

# DAWN



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

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**Compiled & Edited By Shahbaz Shakeel (Online Content Manager)**



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## Rape sentence

THE sins committed by men expiated by the sacrifices of women — it is a story as old as time.

And one that is found even now in pockets of the subcontinent as a shared heritage of injustice and oppression. This time it is India from where another such tale has emerged.

An informal, all-male village council in Uttar Pradesh has ordered the rape of two young sisters after their brother eloped with a married woman from a higher caste.

*Take a look: [Indian village council orders rape of two sisters for brother's elopement](#)*

The panchayat also directed that the girls be paraded naked with their faces blackened. Fearing the outcome, the girls and their family, who belong to the Dalit caste, have fled their village for New Delhi. It seems that the couple whose elopement triggered the sequence of events had been in love for some time but the girl's family, unwilling to countenance their union, had forced her into marriage after finding a more 'suitable' match.

Twisted notions of justice as that which underlie the panchayat's decision in India spring from an antediluvian patriarchy that is equally well entrenched on this side of the border.

The social stratification in the more conservative areas of Pakistan is nearly as formalised as the Hindu caste system and

as pernicious; in the sphere of sexual morals, both systems place the burden of upholding family 'honour' almost entirely upon women.

The outcome, often decided by jirgas headed by tribal elders, can range from ordering honour killings and blatant sexual violence to giving girls or women as compensation to settle disputes. Who can forget the case of Mukhtar Mai, gang-raped on the orders of a village council in 2002 as recompense for an alleged transgression by her brother?

There have been many other such instances. Although a mix of greater awareness through media coverage, improved legislation and judicial activism has resulted in a decline in such cases, we cannot be complacent. Systems that disempower women do not cede space easily.

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## PMDC crisis

NO reliable model has resulted from the country's experiment of establishing organisations to look after and discipline professionals in their field without strict state supervision.

Adjustments — and promises — continue to be made amid interventions, A stance away. In recent times, the affairs of the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council have been deemed complicated enough to require some corrective measures initiated by the Islamabad High Court.

The council had been hit by problems successively and often of scandalous proportions, such as the unmonitored mushroom growth of private colleges that were sometimes accused of functioning as cheap and incompetent degree-awarding mafias.

The face-off between PMDC and the government persisted at the cost of the people and the reputation of the medical profession. The fact that the ministry has been able to secure some say in the working of the PMDC is testament to the difficulties Pakistan is faced with in finding the right formula wherein professionals are expected to act as their own monitors.

All that can be hoped for is that the search for an ideal where checks and balances are offered by the profession itself has not been put on hold. In fact, let us hope that such a search has entered a new phase.

The result of the Islamabad High Court's intervention in the dispute between the National Health Services and the PMDC was an ordinance.

The latter abolished the PMDC executive council and placed the organisation in the temporary care of a management committee.

The ordinance seeks to reduce the number of executive council members by about two-thirds, to just 35. Twenty of them will be elected with 15 nominated (ex-officio) members joining on the basis of their expertise in different fields.

There will be one representative each from the public-sector colleges in the four provinces, Fata and Islamabad. Private colleges in the four provinces, Fata and Islamabad Capital Territory will send one representative each.

The government promises to hold the election for a new executive council within 120 days — to be supervised by a representative of the chief justice of Pakistan. The drastic cut in numbers ought to lead to some clarity but the solution will require much more.

It will require a deep, long and hard struggle by a new-look and hopefully reinvigorated PMDC that is expected to be functioning a few months down the road.

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## The ‘do more’ mantra — again

US NATIONAL Security Adviser Susan Rice’s visit to Islamabad may have officially been to extend an invitation to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to visit the White House next month, but there appears to have been a good deal of other business conducted too.

Unhappily, the old do-more mantra was trotted out again — do more, Ms Rice is reported to have told her Pakistani hosts, against the Haqqani Network. Perhaps this was to be expected, the withholding of the latest tranche of Coalition Support Funds being an early indication that the White House considers Pakistan to be directly or indirectly responsible for the surge of attacks in Kabul following news of Mullah Omar’s death.

