Rawalpindi trials are stuck in limbo. The signals from D.C. are clear: if Pakistan doesn’t act, others will.

Published in Dawn, October 3rd, 2014

Wazirabad scuffle

Editorial

THE anti-government ‘go Nawaz go’ slogan seems to have gone viral, thanks largely to the campaign being run by the PTI and PAT in Islamabad.

Over the past few days, we have come across numerous reports of the slogan being raised in different forums, usually where members of the PML-N are present.

Understandably, the N-League is extremely displeased with the frequent repetition of the stinging phrase. Patience in the party’s ranks is wearing thin and matters came to a head at an event in Wazirabad in Punjab’s Gujranwala district, where the prime minister had come to distribute cheques to flood victims.

The situation turned ugly when PML-N workers, reportedly led by a provincial lawmaker, thrashed PTI supporters for raising the slogan after Nawaz Sharif had left the venue.

As per remarks on television, Taufeeq Butt, the MPA in question, said similar treatment would be meted out to protesters who raised the dreaded slogan again.

Deplorable as the violence is, what is totally unacceptable is the PML-N leadership’s apparent defence of the brutal tactics its activists applied to silence their opponents. Tweeting after the incident, Maryam Nawaz appeared to gloat over the ‘performance’ in Wazirabad, warning PTI supporters “not to mess with lions”.

Political dissent is an essential ingredient of democracy. Yet what has been observed about both sides — the government as well as those in Islamabad calling for its departure — is that there is a visible lack of tolerance.

We can question the timing and occasion where slogans are raised, but stamping out dissent through brute force smacks of authoritarianism. A few days ago, another protester raising the ‘go Nawaz go’ slogan was beaten up at a function in Lahore.

Instead of using such methods, protesters can firmly but in a non-violent manner be asked to take their demonstration elsewhere. Meanwhile, party leaders would do well not to encourage any hooliganism in the lower cadres, which could worsen matters. All sides need to use democratic methods to express dissent, as well as to counter it.

Published in Dawn, October 3rd, 2014

Unfair protections

Editorial

THE Competition Commission of Pakistan is back in the news with an important order against three state-owned construction companies.

When they were formed, the National Logistics Cell, the Frontier Works Organisation and the National Construction Limited, were allowed an exemption from furnishing various types of sureties for work they undertook for the federal and provincial governments.

Their competitors in the private sector, by contrast, have been required to furnish these sureties, ranging from bank guarantees to secure performance bonds and mobilisation advances, and retention money adjustment for example. Since such sureties tie

up large amounts of the contractor’s funds, private parties say these exemptions give the three state-owned companies a huge unfair advantage, and place “burdensome terms” on their private-sector competitors.

The CCP finds that the exemptions were originally granted to “allow growth under protection to achieve economies of scale”. Since their establishment decades ago, the economy has opened up to encourage greater private-sector competition but the exemptions have remained in place. The CCP finds that the three state-owned companies “no longer need protections in the form of exemptions”, keeping in mind “their ability to compete abroad”.

It is heartening to see the CCP asserting itself in an important matter. Providing a level playing field for all players is a key function for the government. Since the exemptions distort the market in the key construction sector of the economy, they create barriers for entry for other players, the CCP says. And since hundreds of billions of rupees flow through government contracts for construction in any given fiscal year, the size of the market that private parties are being discouraged from entering is enormous.

Of particular concern is the fact that two of these companies enjoying exemptions come under the Ministry of Defence. The defence production sector has long enjoyed exemption from the structural adjustment measures undertaken by the government over the past three decades.

If companies in this sector are enjoying profitable years while the rest of the public sector sags under the weight of accumulating losses, it is because exemptions of this sort have been granted in many other forms as well. Perhaps the CCP should look into similar uncompetitive practices in other state-owned enterprises in the defence production sector, which has escaped the brunt of budget cuts and subsidy rollbacks that other SOEs have had to suffer over the decades.

October, 2014

Published in Dawn, October 3rd, 2014

Tahirul Qadri & polls

Editorial

ON the 50th day of his dharna, Tahirul Qadri finally declared his intention of taking part in the electoral politics of the country. He is not only ready for the rough and tumble of the general election, but is also prepared to join those contesting the local government polls — if and when someone decides to hold them.

The Pakistan Awami Tehreek chief might still link his participation in the election to a reform of the system first.

Also read: [Qadri unveils electoral ambitions on 50th day](#)

It could well be that, denied an exit after having encamped in the capital for so many weeks, he is striving to find a way out, and the commitment to elections is one plank of that escape strategy.

Whatever the reasons, those who had been questioning Dr Qadri's agenda for change should welcome his announcement.

They will be justified in hailing it as a sign of progress towards engaging elements that have been so frustrated by the current scheme to be calling for extreme 'remedial' measures. And they will be doing themselves a favour by not greeting the PAT chief's statement with the jeers that so sadly and frequently overwhelm the real debate.

One impression Dr Qadri has managed to create due to his style and the content of his argument is that, over and above being a candidate for power directly, he is keen to play the ideologue whose blessings must be sought by those wanting to rule.

He may still seek to play the revered spiritual and ideological leader, fielding his party and his followers in the election while choosing to not contest a seat personally.

Hence, it is perhaps too early to dwell on how his dual nationality would disqualify him from taking part in an election in Pakistan until he declares his candidature.

The big question is how well equipped, and before that, how willing the country is to address the grievances of various groups — even those who are not allied with the majority.

There is absolutely no doubt that, among the religious groups pushing their respective agendas forward, the militant ones get more attention because of the scare they are able to create whereas the non-militant organisations are ignored, and even made fun of.

This attitude has to change and whichever of Dr Qadri's demands appear to be reasonable must be pondered over in the greater interest of democracy — as a principle — and the culture it spawns.

Published in Dawn, October 4th, 2014

Counting losses the wrong way

Editorial

EVERY so often, a Pakistani official trots out numbers to buttress the claim that the country has suffered a great deal from militancy. There is little doubt that Pakistan has suffered greatly and disastrously from militancy — and that is perhaps why the official attempts at putting a number on the losses come across as crude and unnecessary.

This week, the Foreign Office claimed that the country has suffered \$103bn worth of losses and over 55,000 lives to militancy and terrorism. But even when it comes to the lives lost, there is no single database that exists to even remotely corroborate the claim of fatalities. Indeed, the official estimate — or, perhaps, guesstimate — has ranged over the past year alone from less than 15,000 to, now, over 55,000 lives lost since 2001.

If nothing else, it is a dishonour to the dead and injured to not even be accurately counted among the many who have sacrificed for their country.

Almost as perplexing is the estimate offered by the Foreign Office of the financial losses suffered by the country: \$103bn. For some perspective, this is more than a third of the country's annual GDP.

The \$103bn figure only begins to make some kind of sense if investment and economic activity foregone because of militancy is included. But who's to say whether foreign investment has slowed to a trickle in Pakistan because of militancy and terrorism or because of the energy shortage and business-unfriendly policies of the state?

The apparent laziness with which such figures are produced suggests that the real reason is to demonstrate to the outside

world that Pakistan is as much, if not a greater, victim of terrorism than the outside world. The corollary then is that the outside world should do more to compensate Pakistan and to finance the fight against militancy here.

Yet, there is a fundamental problem with that thinking: Pakistan is essentially under attack from Pakistanis who belong to organisations that at some point in their history have either been created, nurtured, sponsored, funded, trained or equipped by the Pakistani state itself.

Clearly, countries such as the US and Saudi Arabia played a role in the genesis of the problem, but it is the Pakistani state itself that has made the choices that have left state and society so vulnerable to militancy and terrorism. To assert this is not to indulge in an endless blame game, but to underline that the country's policymaking elite are still in denial about both the causes and the necessary policy decisions that have to be made.

Pakistan will only win the fight against militancy if it honestly reckons with the past and moves in the present to shut down the militancy infrastructure and the enabling environment within society. Else, even the exaggerated losses claimed may pale in comparison to the eventual damage.

Published in Dawn, October 4th, 2014

PTI's hydel vision

One of the better things that the PTI government in KP has done is to give a new push to microhydel power generation schemes.

Most recently, their attempts to pursue the Gorkin Matiltan hydropower project (84MW) in Swat has met with resistance in the Central Development Working Party, a government department tasked with approving projects whose cost is less than Rs3bn.

Members of the CDWP, which is run by the PML-N federal government, say the project cost is too high, and that the cost of the electricity it will generate is also too high for a hydel project. They compare this project with another one in KP which was completed at slightly below the cost of Gorkin Matiltan.

It is hard to avoid the impression that the resistance to this project is political. If the CDWP members, which is chaired by the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, Ahsan Iqbal, are serious about comparing the project costs of Gorkin Matiltan with that of Duber Khwar, they should also note that the latter was begun more than a decade ago.

The first electricity ever generated in the territories we now call Pakistan was from a microhydel scheme in Renala Khurd. The next larger power generation was also a microhydel scheme in Malakand valley, built by the British in the 1920s.

There was a vision to provide much of Pakistan's power needs through myriad such schemes in the canals and mountains, but it fell by the wayside with the arrival of American aid in the form of mega dams. The PTI government has recently given new life to the vision, and is taking concrete steps on the ground to implement it.

In return, the PML-N government, which never raised concerns about the cost of generation from the Nandipur project, is obstructing the scheme, arguing its costs are too high. Again, it is hard not to see this as obstructionist politics standing in the way of reviving a promising vision, and innovative approaches, to solving Pakistan's power crisis.

Published in Dawn, October 5th, 2014

Polio: our badge of shame

THE sorry tale of Pakistan's abysmal performance in practically all global development and welfare indicators is equalled, perhaps, only by the state's stubborn, almost criminal, refusal to undertake the task at hand.

Nothing, it seems can bestir the administrators of this country, regardless of whichever party is in power, into taking their responsibilities seriously.

Consider, for example, the fact that Pakistan made history on Friday: it broke its own record of polio cases, with eight additional cases being reported on this day, bringing this year's tally — so far — to 202. The last time we saw such a high number of confirmations was in 2000, when 199 cases were recorded.

This regression is all the more distressing when it is considered that hardly 10 years ago, the indications were that the spread of the crippling virus was being brought under control in the country and there was hope that soon Pakistan too would join the majority of the globe's nations that had proved themselves polio-free.

That this sorry state of affairs comes after international authorities concluded that Pakistan is in danger of reintroducing the virus to other countries, and the World Health Organisation recommended travel restrictions on unvaccinated travellers from Pakistan, is a damning indictment of the authorities' lackadaisical attitude.

Almost all figures in political and bureaucratic circles have, at some point or the other, over the months past professed their recognition of the issue and their commitment to eradicating polio.

The fact that none of these people have subsequently put in any sustained action, or organised concerted and meaningful efforts, means that they were simply using it as a photo-op.

From Imran Khan to Maulana Samiul Haq, from Aseefa Bhutto Zardari to Maryam Nawaz, to say nothing of those directly involved such as the heads of the prime minister's focal team for polio and the officials of the health department — all have professed their commitment to protecting future generations from this dreaded disease. And yet, there has been no sustained action at all; if anything, the issue only continues to worsen.

The travel advisory constitutes a reminder of the pariah status Pakistan faces if polio is not brought under control. While funds from international donors have been pouring in to bolster Pakistan's own efforts and resources, all they have elicited are promises that have proved false and half-baked measures, such as the non-functional system of checking for vaccination certificates at airports.

The world could be forgiven for wondering what it will take to get Pakistan to put its own house in order in this regard. There is, perhaps, only one thing left to say now. The political classes are once again mulling over the shape of the country's future; they need reminding that no future at all is possible with a crippled population.

Sounding the alarm

THERE was an unmistakable sense of urgency in the tone and choice of words of the Saudi grand mufti as he delivered the Haj sermon on Friday. Speaking to around two million hajjis gathered in the plain of Arafat for the climax of the pilgrimage, Shaikh Abdul Aziz al-Shaikh sounded the alarm bell against the self-styled Islamic State without specifically naming the group. But the context of the sermon left little doubt who the cleric was referring to. Shaikh Abdul Aziz implored Muslim leaders to strike hard “the enemies of Islam” who were responsible for “vile crimes ... and terrorism” driven by a “deviant ideology”. The Saudi preacher’s unease is understandable; after all, the expansionist IS controls considerable swathes of territory across the border in Iraq and in Syria, not too far from the kingdom’s northern frontiers. There are also credible reports that thousands of Saudi nationals are fighting for extremist groups in both Iraq and Syria. So the symbolism of using Islam’s most important global gathering of the year to sound the battle cry against IS has not been lost.

While the Saudi mufti’s call for action against the violent extremists is indeed timely, there are a number of factors that Saudi ulema, as well as clerics in other Muslim states, along with the governments of Muslim nations, need to ponder over to get to the root of the problem. After all, IS and other jihadi outfits have not sprouted overnight. In this particular context, in Iraq and Syria such

groups have been used by foreign powers to destabilise the incumbent governments. If the Saudi and other Gulf Arab states have not directly been involved in creating and funding Islamist militant groups, they are certainly guilty of looking the other way as private funds from their nations have flowed into jihadi coffers. And now that the militant groups have become too hot to handle, Arab governments have launched an armed campaign against them. Pakistan has experienced a similar situation and is learning the hard way that patronising extremists can be a double-edged sword; the militants can just as easily turn their guns on their masters should things go awry. The Saudis and all other Muslim states need to realise that using jihadi proxies against other states is extremely bad foreign policy and can boomerang in horrible ways. Once this realisation sinks in at the official level, the grand mufti’s call can have greater impact.

Published in Dawn, October 5th, 2014

LG poll mess

THE Supreme Court's ire is understandable. On Friday, the chief justice asked why his predecessor's directive for holding local government elections by Nov 15 had not been carried out.

The response by those representing the provincial governments in question was a pathetic resort to legal and administrative nostrums to justify inaction on the issue. And when Sindh's assistant advocate general apologised to the chief justice, the latter replied he ought to apologise to the Constitution which had been violated. The chief justice wondered why the provincial governments had to wait for the judiciary to act instead of acting on their own.

The court seemed displeased when the Sindh AAG said he had prepared a draft law that would authorise the ECP to carry out the delimitation of constituencies. The chief justice asked why the law had not been made earlier, and that even if an ordinance were promulgated within a week, it would still not be possible to hold the polls by Nov 15.

The court was also witness to the KP government's quarrels with the ECP when its advocate general said the election body had not agreed to the provincial government's request for electronic voting and to hold the polls in phases for security reasons. As for Punjab, its additional advocate general blamed the federal government for failing to respond to the suggestions it

had made with regard to the ECP's power to delimit the constituencies.