*Also read: [US calls for tough action against Haqqani network](#)*

Yet, that allegation is an extraordinary turnaround from the praise heaped on Pakistan for demonstrating that it can and will nudge the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table with the Afghan government. Moreover, in that first round of talks the Haqqani Network sent a representative to the talks — a representative who participated in the presence of a US government observer.

Surely, the death of Mullah Omar alone would not have forced a rethink of the Pakistani state’s Afghan policy in such quick order. It does appear that the Americans have let their

frustrations with the state of affairs inside Afghanistan get the better of them.

The surge in Taliban attacks, and especially several significant ones inside Kabul, after the news of Mullah Omar’s death was revealed to the world, and a succession struggle broke out causing Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to lash out at Pakistan.

More importantly though, the sequence of events has left the hopes for a next round of talks in shreds. Perhaps, then, the White House is attempting a balancing act — placating the Afghan government, while simultaneously increasing the pressure on Pakistan in the hope that the talks’ process can be resumed as quickly as possible.

That still leaves an obvious contradiction, however: if the US wants Pakistan to distance itself from the Haqqanis further, the Haqqanis are now firmly integrated into the very leadership structure of the Afghan Taliban.

After an uncertain few weeks, it does appear that Mullah Mansour is beginning to consolidate his position. Are the Americans really asking Pakistan to put pressure on a shaky new Afghan Taliban leadership to eject the Haqqanis from the inner circle? Can Mullah Mansour even do that without risking another round of acute uncertainty? Or does the American demand on the Haqqanis amount to an admission that talks are not in fact a priority anymore?

Time and again it has become apparent that the US policy on Afghanistan is muddled and shaped by short-term agendas. The real focus in Afghanistan should be on the resumption of talks

at the earliest. Suggesting to Pakistan that it is once again up to its old tricks hardly seems a recipe for success.

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## Missing PPP leader

ASIF Ali Zardari, former president of Pakistan and still PPP supremo, wants to be heard loud and clear, but he does not appear particularly concerned about being seen leading or being seen at all.

Just where is the PPP boss while the party is facing a crisis in Sindh? Sometimes in Dubai, occasionally in London — but never in Karachi or some other part of Sindh, or even Pakistan for that matter. Why? There is no easily explicable reason, lending credence to many of the conspiracy theories ricocheting around the country.

*Also read: [Nawaz Sharif has reverted to revenge politics of the 90s: Zardari](#)*

Is Mr Zardari afraid that he will be arrested if he travels to and stays inside Pakistan? If so, the bravado about having faced great hardships in the past and being willing to face them again if necessary would be just that — bravado.

While Mr Zardari thunders from foreign shores against the PML-N government, it is the PPP leaders and rank and file

who have remained behind in Sindh who are feeling the pressure.

At this stage, the perception that Mr Zardari has fled Pakistan — leaving associates to deal with the fallout of the corruption that is being unearthed in Sindh by the military establishment — is near impossible to rebut.

Even more dispiriting for the PPP is that its leader appears to have no strategy or plan for dealing with the crisis that the party is slowly being engulfed in. Consider that in mid-June, when the army leadership first made direct references to the problem of corruption at the very highest political levels in Sindh, Mr Zardari lashed out at the army and denounced it for stepping outside its domain.

Now, the former president has decided to praise the army and instead attack Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his government. And attack the PML-N how?

The screed against the PML-N and Prime Minister Sharif centres on allegations of corruption, mis-governance and worse by the PML-N leadership. There is no attempt made by the PPP supremo to even address the deeply problematic questions raised about corruption and misrule in Sindh.

All Mr Zardari appears to have to say in his and his inner circle's defence is that others are tainted too. It is a sorry sight — the PPP left to twist in the wind in Sindh while its leader does little more than rage from abroad.

As ever, it is not just one side that has abdicated its responsibilities. What really can be said about the PML-N



government's handling of the operation in Sindh? The government and its spokespersons barely pretend anymore that the political government is any way in control of or even shaping the contours of the operation that began with Karachi but is now clearly suffering from mission creep.

The PML-N may have shown restraint in the face of Mr Zardari's provocation, but the government appears powerless to do anything about the ever-lengthening shadow of the establishment.

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## Taxing oil

THE absurdity of lowering the price of oil while raising the taxes levied has highlighted the state's fragile revenue base.

One would have thought that the sharp declines in the price of oil all of last year would be a welcome development for a country such as Pakistan, where oil makes up almost a third of the total import bill.

The declines have brought some comfort to the external account and helped build reserves. But the downside of the declines has come in the form of revenue loss, as well as difficulties in getting oil companies to maintain stocks for fear of suffering inventory losses.

*Also read: [Gas tariff increased by up to 67pc](#)*

Ironically enough, on the same day as the country digested news of the double movement in the price of oil, PSO announced its financial results, telling us that due to a 46pc price decline in the international market, the company saw a rise in the sales volume, but a 21pc drop in sales turnover and a sharp drop of 68pc in after-tax profitability.

Fears of revenue loss have given us absurd movements where price declines are offset by hikes in taxes. This is the third time we have seen this government resort to such tactics, the first time being in December and the second in February.

It is understandable that the government would feel compelled to do this since taxes on oil make up a significant share of the total revenues. The taxes have been hiked at the pump not only to offset price declines, but also to help bridge revenue shortfalls, as happened in May when a regulatory duty and a hike in GST were passed just to help meet the revenue target.

In the power sector too, surcharges have been imposed to reduce the impact of a downward revision of oil prices on the power tariff, and hence government revenue. In June, a commitment was given to the IMF that only limited amounts of the decline in the oil price would be passed through to the consumers to minimise the adverse revenue impact. It is dismaying to witness this, primarily because there was a commitment made, when domestic pump prices were fixed to international prices, that all movements in international prices would be reflected at the pump.

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Clearly, that commitment has proved untenable to deliver on, and the reason for this is that we have failed to bring about the required reforms to diversify the revenue base of the state.

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## Talk of war

THE emotions against India find ever more powerful expressions at all kinds of forums with the passage of time. Many Pakistanis angered at the reports of Indian aggression on the borders are keen on letting their neighbour know that they are not overawed by the persistent firing from the other side that has led to the loss of precious lives here.

In fact, the instinct is to outdo the other in issuing menacing threats. Understandable as the ire against India's aggressive tactics is, it has a very intimidating effect on those who have taken upon them the arduous and very risky job of warning people against the dangers inherent in war, war-mongering or even pure brinkmanship.

*Also read: [Heavy losses will be inflicted on India if war imposed on Pakistan: Asif](#)*

It is difficult to advise restraint to a media person who is bent upon mocking the enemy in the crudest of manners. If this task puts one's own patriotism to the severest of tests, provocative

remarks by responsible appointees of the state cast a gloom from which there is no escape.

Take Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, who has reacted with much sound and fury to the Indian provocation along the Working Boundary in recent days — with some pointing out that his anti-India, 'pro-war' outpourings are an attempt to wipe off the residue of any unacceptable remarks he might have mistakenly made in the past.

Whatever the case, one hopes that the realisation will dawn that the minister's portfolio is a sensitive one and that he should be a little more circumspect in his choice of words without, in any way, betraying a defensive mindset.

The defence minister has every right to be outraged by the Indian aggression and attitude. But his allusions to the possible use of nuclear weapons time and again, and especially when tensions are so high, are not needed and must be avoided. The message was already conveyed when the trust was reposed in the Pakistan military's ability to teach any adventurer a lesson that would be hard to forget.

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## Undocumented cross-border trade

A FOUR-man commission appointed by the Supreme Court to examine illegal border crossings at Torkham, the main border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan, has returned with a startling claim that up to Rs6bn in revenue is being lost every month due to the undocumented trade taking place there.