The provinces' recourse to administrative and semi-legal excuses betrays their anxiety to evade local government elections because they are not sure how the people will vote and provincial lawmakers feel their authority will be challenged.

While Punjab and Sindh had a problem with delimitation, KP had no such issue and should have gone ahead with the polls. Instead, the KP government, too, has fallen in line with the other two provinces, as if in an unholy alliance, to deny grass-roots democracy to their people.

The ECP too cannot escape the blame for this mess; it gave Jan 8 last as the date for the polls and then requested the court for a postponement since the date was unrealistic. However, the ECP's point that delimitation is not possible without a census is valid.

For that exercise, it is the federal government that has to stir itself. In other words, all those who matter — the federal government, the three provinces and the ECP — have combined to deny grass-roots democracy to the people.

Published in Dawn, October 6th, 2014

Flood assistance farce

Editorial

THE government has made a sudden appeal for cash assistance from donor agencies to deal with the destruction caused by the latest floods.

The appeal comes a week after the donors had been assured that no assistance would be required. It has been delivered to them through a bureaucrat in the finance ministry, instead of by the minister himself, who, it seems, is too busy in a roadshow to raise funds for the Diamer Bhasha dam project.

The donors want a detailed damage assessment, as well as an action plan for rehabilitating the victims, before the request can be entertained. The authorities say that a variety of flood relief funds have been set up by the federal government as well as the Punjab government, and the donors should simply deposit cash assistance into these.

This is the fifth consecutive year of floods in Pakistan, and each episode has seen an appeal for international assistance.

Meanwhile, the donor agencies and their respective governments are entitled to wonder what steps Pakistan has taken to increase its preparedness for what is clearly becoming an annual trend.

Have forecasting capabilities been improved? Have SOPs been created for the myriad government departments involved in managing the consequences of

flooding while the disaster unfolds? Are rapid assessments drawn up in the aftermath of each episode? If so, why is there a sudden about-turn in asking for assistance this year?

The World Bank has offered Pakistan the services of state-of-the-art flood forecasting technology that successfully predicted the previous two flooding episodes with a 10-day lead time. But the offer has been greeted with complete disinterest by the government.

Currently, forecasts are issued with 48-hour lead time at best, which is grossly insufficient. Technology exists which can increase this lead time to 10 days and this technology has been offered to Pakistan.

Not only that, there is no single government department that is tasked with coordinating the response once a flood alert has been issued. Instead, the same game is played out every year, with a muddled and uncoordinated response once the flood peak actually arrives, followed by the same finger-pointing and blame game in the aftermath of the deluge.

Once the waters subside, the same appeals emerge to build more hydrological infrastructure as a flood-control mechanism. Donors might want to think twice about entertaining the request for cash assistance without a detailed plan of action.

They should insist that a proper disaster preparedness plan be drawn up first, which must include measures to upgrade forecasting capabilities as well as an action plan for coordinating the response once the flood alert has

been issued. Muddling through the same disaster year after year, and following this up with requests for cash assistance and hydrological infrastructure, is turning into a farce. And nobody is laughing.

Published in Dawn, October 6th, 2014

Support for IS

Editorial

Updated Oct 09, 2014 09:07am

The fact that the self-styled Islamic State is drawing fulsome praise from across the militant spectrum is hardly surprising.

After all, the terrorist group's rapid rise and capture of territory in Iraq and Syria has granted it celebrity status within jihadi circles. So while there may be minor differences between various global militant groups — tactical, theological, level of ferocity — the general consensus seems to be that the IS model of waging 'jihad' is a successful one and worthy of replication.

A few days ago, the banned TTP — while still accepting Afghan Taliban supremo Mullah Omar as its spiritual leader — praised all militants in Iraq and Syria, including IS, terming them "noble" and "our brothers".

Some time ago, pro-IS literature was also reportedly distributed in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Fata. Also, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a fanatical

militant outfit responsible for a number of terrorist atrocities inside Pakistan, proclaimed it was "in the same ranks" as the so-called Islamic State.

Nigerian extremist group Boko Haram has expressed warm wishes for IS 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as have some militant outfits in Southeast Asia and North Africa.

While there's little hard evidence that the above-mentioned statements signify that IS and other militant groups are forging some sort of grand global jihadi alliance, they do appear to be policy statements making the intentions of the militants clear.

They should serve as warning shots, alerting governments the world over to the potential havoc such groups can unleash should they join forces operationally. In many ways, IS is the new Al Qaeda; but considering that it actually holds territory makes the Islamic State even more dangerous than the terrorist franchise.

After all, Al Qaeda was successful because it was provided a safe haven by the erstwhile Taliban rulers of Afghanistan. Should IS consolidate its hold over areas it controls it will serve as a magnet for extremists from across the globe, with the potential to destabilise states across the Middle East and Central Asia, including Pakistan.

While Al Qaeda is now being regarded by many as a spent force, especially after the elimination of Osama bin Laden, IS has many of the trappings of a state and its battlefield successes have made it the talk of the Islamist

world. Hence it is essential that governments, especially those of Muslim states, coordinate their efforts to deny IS the chance to operationally link up with sympathetic groups elsewhere.

Published in Dawn, October 9th, 2014

Civilians in the crossfire

Editorial

THE escalating violence between Pakistan and India along the Line of Control and the Working Boundary in the disputed Kashmir region has, as ever, murky origins.

India blames Pakistan, Pakistan blames India; meanwhile, the worst sufferer is the civilian population on either side of the divide.

More lives have been lost and with the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon reduced to urging India and Pakistan to resolve their disputes diplomatically and through dialogue, there is a very real fear that more violence could result in more lives lost in the days ahead. With the blame game continuing and with few independent sources to verify how violence broke out, there is though a sense that both sides are determined not to back down — though it is difficult to see why either side would want the conflict to spiral out of control.

For Pakistan, conflict in Kashmir cannot militarily be a goal at this juncture with the North Waziristan operation

ongoing and strains on military resources because of overall troop commitments in Fata.

For India, with the Narendra Modi-led BJP government in Delhi eyeing gains in elections in India-held Jammu and Kashmir scheduled for November-December, prolonged conflict should not be part of a winning electoral strategy.

Yet, logic often does not work as it should in this most disputed of regions and, occasionally, events in Kashmir are tied to wider struggles that Pakistan and India may be engaging in. Consider that the Modi government has taken a decidedly tough line with Pakistan despite Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif wanting to pursue dialogue while simultaneously struggling with civil-military issues at home.

The rapturous tone of the recent visit by Mr Modi to the US may have encouraged the Indian security establishment to pile further pressure on Pakistan. Meanwhile, on the Pakistan side, that very tone of Mr Modi's visit and the successful inclusion of Pakistan-specific militancy concerns in the joint US-India statement may have rankled, and sections of the security establishment here may have decided that India, and the world at large, needs reminding that the Kashmir dispute is still very much alive and a flashpoint that should invite international attention.

The path to military de-escalation at least remains well-known. Purposeful and result-orientated contact between the directors general of military operations of Pakistan and India can help dampen the violence along the LoC and the Working Boundary — but will the two countries

decide to activate that option themselves, or will the international community have to put pressure behind the scenes?

The approaching winter — while still distant in the present context — should also help dampen hostilities, though it remains to be seen if the elections will be held on time or postponed until the new year after an ongoing visit to Jammu and Kashmir by the Election Commission of India. As ever, little can be said with certainty on Kashmir.

Published in Dawn, October 9th, 2014

Liquor deaths

Editorial

IT is a tragedy that is thrown into starker relief by the fact that the sale and consumption of alcohol is restricted in the country.

The fact is, where there is a demand, there will always be a supply, as well as unscrupulous elements willing to cheat the gullible public.

That lives can be destroyed in the process matters little to the profit-seekers. The first week of the month saw over 20 deaths in Hyderabad as a result of the consumption of toxic liquor, or moonshine.

This resulted in the PPP-led Sindh government firing its excise and taxation minister, Mukesh Kumar Chawla,

over what the senior party leadership termed as “the minister’s negligence in issuing licences to substandard wine shops”.

Given the scale of this incident, it would have been natural to expect a wider investigation, the assumption being that if tainted liquor was being sold on such a large scale in one city, other places might be facing the same problem. That, unfortunately, was not the case, and now Karachi finds itself confronting more than 20 deaths that took place over the Eid holidays for the same reason.

The newly appointed excise and taxation minister, and the station house officer of the police station within whose remit some liquor-production facilities were discovered, have been suspended, and a probe is under way.

Will it succeed and put the makers and distributors of moonshine out of business for good? One aspect of the matter in particular gives reason for doubt: DIG-East, Munir Sheikh, who heads the inquiry committee, conceded on record that at the individual level, there is police connivance in the deadly business. And, indeed, it is difficult to imagine anyone being able to run such a production facility on any sort of appreciable scale without the knowledge, if not active involvement, of local police authorities in urban areas.

Once again, the ball is in the court of the law enforcers. As they tackle the problem of such facilities, can they also clean up their own act?

Published in Dawn, October 10th, 2014

Rents and rackets

THE recent controversy surrounding ‘on money’, or premium charges for the immediate delivery of automobile purchases, opens an important window on the key dysfunctions that ail Pakistan’s economy.

The auto makers argue that new models of their vehicles see ‘overwhelming demand’ that they struggle to meet.

Consumers for their part wonder why the auto makers are so quickly overwhelmed given the extensive protections afforded to the domestic auto sector to shield their investment from foreign competition. Many end up theorising that the shortages of autos are artificially created by the companies to keep prices buoyant. The shortages, therefore, give rise to black markets, reflected in premium charges for immediate delivery.

What should be noted here is that both consumers and auto companies have a point. It is indeed puzzling why auto makers find it hard to ramp up production to keep pace with demand. But it is also a fact that our economy has massive hoards of ‘black money’, large cash-rich investors looking to place their funds in investments where supply and demand can be easily subverted, and with no questions about the source of funds.

Speculative buyers of this sort flock in huge numbers to real estate, commodities, stocks and sometimes even foreign exchange. The volumes involved in the latter

categories are far larger than what we see in the speculative buying of autos.

The ultimate loser in this speculative frenzy is always the consumer, who has to reckon with high and volatile prices for essentials like housing and food on many occasions.

Periodically, we see the launch of whitener schemes, where these hoards of black money are offered amnesty to enter the formal economy with no questions asked, testifying to the powerlessness of the state before sums of dubious origin. Consumers are left trapped between rent-seeking investors on the one hand, and speculators on the other.

Ultimately, the menace of ‘on money’ for automobiles will only disappear once the auto sector is sufficiently incentivised to face up to the cold winds of competition. But draining the black money hoards into fixed investments is also a crucial priority.

Documentation measures and penalties can be effective in curbing the menace to a point. But eventually, larger reforms are necessary to prevent the accumulation of large sums of money outside the formal economy because these cash hoards can wreak terrible damage on the economy should they turn hostile.

Published in Dawn, October 10th, 2014

Absent civilian input on Fata

PRIME Minister Nawaz Sharif may have made a historic visit to North Waziristan Agency yesterday, but optics and words of encouragement for the troops aside, what is the civilian government's input on Fata?

A day earlier, army chief Gen Raheel Sharif perhaps unwittingly played up the contrast between the military's eagerness to be seen to be doing something for the social and economic uplift of Fata and the civilian government's near-total apathy.

Gen Sharif's announcement that the army will, in token numbers, recruit soldiers from Fata and induct Fata schoolchildren and young adults into army-run schools and technical training institutes will not fundamentally alter the region's socio-economic and security landscape. But that is not the point since the army cannot on its own transform the socio-economic and security realities of Fata nor does it have the resources to do so.

What Gen Sharif's announcement did underline, however, was that at least the army leadership is thinking about matters in terms of the aftermath of the military operations, while all the prime minister's visit did was to underscore that the civilians are not even attempting to think about Fata and what it will take to bring peace,

stability and, eventually, prosperity and national inclusivity to the war-torn region.

Clearly, launching Operation Zarb-i-Azb in North Waziristan was not the preferred choice, possibly not even the decision, of the prime minister. Also, with nearly 200,000 troops estimated to be deployed in Fata and military operations ongoing in several areas as security remains elusive, the space for the civilians to help steer the Fata policy is not large. And all of that before even taking into consideration the troubled state of overall civil-military relations.

Yet, an honest appraisal of the situation in Fata will have to confront the reality that the country's civilian leadership, be it the previous elected government or the present one, does not really understand the complexities of the tribal areas nor is it particularly keen on developing ideas about what to do with the region — even if it had the space in the civil-military domain to do so.

Surely though, Fata will never be stabilised and put on a firm, irreversible path to peace if military strategy — and the military itself — drives all policy. Set aside for a minute even the concerns about whether the security establishment has truly abandoned its good militant/bad militant policy and operational distinction.

No army — not even the best intentioned and resourced — is trained to revive and invigorate in socio-economic terms a region ravaged by war. That is a role for the civilian leadership. The army leadership may often shove aside civilians, but simply surrendering, washing their hands of policy issues and sulking isn't the way to

recover the rightful space the civilians should have. The prime minister and his party need to do better, much better.

Published in Dawn, October 10th, 2014

NSC meeting

THE Cabinet Committee on National Security may have become the National Security Committee, but it does not seem to have evolved beyond rhetoric and non-substantive decisions.

Fortunately, both Pakistan and India may be signalling elsewhere — the welcome reduction in violence across the LoC and the Working Boundary yesterday, for example — that both sides are looking for an exit from the present round of fighting at least.

As ever, neither Pakistan nor India is willing to concede an inch on who is to blame, with both countries steadfastly maintaining that each country's border forces were merely responding to attacks from the other side.

That may be in the nature of Pakistan-India relations, but that may also be the case because it is often the security establishment on both sides dictating such responses instead of the politicians demonstrating the courage of leadership.

Be that as it may, a military fierceness that is mitigated by a sense of proportion and implications for regional

stability can at least be cautiously welcomed — and both security establishments ought to know how to choreograph de-escalation until the guns fall completely silent.

Meanwhile, return to the scene of the NSC meeting yesterday. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was right in emphasising that the desire to seek peace does not mean a willingness to accept violence.

Leave aside the inadequacies of the government response for a moment, however. What is the point and purpose of the Indian government led by Narendra Modi when it comes to issuing bellicose statements on Pakistan and Kashmir? Mr Modi's foreign ministry cancelled talks with Pakistan at the foreign secretary level in August, but to what end?

Surely, there are very real concerns that New Delhi has when it comes to Pakistan's policy on India. But there are also very real concerns that Pakistan has when it comes to India, even if they gain less traction internationally. Consider that for all its non-substantive pronouncements, the NSC meeting yesterday brought together the political and military leadership of Pakistan and yet nothing harsh, fierce or unreasonable was said.