The report's findings are controversial, mainly because some members of the commission disagree with the figures. But what is not controversial is that the volume of the undocumented trade taking place at the overland crossing is very large and growing every year.

*Know more: [Nation loses Rs5bn to 6bn a month due to illegal trade at Torkham, SC told](#)*

Getting quantitative estimates of undocumented economic activity is notoriously difficult, but what ought to be readily acceptable to everyone is the large size of undocumented cross-border economic activity taking place along at least three of Pakistan's four borders.

According to an estimate produced a few years ago, the size of the undocumented trade at Torkham, and other crossing points in its vicinity, was \$2.5bn per year.

Today, those involved with drawing up that estimate say the figure could be larger than \$4.5bn. Likewise with India, where an estimate drawn up by researchers at the Sustainable

Development Policy Institute a few years ago put the size of the informal trade close to \$1.7bn (the formal documented trade was \$1.9bn).

Today, that figure, according to the authors of that report, would be much larger due in part to a hike in GST and custom duties in the last budget on precisely those items that are the mainstay of this informal trade. A very similar picture exists on informal trade with Iran.

Clearly, burgeoning regional trade flows are pushing very hard against the myriad obstacles in their path. These obstacles include infrastructure deficiencies, a policy framework that is stacked against freer trade with our neighbouring countries, and security-related considerations.

In short, Pakistan's neglect of its overland trade potential with its neighbours over the years has pushed the burgeoning trade energies into the margins. In this situation, trade continues but without the accompanying benefits to the state of using business relations to build better ties and to reap a revenue windfall in the process.

This is a rather sad reflection on the harm that short-sighted thinking can do. Viewing our neighbours through a lens that is dominated by geopolitical considerations is giving us the worst of both worlds.

It is depriving us of the benefits that closer economic ties can bring to the country, while pushing trade energies into a domain where racketeers thrive and the state is little more than a hapless spectator to a chaotic and uncontrolled expansion in undocumented cross-border trade.

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It is high time we sought to rationalise our overland trade links with our neighbours, and sought to tap the energies bursting at the borders rather than struggling to subordinate them to geopolitical considerations.

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## Suicide attack

THE suicide blast outside the offices of the political administrator in Jamrud, Khyber Agency on Tuesday broke the relative calm in that particular tehsil of the agency this year.

Even otherwise, since the military quietly wrapped up Operation Khyber-II in mid-June, having ejected militants from Bara tehsil and the Tirah subdivision and secured two of three passes linking the Tirah valley to Afghanistan, the agency has been fairly secure.

Yet, the suicide bombing may be part of an emerging pattern that can be traced to an increase in IED attacks in the Mohmand and Bajaur agencies and an uptick in attacks on members of so-called pro-state peace committees.

*Also read: [Four killed, 56 injured in Jamrud suicide attack](#)*

The most likely candidate for orchestrating the recent attacks is the Ahrar faction of the banned TTP, which is believed to have found sanctuary on the Afghan side of the border. That the

military operations in the upper reaches of Fata, and indeed in North Waziristan Agency too, have dislodged militants and caused them to flee to Afghanistan is not really news.

The new aspect may be the effect that the deteriorating Pak-Afghan relationship is having on the ability of anti-Pakistan militants to hide in Afghanistan and strike inside Pakistan.

Has the nosedive in Pak-Afghan relations, the increasing hawkishness on display in Kabul when it comes to Pakistan and a sense of pessimism that the bilateral relationship won't stabilise anytime soon contributed directly or indirectly to the uptick in militant violence in parts of Fata?

Put simply, are the Afghan authorities either turning a blind eye to or possibly encouraging attacks in Fata to retaliate to the surge in bombings and attacks inside Afghan?

Tit-for-tat attacks are not unheard of in the region and it does appear that they may be at play once again. If that is indeed the case, great caution — and an even greater degree of frank discussions — will be needed to help stabilise the Pak-Afghan relationship and clamp down on cross-border militant movements.