True, Pakistan must do more when it comes to responding to not just Indian allegations, but also international concerns about the militancy threat emanating from Pakistan. However, there's little to suggest that Pakistan is spoiling for a fight with India, be it at the military or civilian tier. A more forthcoming and peaceable Indian response is needed.

Pakistan's braveheart

COURAGE is not a rare quality in Pakistan. Adversity that would break most individuals has produced some of our finest — human rights activists, journalists, not to mention ordinary people fighting against formidable odds.

But Malala Yousafzai is a special case; it's hard to find such courage in a 17-year-old coupled with a clarity of thought and an eloquence that can make cynics catch their breath and the world sit up and take notice.

Yesterday, Pakistan's braveheart won the Nobel Peace Prize, giving a nation starved of glad tidings and buffeted by crises on multiple fronts, a reason to celebrate.

By awarding the prize to an education rights activist, the Nobel Committee has delivered a symbolic rebuke to the forces of regression typified by the likes of the Taliban, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State that seek to impose a system in which, aside from a slew of other depredations, children — particularly girls — would be denied the right to education; in effect, deprived of a future.

From a young girl simply wanting to go to school in Swat Valley during the savage rule of the Pakistani Taliban, to a global icon who represents the millions of children out of school in the world, whether for reasons of war, militancy or state neglect — Malala's story is inspirational on many levels.

Even after militants shot her in the head in October 2012 — a shot that veritably rang out across the world — for consistently propagating girls' education, she did not waver. In fact, the near-fatal attack boosted her profile, although she had to move abroad for treatment and for security reasons. Since then, many international accolades have come her way, including the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Malala's latest award, while undoubtedly prestigious for Pakistan, should also make us reflect on how the state has failed in its obligations towards the people in many ways.

Purveyors of intolerance and bigotry have been tolerated for too long here. Malala's own struggle was forged in this environment; the fact that she has to remain abroad testifies to the continuing potency of these forces. And lest we forget, our first Nobel prize winner, Dr Abdus Salam, died away from home, his magnificent achievement ignored in Pakistan, only because he was an Ahmadi. And then there's education.

With five million children aged five to nine out of school, there is no place better than Pakistan to further Malala's cause in a meaningful way.

Finally, the fact that the joint peace prize winner is an Indian, Kailash Satyarthi, also for work in child rights, highlights the commonality of issues between India and Pakistan; it would serve their people well if these could take precedence over politics.

October, 2014

As Malala has said so succinctly, “I raise my voice not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard.”

Published in Dawn, October 11th, 2014

Closure of beaches

THE tendency of state authorities to swing into action only after the damage is done is well documented, as is their proclivity to impose bans at the cost of long-term solutions. Over the holidays last week, residents of Karachi had reason, yet again, to reflect upon this as they found that any attempt to get to one of the several accessible beaches had been blocked. Police and other law-enforcement authorities had put up pickets and check posts, even rolls of barbed wire, to stop many dozens of people whose only fault was that they wanted to spend a day watching the waves. The reason, the policemen told them, was that swimming in the sea was banned, and since they could not prevent people from entering the water, they were disallowing access — even to the sand.

To be sure, the ban appeared valid at the time it was imposed — in the aftermath of the drowning of over 20 people in the turbulent monsoon tides over the Eidul Fitr holidays in July. However, had the authorities taken adequate measures in time, less lives would have been lost. The phenomenon of dangerous tides over the monsoon season is not new, and increasing the number

of lifeguards and deputing police on the beaches could have mitigated the tragedy. Letting the ban remain two months on, though, and continuing to deny the people their right to go to public venues, is befuddling. The monsoon rains are over and the sea is far safer now than it was during the monsoon season. In any case, not letting people swim is quite different from preventing them from taking in the view. Further, as a report in this newspaper highlighted on Friday, there are many people, from pushcart vendors to fishermen to sellers of fruit and drinks, who depend on beach tourism to bolster incomes. The latter are being badly affected by the authorities’ high-handedness. Access to the beaches needs to be restored immediately, and long-term safety measures implemented.

Published in Dawn, October 12th, 2014

Protests and recovery

AFTER weeks of haphazard guessing and politically motivated estimates of economic losses due to the ongoing protests in Islamabad, we finally have a fairly rigorous idea of what the real cost of the political turmoil has been. The World Bank's South Asia Economic Focus, released this week, wisely shies away from giving a rupee cost of the turmoil, saying "it is still too early to assess the impact" of the protests. The protests could shave off up to 2.1 percentage points from the country's GDP this year, but the growth rate is still projected to be up to 4.6pc, against a budgeted target of 4.4pc. Beyond this, the report points to other short-term effects that include damage to the "investor friendly image that Pakistan was carefully rebuilding", loss of reform momentum, possible effects as a result of "the virtual paralysis of the government machinery", and "small losses" on the foreign exchange reserves, that led to a 3pc slide in the rupee.

Beyond these impacts, the Bank paints a relatively rosy picture of the economy, saying things were on the uptick until "a succession of political blows knocked steam out of the recovery". Growth last year was "the highest in seven years" for example, with services and large-scale manufacturing as the drivers. The report notes a "significant strengthening" of reserves, the fiscal deficit saw "a significant correction" and there was "a strong recovery" in credit to the private sector. Not a word is mentioned of the growing trade deficit, except to note that

"export competitiveness suffered". Moreover, the report says the reform agenda made "promising progress" and price stability "was preserved". On the whole, the Bank is happy to run with the story that the country was in the midst of a strong economic recovery until the protests came along and cut the party short.

The report reinforces the view that the short-term, immediate impact of the protests is difficult to discern, unlike the rapid assessments that can give one a rupee estimate of the losses from natural disasters like floods and earthquakes. But the larger strategic impact is very much there, mainly through complicating government decision-making in key areas like tariff reform and privatisation, delaying the completion of the IMF review, and casting uncertainty over investment decisions. The rosy assessment of the government's economic track record is problematic, but it is possible to look past it because the report is about the larger South Asian environment and is dealing with Pakistan in summary form only. However, the assessment about the impact that the protests have had on the economy is a mature one. Thus far, any impact the protests might have had has been limited to the upper reaches of the economy, with day-to-day functioning impacted only briefly in the opening days of the crisis.

Published in Dawn, October 12th, 2014

Cooperation on drones?

The drones are back. After a long pause, the past week has seen a flurry of strikes in Fata — and, as ever, there is little independently verifiable information from the scene of the attacks; nor are the Pakistan and US governments shedding much light on who specifically the targets are.

Yet, for a programme that is mostly murky and always controversial, there are several patterns that can be discerned over the years in the strikes.

Connecting those dots, it appears at the moment that there is renewed cooperation between the Pakistan military and the US administration/CIA on drones, for there has been very little by way of fierce verbal pushback by the Pakistani government over the latest strikes. Relative silence can certainly be interpreted as, at the very least, tacit acceptance and, possibly, active cooperation between the countries. In fact, from the general location of the strikes and their emphasis on North Waziristan where the Pakistan Army is actively engaged in fighting militants, it would appear that active cooperation is taking place — for surely neither the US nor Pakistan could possibly want an errant US-fired missile hitting a Pakistani military target.

Also read: [Unfair advantage of death and drones](#)

Much of what can bring Pakistan and the US closer together in fighting militancy and terrorism is good for the

bilateral relationship as well as a boon for counterterrorism in the region. However, the connection between the tactical and the strategic has often been missing, so that while periods of intense drone strikes have damaged militancy networks in Fata, especially the two Waziristan agencies, they have never really extended to a convergence of overall interests of Pakistan and the US.

There is a sense then that the drone strikes programme and its details are handled in a compartmentalised way, where the only spill-over has been on the negative side rather than the positive side of developing a wider partnership with shared security interests.

Nevertheless, with Pakistan at long last having launched an operation in North Waziristan — thereby necessarily disrupting the operations of Afghan-centric militants with sanctuaries in North Waziristan — and the US mission in Afghanistan vastly decreasingly at least militarily by the end of the year, there is also a possibility that renewed security cooperation, on drone strikes, for example, could lead to a closer understanding on other critical security matters.

A close Pakistan-US relationship may be anathema to some sections of the state and society here and Pakistan may have few real friends left in the US. But impatience, mistrust and suspicion cannot obfuscate the underlying truth: the US and Pakistan need each other. Going it alone has worked for neither Pakistan nor the US — a reality borne out not just by the experience of the past decade and a half but over the course of this country's

October, 2014

history. Better to cooperate than to posture — especially when it's the militants who stand to gain from the latter.

Published in Dawn, October 13th, 2014

Yemen on the brink

Editorial

AS Syria and Iraq grab headlines due to the rise of the self-styled Islamic State, another potential tinderbox in the Middle East sizzles in the background. Yemen, which has long suffered from instability, may implode if its multiple crises are not addressed — crises which could ultimately see Al Qaeda or ideologically similar groups carving out a new base.

A warning sign came in the shape of two bombings recently in which around 70 people were killed. The first struck a gathering of Houthi rebels in the capital Sana'a, while the second attack took place in Mukalla targeting a military outpost. Al Qaeda's local branch — considered to be the most active of the terror franchise's wings — is believed to be responsible as it had earlier warned it would target the Houthis.

Also read: [Yemen air strikes kill 6 Qaeda militants: ministry](#)

At present, there are three main crises brewing in Yemen. The first involves the Houthis, a tribal militant group that follows the Zaydi Shia school, based in northern Yemen, which swept into Sana'a last month demanding, amongst other things, a new prime minister.

The Houthis have had a testy relationship with the government both during strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule as well as after his 2012 ouster.

The second critical issue is the presence of Al Qaeda in Yemen; the terrorist group is opposed to both the government and the Houthis.

Thirdly, a separatist campaign in the formerly independent South Yemen refuses to simmer down. There is also a sectarian element to the crises; while the Houthis are Zaydi Shias, among the government's supporters are Sunni and Salafi groups. Also, the Houthis are believed to have Iranian support, while the government is reportedly close to the Saudis.

At this critical juncture, it is essential for political forces in Yemen — as well as their external backers — to find negotiated solutions to their problems. For the collapse of the state or an escalation of sectarian conflict could pave the way for Al Qaeda to take advantage of the power vacuum.

Published in Dawn, October 13th, 2014

No asylum

THE queue of those wanting to leave the country to escape persecution or for opportunities abroad is long. The aspirants are persistent even if their destinations change.

These days, Australia is a prime ideal to be chased. While Pakistanis may not be on top of the list of those seeking asylum in Australia in recent years, the government there has found it necessary to issue a stern reminder.

Also read: [Australian govt warns Pakistani asylum-seekers against illegal entry](#)

An advertisement appearing in newspapers last week tells those — whether man, woman or child — who get on an Australia-bound boat without visa to beware. It is a loud, clear message, entitled ‘no way’, designed to convey the resolve to not let in the ‘unwanted’.

Their struggles necessitated by a genuine desire for a better life, for which they cannot be faulted, the human side to the asylum seekers is eclipsed by rules and numbers.

According to the UN refugee agency, “there were 45.2 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2012, the highest number since 1994. Of these, 28.8m were internally displaced persons, 15.4m were refugees and 937,000 were asylum seekers”. This puts extra

pressure on governments of destinations preferred by asylum seekers.

Meanwhile, the number of countries putting up a ‘no entry’ board for Pakistanis has increased. For example, in recent times, Sri Lanka has had problems with Pakistanis looking for asylum.

Those who put up the bar routinely come under criticism, which has not prevented them from setting tougher conditions for entry — for Pakistanis and others.

The logic is simple: the flow of refugees has to be contained and the traffic has to be closely monitored, even when the UN rules for refugees and other international law are adhered to. In the latest instance, the Australian emphasis is on unlawful entry, and on those who approach the country by the sea.

The focus may expand if the pressure from refugees mounts. There are many legal ways that remain open to asylum seekers, whatever destination they may have in mind.

The declaration by the Australian government is not the first attempt to make people aware. Since containing people is a hard act to defend and throws up its own stories of human suffering and ambition, it will always be argued against. In the end, however, the law has to take its course.

Pakistan can avert a few tragedies by undertaking to educate the people about the law before they take the deep, long and often hazardous plunge.

Transit fee accord

THE signing of a transit fee accord for the CASA 1000 project is a step in the right direction, but the big question mark hanging over the project remains.

CASA 1000 aims to bring 1,300MW of electricity from the hydropower surpluses of the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan via a 1200km long transmission line.

Construction of major transmission infrastructure will cost an estimated \$1bn, funded largely by the World Bank that approved the project in March of this year. The transit fee accord now opens the way towards finalising the power purchase agreements for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the two buyer countries in the group.

It also opens the way to arrange funding for the remaining portion of the project that is not covered by the World Bank loan of \$526m. Once those two steps are in place, work on building the infrastructure can commence, with a completion date targeted for 2020. More progress has been made in the last one year than in the preceding two decades.

Protecting the infrastructure from sabotage remains a major stumbling block, however. The problem is the transit of electricity through Afghanistan.

Technically, Kabul is responsible for security of the portion of the transmission line that passes through

Afghanistan. But can Kabul live up to this responsibility? A power-sharing agreement has been reached between the two contenders for power following the Afghan elections, but it is not clear whether Kabul will be able to call the shots in Kunduz or Nangarhar provinces through which the transmission lines will travel.

It is far from clear what shape the next order in Afghanistan will take. Will the residual force that is to remain under the Bilateral Security Agreement take any responsibility for protecting the transmission lines? Is anyone talking to the warring groups regarding security? Will the warlords along the way need to be paid off?

As presently conceived, the CASA 1000 project as well as the TAPI gas pipelines are exactly what Pakistan needs to ensure its long-term economic viability. Leveraging the country's so-called location rent is critical to finding a sustainable way out of the power crisis, and to underwrite the resumption of growth and employment to deal with the youth bulge coming our way. But before that can happen, all parties to the agreement need to realise that a strong and stable order in Afghanistan serves everybody's interests.

Published in Dawn, October 14th, 2014

Flight from Balochistan

A DECADE of insecurity in Balochistan has had a grim effect on the troubled province's demographics.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, hundreds of thousands of citizens belonging to religious minority groups as well as settlers from other parts of Pakistan have left Balochistan, thanks to an atmosphere of hostility and violence, which has been shaped by sectarian death squads, separatist militants, and, sadly enough, the state.

Part of an HRCP delegation that recently visited Balochistan, the group's chairperson Zohra Yusuf told the media on Sunday that Shias, Hindus and Zikris have been leaving the province in droves over the past nine years, relocating elsewhere in the country and abroad.

The human rights group gathered this information by conducting interviews and recording testimonials. The HRCP chief also raised the issue of violence faced by journalists in the volatile region; over the last decade, around 40 media persons have been killed, though none of the perpetrators have been brought to justice.

There are numerous actors responsible for violence in Balochistan. Amongst the most lethal are sectarian groups that have unleashed their weapons on Shias — mostly Hazaras — while the small Zikri community has also found itself in their cross hairs.

The most troubling aspect is that the religious extremists are perceived as being tolerated — if not supported — by the establishment to checkmate Baloch separatists.

Meanwhile, the latter are responsible for violence of their own. Along with targeting symbols of the state, they have also turned their guns on settlers in the province. And apart from violence motivated by sectarian and ethno-nationalist considerations, the state, too, has ferociously come down on the separatists and Baloch political activists. While the HRCP said violence had decreased to some extent under the current provincial government's watch, it is a troubling reality that the dumping of mutilated bodies continues.

All the while, the media — which can independently help determine the facts in Balochistan — are being cowed through murder and intimidation. As local journalists point out, they face pressure from both the state and the separatists.

An exodus of religious minorities as well as settlers spells disaster for diversity in Balochistan. Due to this flight, the people of Balochistan will suffer the most.

After all, among those who have left there are educated professionals, tradesmen, educators etc who are crucial to the functioning of a vibrant society.

Perhaps there is still time to stem such negative trends if a genuine effort is made to bring all estranged parties to the table and solve Balochistan's problems through dialogue. But for that to happen the elected government needs to be given full authority to operate, as barely

October, 2014

below the surface it is still the security establishment that calls the shots in Balochistan.

It is the establishment which needs to reflect on why its policies have failed to bring peace to the province.

Published in Dawn, October 14th, 2014

Powering profits

THE power sector regulator, Nepra, has written a letter to all privately owned power producers asking them to provide audited financial statements that explain how their profitability is so high at a time when they are complaining about the rising receivables from the government.

In background conversations, Nepra officials say that some independent power producers enjoy “enormous profits of up to 40pc” and that some elements from their financial affairs “might not have been noticed during the course of public hearings, grant of licences or approval of tariffs”.

The regulator could, they argue, demand a probe into the financial affairs of these IPPs as a routine matter to determine whether there was any overbilling taking place on account of capacity charges of other elements of billing for power dispatch, the availability of plant, and the efficiency factor.

This comes on the heels of increasingly louder demands by the IPPs for the government to settle all outstanding receivables which have climbed to almost Rs300bn.

Perhaps this is only tough talk from Nepra, designed to deflect the IPPs’ demands for settlement of their accounts. But concerns about overbilling by the IPPs are widespread, given the complex and detailed nature of the costs according to which they bill the government.

These concerns need to be addressed through more than tough language. True, any repeat of the coercive renegotiation of power tariffs and capacity charges as seen in the tenure of the last PML-N government would be unwise.

The costs of that episode were high for the government, besides the fact that such coercive tactics are unfair in the absence of strong evidence of wrongdoing.

However, there are options short of such extraordinary measures. For example, a large audit exercise has just been completed of last year’s epic circular debt settlement but the auditor’s report has not been made public.

The government should ask the auditors to release an executive summary of that report, at the very least. Since the public is being made to bear the burden of sharply rising power tariffs, it is in the public interest to show a detailed breakdown of the cost of generation, which we are told is the chief reason behind these rising tariffs.

Increased transparency in the cash flows of the power sector is a public right, and this right must be upheld by more than just words. It is time to make transparency in the power sector a critical policy priority.

Published in Dawn, October 15th, 2014

Jailbreak thwarted

THE attempted jailbreak in Karachi, thwarted by the Rangers and announced on Monday, shows that dangerous minds are hard at work as militants make plans to try and free their comrades in order to spread further chaos in society.

According to the paramilitary force, a 45-metre-long tunnel was being dug leading from a house close to the Karachi Central Jail all the way up to the city's main penitentiary.

The militants' reported plan was to free around 100 inmates inside the facility.

The incident brings to mind the daring jailbreaks orchestrated by the banned TTP in Dera Ismail Khan last year and Bannu in 2012. But where the extremists had been successful in freeing hundreds of prisoners in both operations, including hardened terrorists, in Karachi's case a mixture of luck and good intelligence prevented the repetition of a similar debacle.

Rangers' officials say the diggers of the tunnel were only 10 metres away from their intended target inside the jail when the raid was carried out with the aid of "a national security institution", indicating the help of one of the intelligence agencies.

Reports had been circulating for some time that jails could be attacked; in fact the Sindh minister for prisons told the media on Tuesday that the Hyderabad Central Jail was also under threat. So the intelligence and law-enforcement agencies deserve kudos for averting a disaster.

That said, lessons must be learnt from the incident. The Rangers say, following the raid on the house, a search inside the jail led to the discovery of knives, wires, jihadi literature and a ladder.

This shows that the threat of dangerous militants escaping cannot be taken lightly. Firstly, it was indeed irresponsible and dangerous to keep militants subscribing to a violent or extremist ideology together.

In fact, because of overcrowding in prisons, violent criminals or terrorists are locked up with offenders doing time for relatively lesser crimes. This can expose the latter variety of prisoners to danger as well as radicalisation.

Inmates under trial or serving sentences for terrorism should be separated and housed in different jails in other cities and provinces. Modifying the jail infrastructure is important, as is enhancing security features in prisons that house dangerous offenders and suspects. There

must also be greater effort for trials within jail premises to minimise the risk of violent suspects escaping en route to the courts.

As this paper has been arguing, timely and actionable intelligence is the state's best weapon to counter the militants before they strike. For example, the Karachi prison is located in a densely populated area. Had the militants succeeded in their aim, highly dangerous men could have melted away into a labyrinthine maze of narrow streets within minutes.

Hence it is essential that the security establishment keep its eyes and ears open in and around jails and facilities that face threats from the militants.

Published in Dawn, October 15th, 2014

Poor Turkish strategy

THE Turkish government's decision to bomb the bases of Kurdish militants inside Turkey must look very odd to all those who were expecting Ankara to put its shoulder to the wheel and focus on the more important job of resisting the self-proclaimed Islamic State's relentless advance.

Both the attack by the PKK on a Turkish military outpost and the government's response threaten to undermine a

ceasefire that has been under way since the two sides agreed to a peace process two years ago.

What led to the PKK attack on the military post can be guessed: Kurdish anger over the Turkish failure to join the US-led coalition against the IS. But the attack on the outpost wasn't exactly the best way to express disgust as the Kurds aren't the only ones angry over Ankara's decision to sit on the fence while Kobane's fate hangs in the balance.

The Alevi minority is also seething with anger, and there have been demonstrations across the country against the government's shocking neutrality at a time when the entire Middle East is looking to Turkey and to powers beyond to help crush the IS, whose success threatens to create a new order that would undermine civilisation as we know it.

Evidently, Turkey's priority is Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's head. In fact, it has been criticised for allegedly allowing its soil to be used by militants as a transit route to Syria.

Ankara also feels that bombing IS forces will mean indirect support to Kurdish guerrillas fighting 'caliph' al-Baghdadi's army. But the Kurdish problem has been there for decades, and it is the IS 'blitzkrieg' that has completely upset all other calculations, for Turkey must realise that if the extremist hordes aren't crushed in Syria, they will sooner or later enter Turkish territory to wreak havoc on the Middle East's most democratic and stable country.

October, 2014

Given the turmoil within, it is time Ankara reordered its priorities and realised the danger which the IS poses to Turkey itself.

Published in Dawn, October 16th, 2014

Impact of protests

Editorial

THE anti-government protests on Constitution Avenue may not be over, but they do appear to have morphed from sit-ins to a travelling roadshow of sorts, with Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri both drawing large crowds in various cities of the country.

So perhaps an interim stock-taking of a kind is in order: what exactly have the protests achieved so far? The PML-N government is certainly weaker, the army politically stronger, the media has been thoroughly politicised, and the profiles of Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri have increased.

But there are several other macro and micro issues too. At the systemic level, politics as a whole and politicians in general stand demonised once again and increasingly portrayed as the root of all evil.

This can be seen in the agitation against the so-called VIP culture and virtually every state failure being pinned on them.

To be sure, the political class as a whole and many politicians within it have many failings. Yet, there is a sense that instead of holding the political class's feet to the fire, the flames of the ongoing protests may have engulfed the democratic system — with the obvious winners being the anti-democratic forces in the country. That this has occurred time and again over this country's

tawdry political history only strengthens the suspicion that the winners are not accidental.

Yet, there are several other immediate issues too. Mr Khan and Mr Qadri started out with a coherent and narrow set of demands — but they escalated matters by adding on the ouster of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to a set of otherwise mostly reasonable demands.

The government necessarily balked at the idea of sidelining its own leader, after which the PTI and PAT have sprayed an increasingly incoherent and inconsistent set of allegations at the government. On some days, the government is put to the sword for being too soft on India and not strong enough on Kashmir, on other days it is some localised misstep.

Most of the time now, it appears the PTI and PAT are simply glancing at the news of the day to come up with a new line of attack against the government.

While the focus is on the government's foibles, it is really many of the missteps of the protesters that have limited their impact, from the ill-advised storming of Islamabad's red zone to the insider revelations of Javed Hashmi.

Yet, as ever, the onus must ultimately be on the government to give the country an opportunity to get past this destabilising phase in politics.

Consider that even the appointment of a permanent chief election commissioner continues to prove elusive. If that is to be tied to electoral reforms, as the government is arguing, then where are those reforms and when will they be presented? Governing involves dealing with crises too, not just pretending they no longer exist.

Published in Dawn, October 16th, 2014

Split in Taliban ranks

The rise of the self-styled Islamic State was always going to have repercussions for the militant complex in Pakistan.

The only real question is: how much of an effect will IS have here? The announcement this week by several TTP commanders, headlined by Taliban spokesperson Shahidullah Shahid, that their allegiance now lies with Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi has underlined the lure of IS has for splashy headlines, but the real impact may be limited. Certainly, the banned TTP stands further weakened and Mullah Fazlullah is an increasingly isolated figure, almost consigned to his localised status during the peak of the Swat insurgency.

Additionally, gains for IS are likely to weaken the hand of Al Qaeda. But does all of that translate into IS being the next big thing in militancy here? The resumé of the six TTP commanders may be semi-impressive, but the reality is that they are on the run and unlikely to have much to offer in terms of furthering the IS agenda in Pakistan.

The main problem with discerning whether the IS graph is on the rise because the TTP graph is on the decline is that it is not known whether the fracturing and splintering of the TTP is driven by disagreements over the leadership of Mullah Fazlullah or an ideological split with deeper, more problematic roots.

The rivalry between the two Mehsud groups in the TTP was long-standing, and the rise of groups outside the Waziristan hub, especially the Swat and Mohmand Taliban, had made the TTP umbrella all the more unwieldy and unmanageable. The North Waziristan operation surely exacerbated the internal tensions within the TTP, as must have the security establishment's clandestine efforts to chip away at the unity the TTP often aspired to.

Yet, there is also a perennial fault line among militants here: a localised agenda versus a pan-Islamic vision. Essentially, do militants focus on securing Fata, defeating the Pakistani state and stopping at that or do they always have an eye towards wider goals encompassing the Muslim world? Al Qaeda and its affiliates always pushed for a wider vision, whereas a number of Pakistan-origin militants have had more limited goals focused on securing territory inside Pakistan. Now, IS — the new Al Qaeda in a sense — has rooted its appeal in a global outlook.

If the TTP fracturing and the lure of IS is rooted in something more than localised factors, the state here will have an even bigger challenge to deal with.

When simply dealing with TTP militants with a Pakistan-centric agenda has proved so difficult, how will the state cobble together a strategy to fight a global militant complex that IS could come to represent? Surely though, even if IS is not destined to gain much ground in Pakistan, an old truth still applies: when the existing militant threat is not dealt with, the future threat invariably is more dangerous and complicated.

Assemblies ranked

GIVEN the results of studies in recent years, it is unusual that a private research organisation now places Punjab behind the other three provinces.

But then, it is about the working of the provincial legislatures and the Punjab Assembly has never been a priority with Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif. He has always tried to avoid getting bogged down in work inside the house when real action awaited him outside.

According to the study conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan have shown greater will than Punjab to follow the broad principles of involving the assemblies in meaningful activity since the last general election.

The key indicators that were looked at included: lawmaking, formation of standing committees, time spent in sessions (particularly on crucial budget discussions), attendance of leaders of the treasury and opposition, punctuality, etc. Under most heads, Punjab did worse than the other provinces, reconfirming the style of governance long preferred by Mr Shahbaz Sharif and the need for correction here — but without really providing those who have fared better in this case any great cause for celebration.

The best formula is one that allows every arm of the system to work at its most efficient. Not only could all four

provinces of the country do better on the legislative front, some complementary action by the other components that make up the system could have brought better all-round results for the people.

It can be argued that, in comparison to Punjab, the study brings out a tendency of some not very efficient governments to try and hide behind the grand façade of a provincial assembly. In a nutshell, all these assemblies and governments are still in the early stages of striking the right balance for smoother functioning of the system to the people's advantage.

For Punjab specifically, it is yet another reminder about a much-needed shift that allows broadening of the power base, delegation of responsibilities and consultation with people through their representatives.

Published in Dawn, October 17th, 2014

More CNG licences

LITTLE by little, the government appears to be climbing down from the previous administration's attempts to restrain the growth of the CNG sector.

The latest step in this direction is the approval of 30 licences for new CNG stations, even as the sector is gasping for its allocations of natural gas. The last government had imposed a ban on the issuance of new licences for CNG stations as the sector had grown rapidly, arguing that the dwindling stock of domestic gas was better utilised for power generation and fertiliser, as well as other industrial uses.

Those with licence applications pending when the ban went into effect were given provisional licences, and went ahead with their investments.

The Supreme Court ordered the government to settle the issue of those working under provisional licences, and the government obliged in January of this year by granting 20 marketing licences to those operating under provisional terms. This week the government has paved the way for 30 more to join the club of licensed CNG dealers.

Whether or not the licences ought to have been issued is a complicated issue. But what is not complicated is the growing shortage of the precious stock of domestic gas.

The ban imposed by the previous government has proven very difficult to uphold because the CNG business is a cash cow and there is constant pressure for grant of licence to favoured parties.

The pending issue of those with provisional licences, as well as the difficulties associated with attempts to ban the import of CNG kits and cylinders, highlight the struggle the state has had to wage to restrain the growth of this sector.

More recently, CNG dealers were allowed to import LNG once the infrastructure for doing so is in place, but without any clarity as to how pricing will work in that arrangement. The recent grant of further licences might well be justified according to the technicalities of the law, but this is an opportune moment to recall the good reasons behind why attempts to restrain the growth of this sector came into being in the first place.