Caution is necessary because it is all too easy for another round of damaging accusations and recriminations to break out in public. Frank talk is needed if the two countries are going to be able to address their respective security concerns.

As the dust appears to settle around the collapse of talks between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul, it has become increasingly clear that fundamental issues between Pakistan

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and Afghanistan were not addressed, let alone resolved. That mistake must not be repeated going forward.

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## Abdul Hafiz Pirzada

HISTORY will remember Abdul Hafiz Pirzada, who died in London on Tuesday, for two extraordinary achievements: he piloted the 1973 Constitution, and he had the courage to defy Pakistan's powerful feudal lobby by taxing agricultural income.

He was one of the closest aides of Z.A. Bhutto and was among those who founded the PPP in 1967. A brilliant lawyer, parliamentarian and constitutionalist, Pirzada was involved in some of Pakistan's most intricate and tough legal battles whose outcome had a profound impact on the relationship between the judiciary and the executive.

Until he retired from politics in the 1980s, Pirzada remained with his party through thick and thin, including those dark days when the military led by Ziaul Haq was out to destroy what then was Pakistan's largest political party.

Take a look: [Legal luminary Abdul Hafeez Pirzada passes away](#)

He was among those who defended the ousted prime minister Bhutto when he was tried and finally executed after a verdict that Dorab Patel, one of Pakistan's most eminent jurists, said amounted to "judicial murder". Representing Dr Mubashar Hassan, who had challenged the NRO, Pirzada had the satisfaction of seeing the army-backed law struck down by the Supreme Court.

A law graduate and an MSc in political science, Pirzada belonged to one of Sindh's landowning political families and was the son of Pirzada Abdul Sattar, a Sindh chief minister.

He became a Bhutto acolyte when he entered his chamber and joined politics. He was elected to the National Assembly in 1970, became a federal minister holding several portfolios and played a major role in the framing and passage of the 1973 Constitution, which despite two military interventions has shown resilience.

In June 1977, as finance minister he presented a budget which was a landmark in Pakistan's history because it was for the first time that agricultural income was taxed. His retirement from politics is often attributed to his inability to get along with Benazir Bhutto. Nevertheless his role as one of the fathers of the 1973 Constitution will be remembered by history.

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## President's remarks in China

PRESIDENT Mamnoon Hussain has been a mostly silent, often underwhelming, president so far. Yet, when it comes to the Pak-China relationship, the ceremonial Pakistani president had an unusually public and political message for his more powerful Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping.

President Hussain is reported to have said that most East Turkestan Independence Movement militants — ethnic Uighur Muslims fighting the Chinese state — have been evicted from Pakistan following Operation Zarb-i-Azb.

*Take a look: [Pakistan says "almost all" Uighur militants eliminated](#)*

He added that Pakistan is committed to ensuring the safety and security of Chinese nationals working on various projects here.

The public comments are a measure of how eager the Pakistani state is to assure the Chinese that everything possible is being done to address their security concerns — China does not even officially acknowledge the existence of the separatist movement and the state media made no reference to Mr Hussain's comments.

While the claims are quite possibly true, they do not necessarily reflect a longer-term reality. Since 9/11, the Pakistani state has periodically attempted to evict foreign militants from its soil. Be it through the much-lamented peace deals with so-called pro-state militants, counterterrorism operations in urban areas or direct military operations, the

space for Arabs, Uzbeks, Chechens, Uighurs and militants of sundry other nationalities has progressively shrunk. Since Zarb-i-Azb in particular, the physical space available to foreign, non-Afghan elements has been virtually eliminated. But it is also the case that many are believed to have escaped to Afghanistan — and the correlation between an increased outside militant presence in Afghanistan and violence in, say, the northern parts of the country has not gone unnoticed. What that means then is that while it is possible to dislodge militants from one area or region, it is far more difficult to eliminate them or put an end to their activities altogether. So long as the Pak-Afghan border remains porous, a return to Pakistan of foreign militants cannot be discounted. Particularly in the case of Uighur militants, the lure to return to Pakistan, just as the state tries to ramp up economic linkages with the Xinjiang region, will be strong. Success today should not translate into complacency tomorrow.