The country cannot afford further increases in allocations to the CNG sector. Let us hope that the grant of licences this week is not a slippery slope back towards unbridled growth in the vehicular use of CNG.

Published in Dawn, October 17th, 2014

Blasphemy ruling

The Lahore High Court has upheld the death sentence against Asiya Bibi in a blasphemy case which goes back five years. A mother of five children and a Christian, she was accused of passing derogatory remarks about the Prophet (PBUH) by her neighbours near Nankana Sahib in central Punjab in 2009.

The case got widespread coverage in the local and international media and aroused passions in Pakistan due to its sensitive nature. It was this case that led to the assassination of the then Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer by one of his official guards.

Since then, those who have appeared to even mildly be advocating a fair trial for a blasphemy accused according to Pakistani law have been direly threatened. A federal minister who had chosen to speak about Asiya Bibi was gunned down and one rights lawyer who was defending a blasphemy accused in Multan was murdered.

On Thursday, a high court judge ruled that there is no other punishment but death for the crime that Asiya Bibi has been convicted of. A defence lawyer has said his client would appeal in the Supreme Court but those who brought up the charge are already celebrating, calling it a “victory of Islam”.

More or less the same intimidating atmosphere has prevailed throughout the trial — first at the subordinate

court which pronounced the death sentence and then at the high court. The accused came to be summarily viewed as guilty the moment she was accused, caught in the wave of hatred routinely generated by blasphemy cases here.

There were a few voices which called for a careful approach to the trial, but this was too emotional an issue for the charged crowd to allow any advice to proceed cautiously, let alone entertain any suggestion for review.

The fact, however, remains that the law as it exists has to take its course; there has to be a trial, which cannot be complete without the accused exercising his or her right to defence. But for a defence to have any meaning, there have to be lawyers who can do the job assigned to them without fear of being condemned as offenders themselves.

As any debate about revisiting the law gets increasingly hazardous and as points about the possibility of the law being used to settle personal scores are forcefully pushed out of the discussion, the next question is: is any fair trial possible in the atmosphere of extreme fear that surrounds all blasphemy cases?

Published in Dawn, October 18th, 2014

Afghanistan fatigue

With the scheduled drawdown of foreign troops in Afghanistan under way, it was inevitable that there would be a palpable sense of donor fatigue in nations including those that have poured millions of dollars into the country. How serious the effects of this will prove, though, was indicated by a statement put out by the World Food Programme in Kabul on Tuesday.

The UN food assistance agency faces a funding gap of about \$30m for the programme it runs in Afghanistan and warned that this had forced it to cut rations for up to a million people there, out of a total of 3.7 million that it is aiding.

“We have had to cut down the rations of the people we are assisting, just so we can buy some time, so we don’t stop altogether,” said the Afghanistan country director Claude Jibidar.

As a result of the cuts, the calorie count of the food relief has dropped from 2,100 calories a day to 1,500. Needless to say, those receiving aid from the WFP are amongst the poorest of the poor. Many of them had to flee their homes in the latest iteration of war and have yet to find a steady means of livelihood.

This reality is a reminder of the shape of things to come. With new wars and new crises elsewhere and in other regions, attention will inevitably shift fast. But the world

needs to recall its responsibilities towards Afghanistan, a country whose misfortunes are not entirely of its own making.

Having been ravaged by conflict for upwards of 30 years, with generations that have seen nothing but violence, improvement in the country’s social fabric and infrastructure is a matter of the long haul.

In this, the authorities in Afghanistan will need the support and cooperation of not just neighbouring countries such as Pakistan — which continues to host millions of refugees on its soil — but also of others. With the foreign presence dwindling fast, Afghanistan must not be left exposed to another cycle of instability.

Implications of Multan by-election

Looking for meaning in a by-election result comes with the usual caveats. Too much should not be read into by-elections. The electorate is often uninterested. A general election can and does often produce very different results.

Yet, sometimes the result speaks for itself. Short on principle and consistency the PTI may have been in backing the independent candidate Mohammad Amir Dogar, but the party has proved a point: it continues to attract voters.

And clever as the PML-N may have tried to be in backing a former party member, Javed Hashmi, in his bid to defeat the PTI of which he was until recently a member, the N-League has demonstrated that all is not well in Punjab as far as the party is concerned.

To be sure, given that the seat was won by Mr Hashmi on a PTI ticket in May 2013 and the PML-N is not a dominant force in south Punjab, the pluses for the PTI from Thursday's by-election result are bigger than the PML-N's minuses.

For the PML-N, NA-149 may be a single seat that had not been with the party to begin with, but there is a wider problem: several more by-elections will have to be held in

Punjab once the PTI's en masse resignations from the National Assembly take effect.

And while the distance between Multan and Lahore may have once been great, perhaps as great as the distance between an urban and rural voter in the province, poll trends in Punjab suggest a flattening out of the electorate with similar themes animating voters across regions.

The public may not have turned on the PML-N over the last year, but neither is it enthused by the party's performance at the centre — and possibly even at the provincial level. Similarly, while Imran Khan's message may often be muddled and contradictory and his support base not growing enormously, his core theme of dissent is resonating with many sections of the public.

The democratic, constitutional system is not delivering adequately or quickly enough in the public's estimation and people are willing to look elsewhere for hope. The PML-N's stodginess, stubbornness and listlessness are only compounding a sense that it is either out of touch or unable to deliver on the raised expectations of the public.

Still, one by-election does not necessarily make for a reversal of May 2013. The PTI will be cheered by the win, but there is also a warning of sorts buried in Thursday's results: without a plan and without the capacity to execute it, any party that campaigns on hope will suffer the electoral consequences of unmet expectations.

Much clearer is the continuing decline of the PPP in Punjab. NA-149 was essentially a two-horse race, with the PPP candidate absolutely nowhere. Is the PPP's

October, 2014

decline in the province terminal? The results would appear to suggest so.

Published in Dawn, October 18th, 2014

Woes of journalists

IT is a sad reflection on a country when those who are at the vanguard of all popular causes are found struggling to secure a few basics for themselves. Journalists in Pakistan have been demanding protection and investigation of cases of violence against them. Worse, they have been forced to call for payment of compensation to the families of journalists killed in pursuance of their work. There has been little official response to these demands. One of the most dangerous places for journalists anywhere, Pakistan is regrettably also characterised by apathy on the part of those in power. Estimates show more than 40 journalists have been killed in conflict-ridden Balochistan alone over the last five years. And there have been instances elsewhere in which media persons have been targeted. But nothing has emerged to suggest that the authorities are alarmed. Instead, journalists continue to be exposed to ever greater danger in the presence of a state that is unable to offer much in terms of protection and because of cut-throat competition among their employers.

Journalists in Pakistan have to thus fight on many fronts. They are up against the perpetrators of violence, they are

striving to make the state wake up to its responsibility of providing security and they have to evolve a professional scheme that allows them to carry out their duties with minimum risk. There has been some effort towards these ends but no real results. Lately, journalists have managed to get the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly to write to the prime minister, urging the government to give compensation to the families of Balochistan-based journalists who have died in targeted killings. Also, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists on Friday launched a weeklong black ribbon campaign against some recent killings. This is strong enough protest for anyone inclined to listen but it can be made more potent by the inclusion of a greater number of journalists. The groupings in the ranks are harming the cause which is common to all journalists.

Published in Dawn, October 19th, 2014

Ebola danger

THE level of panic that has ensued in several developed countries regarding the threat of Ebola there is perhaps unnecessary given that they are well equipped to contain the virus. But what the dreaded disease has wrought in the poor countries of western Africa is horrifying, with nearly 4,500 people dead and already stressed healthcare infrastructures brought to the point of collapse. Unfortunately, several developing countries are too sanguine about the risk. Consider the case of Pakistan: we have a far from adequate healthcare infrastructure — one that is plagued by inefficiencies, mismanagement and resource and manpower shortages. It has not kept pace with the needs of a burgeoning and increasingly poor population, and even basics such as maternal and child health are not covered. The medical needs of millions of people go unmet, and hundreds of thousands of people die of preventable illnesses. Were something like the Ebola virus to strike here, the outcome would be nothing short of catastrophic, especially in view of the high population and urban density rates.

It is not that the government is not alive to the danger, but that the protective measures being talked about are far from sufficient and certainly far from showing the sort of urgency that is warranted. On Friday, it was announced that a counter had been set up at the Islamabad airport to screen travellers from western Africa, and bureaucratic moves such as appointing focal

persons, etc, had been taken. But what about the country's other international airports? What about travellers entering through the ports and land borders? What about the fact that although international passengers already fill out a health card, these cards are rarely — if ever — scanned and can usually be found littering the premises? The state's utter inability to enforce even its own decisions in terms of healthcare can be gauged from the promises made about polio. Officialdom claimed to have set up mechanisms at airports to screen out passengers without vaccination certificates, but in reality thousands of people are travelling unchecked. As with polio, the introduction of Ebola is a risk Pakistan can simply not afford to take. It seems to be failing in the former case; will it be the same with the latter?

Published in Dawn, October 19th, 2014

Power reshuffle

RECENT changes in the power sector, arguably one of the most crucial areas in need of major reform, have led to much debate. A new face has been nominated for the post of secretary, water and power. Outgoing secretary Nargis Sethi had taken up the challenge after efficiently managing some very senior federal government posts. Her tough talk led many to believe she would ensure that the power bureaucracy delivered results, particularly where improving recoveries and raising efficiencies were concerned. The sheer force of confidence that Ms Sethi brought with her were assets — up to a point. But ultimately, the intrigues of the inept in the power bureaucracy proved stronger than her willpower, and the results of the pressure exerted by her to accelerate recoveries led to an overbilling scandal, which apparently played a major role in her premature removal. The episode goes to show that tough talk is not enough to deal with the power bureaucracy. What is needed is a calmer, more methodical approach to reform the incentive structure that makes the bureaucracy tick.

Her replacement is Younus Dagha, a relatively newer face at the top. Mr Dagha belongs to the DMG group from 1985 and has spent most of his career in service to the provincial government of Sindh. His work in the federal government is only a few years old, and most it is far removed from the type of posts around which powerful politics revolve. But Mr Dagha has a reputation

as a man who gets things done without getting his hands dirty. The road ahead for him is treacherous, and his relative inexperience in dealing with high-pressure posts in close proximity to political power could be as much of an asset as a liability. Tackling political pressure, the intrigues of the power bureaucracy and pressure from the IPPs may well take its usual toll.

As an example, consider how Minister for Water and Power Khawaja Asif recently embarrassed himself and a number of others by announcing that Nepra, the supposedly independent regulator, had rejected a petition filed by the PTI even before Nepra had said anything about the matter. The Nepra chief, who happens to be related to the minister, was put in the position of having to deny that a decision had been made on that petition. Khawaja Asif's announcement served to reinforce the impression held by many that family ties between the minister and the regulator's chief had led the latter to subordinate his professional obligations to the political priorities of the minister. It remains to be seen how Mr Dagha will respond to this sort of pressure, especially considering he has a track record of not obliging political interference. To be successful, he will need to keep politics at bay, not become overconfident, and chart out a methodical and deliberate path of reform. No doubt this is a daunting job, but perhaps the best bet is to entrust it to a new face.

Published in Dawn, October 19th, 2014

Space for culture

WHILE Karachi is more known for frequent bloodshed and chaos, the fact that the megacity has just witnessed the seventh edition of the International Urdu Conference shows it can also play host to events that promote learning.

The four-day conference, which concluded on Sunday, featured eminent men of letters and literati from across Pakistan as well as the diaspora. That writers and scholars from India, Egypt and Turkey were present was an added bonus. It is heartening that despite Karachi's near-constant instability and the fact that political activity in the metropolis was at fever pitch due to Saturday's PPP rally, the public's attendance at the conference was encouraging, though perhaps a stronger presence from the youth was needed.

Participants of the "cultural congregation" discussed a range of topics relevant to the condition and future prospects of Urdu. Of course, the rampant extremism in society did not escape the attention of the discussants, as speakers said fiction writers specifically feared an obscurantist backlash.

Equally interesting were concerns about the effects globalisation was having on Urdu. In the new 'global culture' — largely shaped by multinational corporations — English was dominant and to ensure its survival Urdu had to "turn itself into the language of creativity and knowledge".

Languages the world over face a Darwinian struggle; only the strongest survive in a globalised age, and efforts such as the Urdu conference are essential to ensuring languages are patronised and nurtured.

Some speakers also raised the point that in the current societal milieu, literature and language did not matter much.

Indeed, literature conferences, book fairs and other events that promote learning are essential to fostering tolerance and civilised behaviour in society.

Encouragingly, Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad have all over the past few years witnessed regular events that promote literature and the arts. However, challenges persist; only last year, Karachi's book fair was targeted by protesting extremists.

The state can help by supporting such literary endeavours and protecting them from the threats posed by hardliners.

Published in Dawn, October 20th, 2014

The army's view

WHEN the army chief speaks, listening can be instructive, especially if the chief is dilating on issues of national security and foreign policy.

In more normal times, Gen Raheel Sharif's speech to fresh graduates of the military academy in Kakul would have been a routine affair, but context can be everything.

With violence along the LoC and Working Boundary having flared up recently, tensions with India still high, a military operation in North Waziristan looking set to continue into the winter, a new dispensation in Afghanistan and civil-military relations having taken more than a few knocks in recent months, Gen Sharif's words were all the more important. And it is more than likely they indicated state policy direction on key issues in the near future.

On India, the message was not quite a dismal one – given the aggressive tone emanating from New Delhi under the Narendra Modi-led BJP government. But it certainly suggests that Pakistan and India are back to square one, with Pakistan insisting that normalisation and peace can only take place in an environment where the Kashmir dispute is placed front and centre.

Yet, nothing Gen Sharif said suggests that the army-led security establishment is quite looking for a solution on an urgent or innovative basis. By reiterating that the Kashmir dispute must be resolved “in accordance with

the will of Kashmiri people as enshrined in the UN resolutions” the army here has signalled that it is not in fact really seeking any forward movement on Kashmir.

In reality, principled and legal as Pakistan's long-standing formulation on Kashmir has been, the original fair and just solution is a virtual non-starter now.

Anything that does nudge the Kashmir dispute closer to resolution – as opposed to a return to the non-violent impasse of the past decade – would have to be the so-called out-of-the-box solution that Pervez Musharraf semi-championed. Clearly though, the army leadership does not believe – and it may well be right – that the Modi government is remotely interested in pursuing peace right now, let alone a resolution of the Kashmir issue.

On Afghanistan, meanwhile, Gen Sharif sounded a more conciliatory tone, essentially welcoming the Ashraf Ghani-Abdullah Abdullah governance experiment and even suggesting that the Pakistan Army will support the Afghan security forces, despite long-held reservations about the size, purpose and viability of the foreign-funded Afghan National Army.

While the army's Afghan policy may not fundamentally have changed as yet, there are signs that if the Afghans find a way to establish relative peace and stability in their country, Pakistan will not intervene against or scuttle an internal Afghan settlement.

Finally, on internal security and Operation Zarb-i-Azb, Gen Sharif suggested that “cohesive, dedicated and

timely involvement of all stake holders and state institutions is essential” for peace. But then, what has the army really done to encourage civilian input?

Published in Dawn, October 20th, 2014

Targeting of non-Baloch

ONCE again, the blood of innocents has flowed in Balochistan. Eight labourers kidnapped in the early hours of Sunday from a poultry farm in Sakran, Lasbela district, were found murdered later that day, their bodies dumped in a mountainous area.

Another labourer, who had been kidnapped in the same incident, was discovered in an injured condition close to the other victims.

The men belonged to various parts of Punjab, driven by economic compulsions to seek work in the insurgency-wracked province following the devastating floods in their native areas. From the details that have emerged, this is yet another grisly chapter in the Baloch separatists’ campaign to define their enemy along ethnic lines, in which any non-Baloch is worthy of elimination.

Evidently, 11 men had been kidnapped, but two were released after a perusal of the victims’ identity cards revealed they were Baloch. Earlier this month, a barber shop and a photographer’s studio in Quetta, both owned

by non-Baloch, were attacked with hand grenades, killing and injuring several.

Armed struggles, when they are particularly protracted, run the risk of straying from their original ideological context: frustrations boil over and rivalries stemming from competition over resources to differences regarding strategy create a situation of having to prove one’s credentials.

It could be argued that the Baloch insurgency, spawned by the state’s own repressive and short-sighted policies, turned that corner when separatists began to target non-Baloch living and working in Balochistan.

This trend has especially manifested itself in its latest iteration, triggered by Akbar Bugti’s murder in 2006. In treading upon this path, the separatists betray a hardening of stance and a narrowness of vision that compromises the future of their own people. For, among those non-Baloch who have been attacked or driven out of the province by the insurgents, are educationists, doctors and health workers.

The province thus continues to haemorrhage well-qualified individuals who are much needed to improve developmental indicators already among the lowest in the country, even when non-Baloch such as the Hazaras are slaughtered in attacks by religious extremists who, militant Baloch groups allege, are being used by the state to counter the insurgency, the separatists utter not a word in condemnation. In their hatred and obduracy, they compromise any effort to address the legitimate grievances of the Baloch.

The drop in FDI

THE steep fall in foreign investment is a vote of little confidence in the turnaround story the government enjoys telling everybody.

Latest figures show that foreign investment in the first quarter of the current fiscal year dropped by 26pc from the same period last year. This is putting pressure on the massive debt service obligations due this year, as well as challenging the resumption of job-creating growth.

Outflows in the form of dividends and repatriation of profits has risen, ie foreign investors prefer to take out whatever money they are making in Pakistan rather than risk new investments.

The trade deficit is widening, which indicates that difficulties are accumulating on the external front where the government likes to claim its biggest success. Thus far, reserves have not seen any adverse impact, but if the situation is not rectified, that could change.

Much of the government's turnaround story hinges on external-sector developments. They claim they stabilised reserves and strengthened the currency, and obtained a vote of confidence from Moody's. But a deeper look reveals darkening clouds.

The fall in foreign investment is only partially the result of the political turmoil in the country. The turmoil certainly hasn't helped, but the decline in foreign investment

began long before the protests, and is more closely related to the difficulty of credibly selling the government's growth story.

Inflows of foreign investment did see an uptick from 2013 on, when the new government took the reins, but that trend tapered out by January of this year and appears to be worsening.

reasons have more to do with the underlying fundamentals that fail to inspire confidence, such as law and order, the state of governance, the perception of favouritism in the way the government operates, the precarious nature of external-sector developments, etc.

This vote of little confidence that investors are casting by abstaining from acquiring stakes in an economy the government claims is on the mend cannot be addressed through mere statements. Yes, political stability is badly needed, but clearly the authorities need to do more to establish their credentials as a business-friendly government. Their insistence that they are one does not seem to find any takers.

Published in Dawn, October 21st, 2014

A national shame

OUTRAGE, disbelief and despondency are some of the emotions triggered by news of the armed robbery targeting the Edhi Foundation's headquarters on Sunday morning.

While hold-ups and robberies in the chaotic environs of Karachi are very common, as armed thugs loot citizens on a daily basis in this unfortunate city, it is the audacity of the criminals to target the country's most outstanding social workers that is particularly unnerving.

As per reports, a number of armed men barged into the Edhi Foundation's premises in the old city area and fled with gold and cash worth around Rs30m. The marauders held the staff at gunpoint and also threatened Mr Edhi, who was asleep when the criminals struck.

Clearly not in a hurry, the armed robbers spent around 30 minutes in the office. There are indications that they may have had inside information as they knew the location of the cash and valuables. Speaking after the incident, Mr Edhi told a foreign media organisation that he felt "heartbroken" and "violated".

Most people in Pakistan have a good idea of the role Abdul Sattar Edhi and his foundation play in this country.

The iconic social worker cares for those whom state and society have forgotten or choose not to remember. For

decades, his organisation has been a shelter for the dispossessed, the abandoned and the weak.

His fleet of ambulances and other social services are literally life-saving endeavours filling in the vast space the state — due to its negligence and disinterest — has left vacant. That is why the shock over this crime is so great.

It seems that in Pakistan, crime and militancy have devolved to such unenviable depths that even a saviour like Mr Edhi is not safe from the depredations of marauders. The incident shows that everything is fair game in this country, that all targets are kosher. Indeed, the question swirling in many minds is that if a personality such as Abdul Sattar Edhi can be robbed, what else is left?

But then, we as a nation have been falling through a bottomless pit for some time now. Criminals and terrorists have no qualms about attacking funerals and hospitals, even killing women and children if they happen to get in the way.

In this country, flawed ideologies have led to the murder of doctors, teachers and polio vaccinators, all doing the work of messiahs. But where is society's condemnation? Or have we become numb?

The robbery has been condemned by the high and mighty of this land, including the prime minister. However, while we are hopeful that Mr Edhi will recover and continue his mission to serve humanity, we are not so sure if the authorities will be moved by this latest

October, 2014

outrage to act decisively and crack down on urban crime so that citizens' lives and properties are made safe.

Published in Dawn, October 21st, 2014

Talk of nukes

THE nuclear boast by a federal minister in the National Assembly on Monday was not required. The minister, retired Lt-Gen Abdul Qadir Baloch, says he spent seven of his years in the army on the Line of Control, which apparently qualified him to talk of what he called a “matching” response to an “aggressive” India. But his warning was rather superfluous, for the dangers of having two skirmishing nuclear-armed neighbours are too well known to need further elaboration. The thought is chilling enough even without the good minister having to throw in a few thrills of his own. In fact, once such fears are sparked, particularly given the current spike in border hostilities, all adventurous talk even remotely connected with the use of nuclear force should be shunned. This logic did not seem to strike Mr Baloch who was heard reminding everyone that if “countries possess any capability for their defence; they don’t keep it only in cold storage. This capability can be used in times of need”. Most people would be likely to miss the balancing act that Mr Baloch was trying to put up by “reassuring” his

audience that Pakistan had maintained its nuclear capability with “utmost responsibility”.

The minister was obviously indulging in the kind of posturing that has sadly been considered necessary at this moment in both India and Pakistan. However, he took the intimidating battle that the two sides have been locked in to an altogether different level — perhaps compelled by all the critique of his government which has been accused of reacting too softly to Indian aggression on the borders. There are other political parties that have tried to use the situation to press their own credentials and Pakistanis are reacting with anger to news about their countrymen being hit by cross-border fire from the Indian forces. The current spur in hostilities makes it difficult enough for Pakistan and India to jointly pursue a less dangerous future. Let’s not aggravate the situation by bringing in the nukes.

Published in Dawn, October 22nd, 2014

Licence suspension

Editorial

A MERE four months after Geo News was fined and its broadcast licence temporarily suspended by Pemra, on Monday it was ARY News that was similarly cautioned with a 15-day licence suspension and a Rs10m fine. The institutions these channels are deemed to have harmed are different — it is the ISI in the former instance and the judiciary in the second. But the root of the problem is the same: the airing of content that has displayed a problematic journalistic ethos and the failure to weed out undesirable or reckless commentary. Whether the punishment meets the scale of the transgression is debatable in such cases. But what is not debatable is that on several occasions, in different ways, Pakistan’s vibrant and outspoken electronic media have erred on the side of being too lax in their application of filters, and have consequently underscored the need for regulation.

There is, of course, a lot of difference between censorship and regulation. Across the world, the functioning of the electronic media is subjected to the scrutiny of regulatory bodies that act as the media’s conscience and in the public interest. This was precisely the reasoning behind the establishment of Pemra. That said, however, there are in practical terms certain problems with the watchdog. These require rectification — and on an urgent basis. First, where regulatory bodies are effective, they also have considerable power to implement their decisions and, more importantly, are

viewed as having an entirely independent and transparent functioning. What is Pemra’s implementing power? Now that ARY’s licence has been suspended, the country will no doubt see the same situation as it did with Geo: depending on individual cable operators’ inclination, the broadcast will cease in some areas and not in others. Second, as a result of the Geo/ARY debacle, Pemra as it stands today has been tainted with political hues, and there are reasons to fear that its decisions may not be as independent as could be hoped for. This needs to be reversed. Further, there is no argument that Pakistan’s electronic media landscape can do with better, clearer rules that should be applied fairly, with transparency, and across the board. All this can be achieved if the Pemra regulatory framework is subjected to close parliamentary re-examination. As long as the main stakeholders are kept part of the consulting process, there is no reason a new regulator with new rules cannot be created.

Published in Dawn, October 22nd, 2014

Tensions on Pak-Iran border

WHILE certain sections of the geostrategic community in Pakistan have always touted the geographic importance of the country and the enviable place it has as a regional trade corridor, the reality is that the state's borders have more often proved a liability than an asset over the decades. With friction on the Pak-Afghan border having been a near constant over the last decade and the Pak-India border — or, more specifically, the Line of Control and Working Boundary with Kashmir — having flared up recently, a third border has seen a rise in tensions over the last week: Iran-Pakistan. A flurry of diplomatic activity has followed the killing of a Pakistan Frontier Corps soldier in an attack on Pakistani soil by Iranian border security forces and the Iranian side at least seems to be in a bellicose mood. This is not the first time this year that the Iran-Pakistan border has been a flashpoint: earlier the abduction of Iranian border guards caused a sharp response from Iran and small, localised incidents on the border are frequent enough.

The basic problem is well known. Iran accuses Pakistan of allowing its territory in Balochistan to be used to destabilise the Sistan-Baluchestan region in Iran — though the Iranians usually make the connection to foreign (read Western) intelligence services operating in the Balochistan and southern Afghanistan region. Yet,

the problem is much wider than what Iran often claims and not necessarily uni-directional. The porous Iran-Pakistan border that runs over 900km is a magnet for smugglers — of humans, drugs and petroleum products — criminal elements and even militants. While Iran has invested more than Pakistan in shoring up its border controls, security officials here have privately over the years suggested that Iran is not above interfering in Balochistan and southern Afghanistan, especially given the Shia Hazara population in the region.

Identifying the problem though does not mean that either side has been particularly keen on solving it — not that cross-border movements in remote regions can ever really be fully eliminated, especially when there is a significant financial incentive. But surely, given the alarming potential for friction that exists on the Pak-Iran border, it is in the interests of both sides to go beyond diplomatic barbs and systematically diminish the threat. The Pak-Iran relationship has over the years been characterised by coolness towards each other, not just because of Pakistan's closeness to Saudi Arabia and its relationship with the US, but also because neither country's leadership has been willing to think in creative or innovative ways to improve ties. The physical links that the IP gas pipeline, surplus electricity supply from Iran to Pakistan and higher volumes of official trade would create could help make ties mutually beneficial and move them away from the present security-centric character. But for that to happen the leadership on both sides would need to show greater vision.

Published in Dawn, October 22nd, 2014

Confused priorities

THE Council of Islamic Ideology appears to be playing a familiar tune. Following a meeting in Islamabad on Tuesday, CII chairman Maulana Mohammad Khan Sheerani said that a Muslim woman cannot object to her husband's second or subsequent marriages.

He added that the relevant section of the Muslim Divorce Act, 1939, contravened Sharia hence it should be repealed. It seems that the learned doctors of religion that serve on the council have an obsession with marriage laws — this was the fourth meeting this year to discuss the subject — and are bent upon reversing whatever progressive legislation exists to protect women and children.

For example, in May the CII had issued a statement that endorsed child marriage. As it is, due to the patriarchal, almost medieval mindsets that prevail in society, the odds are stacked against women and children in Pakistan. So when an official body makes such questionable pronouncements — even in an advisory, non-binding capacity — it sends all the wrong signals to society.

The council, as it stands, is dominated by the chairman, who is a cleric from the far right of the conservative brand. Hence, space in the body for progressive religious voices is minimal. With society already sinking in the bog of extremism and obscurantism, will such

pronouncements from an official body help improve the situation?

Like so many other state institutions, the CII seems to have misplaced priorities. While it does occasionally add positive input to important issues, such as calling for a ban on hate speech during Muharram and condemning the practice of declaring Muslims non-believers, as it did on Wednesday, at the same time the council also endorses regressive thoughts.

This dichotomy should be addressed. If the CII cannot endorse progressive religious views that help heal society's rifts, it should be wrapped up. As it is, we have an elected body in the shape of parliament that is qualified to legislate on all issues, hence the presence of a parallel advisory institution makes little sense.

Published in Dawn, October 23rd, 2014

Power fumble

LESS than six months into their second fiscal year, the government is already fumbling its response to the power crisis.

This is a government that campaigned on ending load-shedding and whose senior leadership, when in opposition, skewered the previous government for its many mistakes in the power sector.

This is a government that borrowed an epic half a trillion rupees in a matter of days to settle the circular debt as one of its earliest actions, promising us that this problem would not be allowed to return as it did after every other such settlement in previous years.

This time it would be different, we were told last summer. This time reforms would be introduced to bring about efficiency, lower losses and raise recoveries, with minimal impact on tariffs for end-consumers.