There is another aspect to what President Hussain said in Beijing: while he may have conveyed good news, will there ever be a reckoning inside Pakistan of how the problem of foreign militants was allowed to grow to such an extent to begin with? Who were the architects of a security policy that allowed Fata to become an international hub of militancy? Who were the individuals responsible for letting foreign militants wage war against Pakistan and its neighbouring countries? Without accountability, without honestly facing the past, there is rarely irreversible policy change. What the country needs to collectively pledge is that never again will it allow the mistakes of the past to be repeated. But first, those mistakes must be publicly acknowledged.

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## DHA growth

A CASE under way in the Supreme Court has cast light on the rapid growth of Defence Housing Authorities across Punjab and certain accompanying irregularities.

The growth of DHAs, housing societies meant for military officers, in Lahore, Rawalpindi, Bahawalpur and Gujranwala, has developed along two lines.

One is the growth in actual size, and the second is the increase in the powers the authorities have picked up over the years, particularly during military rule.

Over the years, the upscale property developer of the Pakistan Army, which says it works for the “families of martyrs”, has acquired land sometimes in a questionable manner; at other places, it has obtained land that was earmarked for development projects meant to serve the civilian population.

This acquisition has taken place on such a large scale that it has invited scathing comments from the bench.

*Also read: [SC asks Lahore DHA to explain expansion](#)*

Meanwhile, the Punjab government appears to have remained more or less a passive observer of the entire process.

The provincial government has a large role to play in land acquisition and relevant approvals for subsequent development.

In Rawalpindi, for instance, provincial government functionaries did try to object to the grant of land on which the DHA is built. They argued that it was marked for a dam, but were unable to mount any serious challenge to the army’s bid to obtain the land for its property developer.

In other provinces, the sheer scale of growth of DHAs in the cities has inevitably constricted the supply of land that could be used for more affordable housing needed by the larger population. The Punjab government is either too powerless to regulate the pace and direction of land acquisition by this powerful property developer, or too timid to take a stand.

The result is a mushrooming growth of elite housing societies — while affordable housing lags far behind the numbers required for a growing population. It is all the more distressing to see this phenomenon unfold against the backdrop of what the army high command has described as an “existential war” that the country is waging against extremist militant groups.

The government in Punjab has no excuse to dither endlessly as large tracts of land are gobbled up for more speculative investment and servicing elite needs. Apart from taking action to curb this trend, it must announce an even more ambitious plan for allocating land for affordable housing to meet the needs of its citizens.

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## Glacier warnings

WHEN floods hit Chitral this monsoon season, a new danger was discovered. A number of glacial lakes burst their banks and created devastating flash floods in the valleys below.

Known as a Glacial Lake Outburst Flood, the phenomenon is a growing danger in regions affected by acceleration in the melting rate of glaciers.

*Also read: [Glaciers melt to lowest level on record: study](#)*

A few GLOF events have hit Pakistan's mountainous north in the recent past, but the flooding in Chitral saw GLOFs on an unprecedented scale. It is, therefore, heartening to see the Pakistan Meteorological Department inaugurating a programme to develop an early warning system for communities at risk; the PMD's estimate that 36 glacial lakes in Pakistan present a GLOF threat is cause for deep concern, perhaps not for the entire country but certainly for those who live in the areas at risk.

An early warning system has already been installed in Chitral, and another in Gilgit-Baltistan. Moreover, the PMD should make a vigorous effort to learn how effective that system was in the recent floods to ensure that the right lessons are learned to strengthen early warning systems.

*Know more: [Timber mafia blamed for Chitral floods](#)*

But more importantly, it is possible to go beyond early warning systems when looking to mitigate the risks from GLOFs;

programmes that involve other measures should also be looked into.

Small-scale projects have been run in countries such as Nepal and Peru that seek to reduce the likelihood of a GLOF through controlled drainage of lakes at risk.