All these promises appeared to be enshrined in a single line in the last budget: the massively reduced allocation for power tariff subsidies for fiscal year 2014-15. The government meant business it appeared, because with reduced allocation for subsidies, there would be no choice but to raise recoveries and efficiencies.

Since then, we have had an overbilling scandal, which cost a veteran bureaucrat her job, and now the ramshackle attempt to sneak through a power tariff

increase, apparently in the hope that nobody would notice. But somebody did notice, and the whistle was indeed blown, and now we have a hasty withdrawal from that decision from an authority no less than the prime minister himself, signalling a wavering and weak-kneed commitment at the top levels of government to follow through on their own decisions.

Fact of the matter is that the government is struggling to formulate a response to the power crisis in the same manner as its predecessor. The current political difficulties are no excuse; after all, Pakistan's politics have almost always been tumultuous.

Did the PML-N not know at the time of making its campaign promise that the party would be required to deliver on its pledges in the midst of a stormy political environment? Without underlying reforms that alter the incentive structure the bureaucracy operates under, top-line measures such as tariff increases and raw pressure to raise recoveries will only generate more problems and provoke a powerful backlash.

In the second year of its rule, we are entitled to see a more coherent response from the government towards delivering on its principal campaign promise regarding the power crisis.

Published in Dawn, October 23rd, 2014

Education in a shambles

THE information may not be new, but the issue is so crucial that it bears repetition: Pakistan will have no future unless it invests heavily in the young — and this investment begins with the long-neglected, even forgotten, sector of education.

Despite having a clause on the law books that makes education a universal right for all children, the country is still struggling to put every child in school.

On top of that, we now have stark facts and figures about the difficulty in keeping children in school, even if they make it there in the first place. On Tuesday, education campaigner Alif Ailaan released its latest report, Broken promises: The crisis of Pakistan's out-of-school children.

The figures are worrying: of those that do enrol in school, only one in four make it to Grade 10; as indicated by data from various sources used by Alif Ailaan. That means some 25 million children drop out of school.

A perusal of the reasons the report lays out for this shamefully high figure is as revealing as it is instructive. A couple of myths are busted, for example, only 1pc of girls were forced to opt out of school because of marriage.

Some reasons are obvious — poverty, the need to start pulling in an income and the expense of schooling are deterrents for both boys and girls. But other factors are

an indictment of the education infrastructure and its handling. Consider, for example, that 5pc of male dropouts find that school is too far off to make attendance viable; and 51pc of such boys don't go because they themselves are not willing to continue. The figure for girls not attending for the latter reason is 28pc. But why would children be unwilling to go to school?

An answer is found in what the Rawalpindi deputy district education officer had to say to this newspaper. The major reasons, according to him, are “[in]consistency of policies, poverty and a shambolic education infrastructure”. A schoolteacher from the city commented in addition: “a poorly managed system of examinations and teachers’ maltreatment of students”.

The path to remedying the situation on paper is quite clear. But so far the country has lacked the sort of political will needed to make it happen. For instance, in the wake of devolution after the passage of the 18th Amendment, the centre seems to have abandoned the subject as a provincial matter; the provinces have, meanwhile, done little (other than Sindh, which has started to try and weed out political appointees in schoolteachers’ positions).

The low school enrolment rates coupled with high dropout rates are a disaster in the making for the country's social and economic future. But going by the response to this abysmal state of affairs, the dire implications have not yet filtered into the consciousness of those at the helm.

Published in Dawn, October 23rd, 2014

Measures against Ebola

WITH a fatality rate of around 70pc, according to WHO, the Ebola outbreak raging mainly in parts of West Africa has, with good reason, triggered much anxiety across the world.

The disease has ravaged the society and health infrastructure of the hardest-hit countries which include Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

In Pakistan, after an initially lackadaisical response to the threat of the virus entering the country, the health authorities appear to have woken up to the risk and scrambled to put preventive measures in place. Isolation wards have been set up in at least seven tertiary care hospitals all over the country.

Round-the-clock health staff has been appointed at all international airports to screen passengers arriving from Ebola-affected countries, document their history and if necessary, coordinate with relevant personnel in the provincial health departments to keep such passengers under observation/quarantine at one of the isolation wards.

Training in detecting and handling cases is being conducted for the health staff deputed at points of entry. WHO has provided 15 sets of protective gear to the Sindh government in case doctors and paramedics in the province have to handle an infected person.

This is all very well, and WHO has also declared itself satisfied with the measures Pakistan is taking to contend with this health emergency.

However, key to success here is consistency and rigorous application of the protocols that are being put in place. Such discipline does not come naturally to us, but harness it we must. Adherence to preventive measures is essential right down to the micro level in the health chain where laxity is most likely. For this, training of everyone concerned must be mandatory.

The response should continue to be coordinated by a central authority, and assessments on a weekly basis sought from provincial health authorities so that a constant vigil can be maintained. Even one case slipping through can have consequences too horrific to contemplate in a population already reeling under the weight of several health crises.

Published in Dawn, October 24th, 2014

Attacks in Quetta

ONE day, one provincial capital, three violent incidents — Quetta in particular, and Balochistan in general, appear to be slipping back towards outright anarchy and the state seems utterly clueless and impotent.

Start with the attack on the Shia Hazara community. With the majority of Hazaras settled in one particular zone in Quetta and the community under sustained and deadly threat, the law-enforcement and intelligence apparatus in the provincial capital ought surely to be able to do better to protect the community. Yet, whatever measures were taken in the wake of the devastating bombings in early 2013 on the Hazara community have clearly proved inadequate.

If preventing a drive-by shooting of a bus is fiendishly difficult, far more obvious is the failure to follow up on intelligence reports suggesting that Quetta is infested with sectarian militants with an explicit agenda of attacking the Hazaras.

All that ever seems to happen is after each terrible crime against the Hazaras, the law-enforcement and intelligence agencies briefly go into overdrive, raiding suspected terrorist hideouts, arresting people, etc before slipping back into complacency until the next hideous attack, when the cycle is repeated all over again.

Of course, if failure to defend a shocking vulnerable and under-siege community were not bad enough, the law-enforcement apparatus led by the paramilitary Frontier Corps was unable to even defend its own soldiers in a roadside bombing in Quetta yesterday.

Again, no counterterrorism system can be perfect and some attacks in a state of insurgency are inevitable, but that only underscores the wider point: whatever the army-led security establishment has done to counter terrorism and insurgency in the province over the past decade has not worked — indeed, is not working.

To add to that already chaotic scene came a third attack, this time on Fazlur Rehman in the evening. There are obvious possibilities for who can and would want to attack the JUI-F chief, including an unverified early claim of responsibility last evening, and those possibilities suggest that yesterday's attack could have ramifications far beyond Quetta, given the maulana's political base in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and his party's presence in parts of Fata.

What is also clear is that across the spectrum of the country's political leadership, there are very real and disturbing threats to the lives of politicians for any number of reasons.

Returning to Quetta, however, the signs are ominous. The attack against the Hazaras and the JUI-F chief in particular come in the run-up to Muharram, when security worries and religious sensitivities tend to spike.

The first priority of the provincial and federal governments and the law-enforcement and security apparatus should be to urgently reassess any and all plans for keeping the peace in Quetta in the uniquely challenging weeks ahead. Else, the forgotten problems of Quetta could burn right through to the front of the national stage.

Published in Dawn, October 24th, 2014

Food insecurity looms

THE recurrence of extreme weather phenomena in Pakistan appears to be adding to food insecurity concerns in the country.

As the findings of a survey — conducted by the National Disaster Management Authority and the UN — examining the effects of September's floods in Punjab show, the deluge has affected standing crops that were ready for harvesting, while food stocks have also been hit.

The study, which focused on five Punjab districts, says around 77pc of crops in the area were damaged, with Multan and Jhang suffering the most. These two districts, along with Chiniot, also witnessed food stock losses of around 50pc. The report says that prior to the floods all five districts were considered food secure.

Some studies suggest that up to 50pc of Pakistan's population may be food insecure. This is mainly due to lack of access to food, as the high cost of edibles takes them beyond the reach of people's purchasing power. However, when natural disasters strike, the situation is aggravated.

In the aftermath of the floods, the economy might be affected as exports suffer, but the greater threat is to the local people whose purchasing power is dealt a blow because with no crops left to sell, their income is reduced.

The situation should prompt the state into preparing a plan that can address food security issues during emergencies, as well as extending a helping hand to families that cannot access adequate nutrition due to financial constraints.

Perhaps establishing a network of food banks can address this problem. This can be done on a district-wise basis so that food is quickly dispatched to those most at risk. Only the state has the infrastructure — especially where warehousing and transport are concerned — to pull this off, though the private sector can be brought in to ensure that food storage and distribution is done in an effective and transparent manner.

Considering there is enough food to go around, it will be inexcusable if efforts are not made to ensure it reaches the hungry.

Published in Dawn, October 25th, 2014

Governance challenge

IF it leads to an improvement in governance then it is always better late than never — but what exactly does Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif have in mind when it comes to summoning the cabinet and requiring each minister to evaluate his own performance against a set of criteria given by the Prime Minister's Office?

Clearly, at the very least, the administration is hoping to send out a message that it is serious about the business of governance, a major political priority given there is universal consensus that the government has failed to meet the high expectations attached to it. But is Mr Sharif really prepared to go beyond theatrical flourishes and take the hard decisions that will be necessary to turn around this government's policy and administrative record?

The process of ministerial self-evaluation that will begin on Oct 28 is hardly a promising starting point: why would any minister with a mind to staying on as minister, even if with another portfolio, self-evaluate his department's performance in any meaningful or critical way that could jeopardise his future?

Far more relevant, then, could be the already completed assessments by the Prime Minister's Office of individual cabinet members.

Yet, even if the prime minister already has before him the world's most blunt, focused and piercing analyses of his entire cabinet, what matters is what he chooses to do next. Specifically, on the personnel front, will he be willing to let go of the old guard that dominates the upper echelons of the party leadership and allow younger, more dynamic and hungrier PML-N parliamentarians to have more seats at the cabinet table and a greater voice?

A cabinet reshuffle is essential — the anaemic results over the first 16 months of a five-year term demand that — but if it means getting the same old faces to switch portfolios, then governance can hardly be expected to improve. But there is a subsequent, possibly bigger problem — assuming a cabinet reshuffle does lead to more dynamism and new faces.

What is the overall policy direction that the ministers will be following? Getting to grips with administration alone — running a ministry effectively, ensuring targets are achieved, being able to see projects through to completion — is simply not adequate anymore.

Serious and meaningful structural reforms are needed to put state and society on a more stable, growth-orientated and equitable path. But reforms have not been part of the government's agenda so far. Is the prime minister willing to change that?

Information law

Editorial

THE Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act 2013 has left its mark. On Friday, the provincial information commission handed out its first penalty for violation of the act, ordering the EDO, education, in Vehari to pay a fine equalling two months of his salary for his indifference. In June this year, a government school teacher in Vehari had invoked the law to seek some material from the executive district officer: a copy of an inquiry report against the teacher and a seniority list of teachers. The request was not entertained and after the information commissioner was moved, the EDO failed to respond to the repeated calls to explain his position. This led eventually to the fine, and the setting of an example that should put government officials in the province on alert.

For an office that has yet to be given a budget and a place to operate from, the information commission in Punjab has begun on a promising note. Its formation after Khyber Pakhtunkhwa established a precedent for such a commission was much needed. There was considerable pressure for its creation from within and outside. The effort finally bore fruit late last year, with the focus now shifting to its effective implementation. The commission has so far been working on the sidelines, and has not really been generating the kind of excitement that such an initiative deserves to boost people's confidence in the working of the system. But if the government was a little too relaxed or reluctant in facilitating the functioning of

the commission, the determination the latter has shown in dealing with this case in Vehari should now earn it the required official backing. Transparency and access to information are essential to tackling the growing demand of Pakistanis for better governance. The Punjab commission has 17 other complaints pending. These are crucial early cases that are to set the course for Punjab and the rest of the country. They must get the attention of everyone around.

Published in Dawn, October 26th, 2014

A familiar spat

A STEADY war of words between the PPP and MQM has been escalating over the past few days, which has caused the Muttahida to bid adieu to the PPP as its coalition partner in the Sindh, Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan governments. The MQM-PPP relationship has never been an easy one, ever since the Muttahida emerged as a major political force in urban Sindh in the 1980s. There have been periods of mutual tolerance, as well as phases when both parties have been locked in bitter opposition. The latest spat seems to have been sparked by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's comments targeted at Altaf Hussain; following the PPP's Oct 18 rally in Karachi the Muttahida left the Sindh government as it did not take kindly to the PPP chief's criticism of Mr Hussain. The situation was already tense as PPP leader

Khursheed Shah had, before the rally, termed the word 'mohajir' (immigrant) an 'expletive'. Amidst the sniping, the MQM upped the ante when, during Friday's Sindh Assembly session, a Muttahida lawmaker demanded the creation of a 'Mohajir' province as, according to him, Urdu speakers in Sindh were subjected to 'discrimination'. The PPP's response to this was unambiguous: no division of Sindh.

Both parties must realise that statements and sound bites should not determine the course of politics. Khursheed Shah's statement was both ill-advised and ill-timed. The MQM should realise it was only a statement and leave it at that. Filing a legal application against Mr Shah for blasphemy — a course of action usually taken by hard-line religious elements the MQM itself often rails against — is unnecessary and sets a dangerous precedent. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari should also refrain from making antagonistic remarks. Yet what is particularly sad is that whenever political differences between both parties emerge, they bring ethnic and communal issues into the discourse. The PPP should also perhaps further clarify its stand on new provinces, for while it opposes the division of Sindh, it supports carving out a Seraiki province from Punjab. Meanwhile, the MQM should reconsider its policy of resorting to extreme measures — such as calling for the division of Sindh on an ethnic basis — every time it feels slighted. While the political rhetoric continues and both parties blow hot and cold, after the dust settles bitterness on ethnic grounds among Sindh's communities remains. The PPP and MQM need to work out a modus vivendi that would allow them to settle political differences without stoking divisive issues.

Published in Dawn, October 26th, 2014

Asia spawns a bank

PAKISTAN signed on a historic dotted line this week. Finance Minister Ishaq Dar put his signature on the formation of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank and Pakistan became a member of a new line of development banks coming out of China that are looking to break the monopoly the advanced industrial West has enjoyed in running the world's multilateral institutions. Although Pakistan is not a contributing member, in the sense that the country will not be contributing any funds to the bank's capital base, it will be able to draw resources from the bank once it becomes operational. This will give the country an alternative to the World Bank and Asian Development Bank that have been traditional partners for financing infrastructure initiatives here since at least the 1960s. Breaking the West's monopoly in this field might be the bank's biggest legacy, if it succeeds in taking off. Since Pakistan has been a habitual borrower from multilateral agencies that were created in the historic Bretton Woods accord in the aftermath of the Second World War, the appearance of a new entrant in the field could be a development of great importance.

There is no guarantee that the bank will succeed, though. Once in operation, with a capital injection of \$50bn

entirely from China's mammoth reserves, there will come a host of complications that have bedevilled multilateral lending since at least the 1980s. First amongst these will be deciding the economic thinking that will guide the bank's lending priorities. Ever since the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s, the IMF and World Bank have both struggled with the question of lending to countries whose fiscal and external difficulties are chronic in nature, and tied to other economic weaknesses such as limited export competitiveness and massive debt profiles that necessitate subsidised bailout schemes. In addition, there has been a tendency to use these multilateral lenders as glorified ATM machines, and leverage geopolitical clout to soften the terms on which they lend.

The Asian bank now inherits this search for a viable multilateral lending paradigm. Early reports suggest the bank will "streamline" its lending — meaning conditionalities might be minimal — but how will it deal with the problem of chronic users of its resources? Will it have the muscle to push pro-growth policies onto its borrowers? It is a good thing that the free market orthodoxy peddled by the World Bank and IMF for decades now will meet a competitor, but does the Asian bank and its backers have a more viable alternative? The appearance of the bank is being rightly celebrated in some circles as the first blow to the institutional architecture which the advanced industrial West has used to exercise its hegemony across the world. But the real celebrations should be kept on hold till more is known about the modus operandi of the bank, and how it will structure the terms of lending.

Published in Dawn, October 26th, 2014

Predatory cities

OUR cities are devouring the hinterlands with a voracious appetite. More than 3,000 acres of agricultural land have been used for housing colonies in district Peshawar in the last 13 years, according to data provided to the provincial assembly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by the revenue minister on Friday.

The trend is not restricted to Peshawar. The revenue minister also provided figures for Nowshera, where almost a third of the city's agricultural hinterland has been parcelled out for housing colonies.

Around Punjab and Sindh as well, one finds sprouting housing colonies coming up on agricultural land. In part, the trend is fed by a lack of any law to prevent spiralling construction on agricultural land. But in large measure, the trend is also fed by pools of black money accumulating in the informal sector that is searching for profitable avenues for investment — and speculation in land provides the perfect outlet. Equally, the trend is the product of poor zoning to channel and guide the growth of urbanisation in the midst of a growing population.

Many of the housing colonies are being built on prime agricultural land that is rendered unproductive since the colonies wait for years for infrastructure including electricity, sewerage systems, water and gas.

The main purpose behind these colonies in most cases is simply to trade files. The development work is left to languish for years. Eating up fertile and productive land for speculative purposes such as this carries a double cost.

First, it destroys productive land by turning it into a chip in a gambling enterprise. Second, it saps energy from any attempt to formulate a coherent response to the massive and growing deficit in housing units for urban dwellers, particularly the poor who are left at the mercy of the land mafia.

It is imperative to bring this trend under control, through laws that protect agricultural land, and also to ensure proper zoning in cities and arrest the accumulation of vast holdings of black money in the informal sector.

Published in Dawn, October 27th, 2014

Saarc summitry

THE leaders of Saarc are scheduled to meet in Nepal at a time when civilian deaths resulting from skirmishes between India and Pakistan on the Line of Control and the Working Boundary have cast a dark shadow over South Asia.

The guns may perhaps fall silent when the summit conference is held, but that is more likely to mean respite rather than a long-term solution to the problems that obstruct a more vibrant and cooperation-oriented relationship among the member countries.

Accepting the Nepalese prime minister's invitation to attend the conference in his country on Nov 26-27, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reiterated his desire for greater economic cooperation among the "major countries" of the South Asian forum. Earlier, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, too, had pleaded for greater cooperation among Saarc nations to alleviate poverty.

This is the same Mr Modi who has upped the ante in Kashmir by giving carte blanche to his troops for a higher force level to 'retaliate' against Pakistan.

Founded 29 years ago, Saarc should have been a going concern by now; instead it has not even managed to hold annual summit conferences regularly.

In contrast, we have the enviable examples of such regional blocs as Asean, the African Union and the

Organisation of American States, not to speak of the miracle that is the European Union. All that Saarc has done all these decades is to come up with a plethora of pious resolutions which have remained confined to paper.

The 1990 conference in the Maldives launched two major projects for “organised tourism” and “special travel documents” providing for visa liberalisation for certain categories of visitors, but nothing practical was done.

Last week, Saarc energy ministers met in New Delhi and finalised the framework for cooperation to share technology in renewable energy and pricing mechanisms. But it remains to be seen whether there will be progress on this vital sector.

Given the fact that the Saarc bloc comprises 23pc of the world’s population, the scope for trade and economic growth is enormous. But the basic issue is the mistrust between its two major powers, Pakistan and India, and the latter’s dominating attitude.

A regional grouping can work in an atmosphere free from duress and coercion. But, sadly, this is lacking in South Asia. Social dividends from trade can provide the impetus for cooperation, but Saarc’s political leadership has shown a lack of will to turn the regional grouping into a dynamic entity.

Published in Dawn, October 27th, 2014

Textbook tinkering

IF it is obvious that Pakistan — its population and its relations with the rest of the world — is in grave danger thanks to the growing presence of polio, it is also clear that neither the centre nor the provincial administrations have taken any action to prove they care about the threat.

On Saturday came a report by the Independent Monitoring Board of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. It is a damning indictment of our failure to battle the “Pakistan poliovirus”.

The latter is being transported abroad, giving us the dubious distinction of harbouring 80pc of the world’s polio cases. The report has called domestic efforts to tackle the challenge a “disaster”, adding that “nothing short of transformative action will do”.

What has the state’s response been to this clarion call? As reported on Monday, Minister of State for National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination Saira Afzal Tarar said that “since the IMB report was issued over the weekend, we have not been able to review its recommendations thoroughly”.

A high-level meeting will be called “in a day or two”, she further promised, before reiterating that Pakistan knew best which of the IMB’s recommendations should be implemented.

If Pakistan does indeed know best, why has the polio eradication initiative — spread over two decades and having soaked up millions upon millions of dollars given largely by international donors — produced such an impressive state of shambles?

Pakistan is the only country where the virus is spreading, and as the IMB said in a letter to the Unicef executive director, if this country is not somehow induced into urgently implementing its recommendations, “hundreds of millions of dollars [would have to be] spent every year solely to keep [the] Pakistan poliovirus out of other countries”.

There are too many serious questions. Why are there cases of children having succumbed to the virus even though they had received the OPV? Possible answer: because the follow-up dosage schedule was not followed.

If access to children in North and South Waziristan made vaccination difficult, why do tens of thousands remain unvaccinated even though, having fled the military operation, they are now mainly housed in IDP camps in accessible areas?

Perhaps because the state’s coordination has been poor. Why is the virus surfacing in areas earlier thought to be polio-free, such as Punjab and Balochistan?

We do know that the central and provincial governments’ infrastructure is in utter disarray. Why are there still refusals in urban areas such as Karachi? Because nowhere do we see the government making any

concerted effort to take control of the narrative and right the wrongs the vaccination campaign has suffered at the hands of various actors.

The picture is dismal, and the sluggishness of the authorities shocking. Currently, it is anybody’s guess what it will take to jolt the state out of its torpor. Meanwhile, other countries might start to pull up their drawbridges.

Published in Dawn, October 28th, 2014

Talks with the Taliban

THE state is talking to the Taliban again — but this time in rather different circumstances.

The last time the government tried to negotiate with the banned TTP, it did so from a position of weakness: the TTP was in the ascendant, the TTP was regularly attacking state and society and the TTP was the one issuing preconditions. Now though, as the government negotiates with a breakaway Mehsud faction of the TTP, there are marked differences.

For one, the military operation in North Waziristan Agency has scattered the TTP and denied it a vital base from which to organise and plot attacks against Pakistan.

For another, the state is attempting a dual track of dialogue and fighting — exactly what should have happened before, given that keeping the pressure on militants could cause them to yield at the negotiating table more quickly and also abide by any agreement reached.

As for the possibility of a negotiated peace with certain sections of the Taliban, the priority of the state should be to ensure the Taliban factions are not simply looking to buy time to regroup, reorganise and, eventually, emerge to challenge the state again. And while there is nothing inherently wrong in seeking to negotiate with any enemy, there need to be certain red lines.

For one, many of the groups that have, over the years, reached a settlement with the state have tended to do so while simultaneously vowing to take their fight outside the territorial boundaries of Pakistan. That usually has meant concentrating on neighbouring Afghanistan in recent times. But that never has been, and certainly is not now, in Pakistan's overall security interests.

Negotiations must not allow militant groups to continue to exist on Pakistani soil with a mission of destabilising neighbouring countries or even beyond.

At the same time, the Pakistani state should impress on the Afghan government that the problem of reverse sanctuaries — Pakistani militants hiding out in border regions of Afghanistan from where they plot and organise attacks inside Pakistan — cannot be allowed to grow.

Time and again Afghan and Pakistani officials insist that the only way to ensure regional stability and peace is to eliminate all sanctuaries, but then quietly do things — or look the other way in times of crisis — that nudge peace and stability a little further out of reach. Militants are a danger to everyone. Allowing some to survive if they focus elsewhere is not a winning strategy.

Published in Dawn, October 29th, 2014

Afghan reconciliation

THE importance — or rather, the lack thereof — of the visit of US Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan Dan Feldman to Islamabad this week can be gauged from the press note his office put out on Oct 27.

Barely three perfunctory lines are dedicated to the Pakistan visit; while five lines are reserved for the next leg of the trip — China — with words like 'senior', 'key' and 'important' sprinkled liberally across the China-related part of the statement. With that hardly overwhelming pre-trip billing, the visit itself passed off in a welter of platitudes.

The US is committed to Pakistan; but assistance is going to be dramatically scaled back. The US wants more trade with Pakistan; but there is no mention of how trade concessions will be enacted.

The US is not abandoning Afghanistan; but US language on Afghanistan seems increasingly noncommittal. And the US wants the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan to move forward; but is not really willing to do anything about it.

Perhaps the greatest worry about the increasing distance the US seems to be putting between itself and this region is what will happen on the Taliban front.

Unable — at times unwilling — to draw the Afghan Taliban into talks over the years, the US seems content to ignore the problem and virtually treats it as one that the Afghan government has to solve on its own, or perhaps with some Pakistani input.

The Taliban, meanwhile, appear to view the massive drawdown of foreign troops as a victory for themselves as they make gains in the more contested regions, with foreign troops withdrawing and the Afghan National Security Forces unwilling or unable to exert control over swathes of Afghanistan's territory.

How does it help a reconciliation process if one side believes, and has reason to, that it can simply take by force what it cannot secure at the negotiating table? Pushing reconciliation further down the list of priorities — as appears to have happened given the fraught Afghan presidential transition and the diversion of the US foreign policy establishment's attention to other areas — only sets up a more complicated problem for the region: dealing with the Taliban just as the latter believe they have defeated not one, but two superpowers in three decades.

The right course of action, never the easiest, remains well known — Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US need to work together to find a peaceful settlement with the Afghan Taliban.

Published in Dawn, October 30th, 2014

Privatisation restarts

IN an important policy address before the International Investment Conference, the government has reiterated its resolve to follow through on its privatisation agenda, which has suffered some delays on account of the PTI and PAT protests.

From the presentations made by the ministers for finance and privatisation, it appears the government is making the sale of state-owned enterprises a central plank in its programme to revive the economy.

The poor performance of the state-owned enterprises, headlined by massive inefficiencies in the power sector as well as accumulating losses in PIA and Pakistan Steel, are reason enough to agree that the government should now pull out of the business of operating commercial enterprises.

However, there are some very important public interest issues at stake that must be catered for, something that was lacking in the previous round.

Transparency in the valuation of the companies is not difficult in an age when the accumulated experience of two decades of privatisation around the world has taught us enough on how to generate reference prices and conduct auctions.

What needs to be learned, though, is the importance of safeguarding the public interest to ensure quality of service delivery post-privatisation. Mohammad Zubair, the privatisation minister, referred to the “healthy banking industry” today as an example of the benefits of privatisation. Unfortunately, he is only half correct.

It is true that the banking system is no longer choked with loans gone bad as it was in the era of nationalised banks. But it is just as true that our banks have almost totally eschewed all interest in risk assessment and lending to private-sector businesses, preferring to bask in the risk-free environment of lending to government.

What is more, they are rolling up their branch network in the rural areas, and have relaxed their efforts to increase their depository base, preferring to let money come in on autopilot instead.

In the power sector, the privatisation of KESC turned into a disaster almost immediately following its sale in 2004. The present management has succeeded in lifting the enterprise into profit, but its use of a highly controversial method to prioritise the provision of electricity to high-recovery areas remains problematic, principally because it skews the allocation of a vital resource towards the rich and away from the poor.

The method is commercially effective undoubtedly, but raises profound moral questions where the public interest is concerned. This is the biggest lesson that our past experience with privatisation has taught us.

Once privatised, these enterprises swivel quickly towards serving the needs of the elites only as part of a commercial strategy to pursue low-hanging fruit, and disregard the public interest.

Now that the process is about to start again after an eight-year hiatus, it is worth asking what is being done to guard against a repeat of these failures this time round.

Published in Dawn, October 30th, 2014

Tax deadline

T would not be a bad idea to extend the filing deadline for taxes by a few more weeks. The e-filing system may be a much-needed innovation, but let’s admit that we are still trying to make it work properly.

The Karachi Tax Bar Association has made a list of failings in the system and called for the deadline to be moved forward, while many people are struggling with its complexities.

Getting used to the system will take a little more time, and an extension would help the message that the Federal Board of Revenue has been sending out on the benefits of filing to reach more people.

October, 2014

The government is to be commended for taking steps to encourage filing, including the incentives in the tax code regarding withholding taxes as well as publication of the list of filers.

Last year, the deadline was extended till Dec 16, and it is hard to argue that it resulted in any lost revenue for the state.

Industry and salaried people are the backbone of our country's revenue generation, and leaders from both sides of that divide have pleaded for a little more time.

The powerful Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry has also asked for more time to familiarise itself with the system. Besides, tax forms in many places were not available till well into September so many people are getting their first look at a new system very close to the deadline.

Since many businesses are still tallying up their losses from the general slowdown in the economy, as well as the disruptive impact of the floods and protests, it would be a good idea to give them a little more time to do their calculations accurately instead of having to deal with errors through audit at a later stage.

It is important for everyone to make every effort to file their returns though, and extensions should not be seen as an excuse to evade this obligation.

Published in Dawn, October 31st, 2014