Perhaps Pakistan can learn from the experiences of these projects too, which can be expensive. However, donor funds are usually available for them.

The inhabitants of the mountainous north, whether Gilgit-Baltistan or KP, have long been neglected by our policymakers, because their needs are unique and population densities are very small.

But the peculiar dangers opening up due to changing weather patterns affect these communities more than most others, and they deserve special focus and attention in developing adaptive strategies to help them cope with the challenges coming their way.

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## Sindh's madressahs

That hard-line madressahs are an essential part of the structure of militancy in Pakistan is no secret.

These institutions provide manpower for many of the country's proscribed sectarian and jihadi groups, as well as logistics and infrastructure, besides promoting an obscurantist worldview.

However, in recent times, the real challenge for the state has been countering radical seminaries, especially in light of the National Action Plan.

There has been some movement in this regard in both Sindh and Punjab. As reported on Friday, "jihadi literature" has been recovered after a madressah hostel was raided in Karachi; the material apparently belonged to a banned militant group and was put up by a student, who is now in custody.

*Know more: [Karachi seminaries' swoop: Jihadi literature seized from madressah](#)*

The raids on seminaries in Sindh have followed disclosures by the Sindh authorities last month that there were 49 madressahs with suspected links to terrorism across the province. Half of the suspected institutions are in Karachi.

Clearly, religious militancy has put down roots in Sindh, particularly in Karachi, as frequent sectarian violence in the metropolis — as well as bloodshed in other districts, such as the devastating Shikarpur imambargah bombing in January — shows.

Hence, the identification of 49 suspected madressahs seems a little surprising. After all, as per official estimates there are over 9,500 seminaries in Sindh; around 3,000 of these — again mostly in Karachi — are unregistered. Therefore, raiding a handful of institutions and picking up a few suspects will have no long-term effect on solving Sindh's militancy problem.

The process needs to be continuous and based on solid intelligence. Perhaps in comparison Sindh has performed better than Punjab in this regard, where 'only' 20 suspected seminaries have been identified. Considering that Punjab is the ideological heartland of many Pakistani sectarian and jihadi militant groups, that number has justifiably raised eyebrows. Whether it is Punjab, Sindh or the other provinces, action against hard-line seminaries must go beyond cosmetic measures and have lasting effects in order to uproot the support structure of militancy.

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## Radio Pakistan Quetta

WHERE the acquisition of potentially lucrative tracts of land is concerned, there is never any shortage of takers in this country.

Recent decades have seen countless acres of land in cities and even in the rural areas taken over to satisfy the never-flagging demand to either convert its use or parcel it out for sale. Historical buildings have been torn down to make way for malls and plazas.

And while it is unarguable that development must take place and the needs of a burgeoning citizenry met, the problem is that in too many instances, the land acquisition decision is based on dubious logic and designed to serve the desires of a select few.

*Know more: [Radio Pakistan to go off air in favour of sports complex](#)*

This pattern seems under way yet again in the finalisation of the Balochistan government's plan, as reported recently, to take over 64 acres of land owned by Radio Pakistan in Quetta which houses its supplementary station and some machinery and medium-wave and short-wave transmission towers.

When the land on Sariab Road was allotted to Radio Pakistan in 1964, it was fairly remote but, by now, the expanding city has caught up with it. It is being said that the location will be used to construct a sports complex and a park, an aim that is laudable if it is ever achieved. Yet is the shutting down of this station the best way forward? There are a few points to consider.

First, this station is being used to broadcast a number of programmes in local languages, and their loss would be inflicting a needless blow on Radio Pakistan's image, to say nothing of leaving audiences bereft.

In its heyday, Radio Pakistan built its reputation and popularity on not just its reach but also its mandate to broadcast, as a public-sector entity, material that would not be commercially successful.

Second, taking down the transmission towers would hamper the Quetta station's broadcast range. Third, while building a sports complex has the contours of political mileage, the fact remains that the government-constructed Shahwani Sports Stadium is located close to this Radio Pakistan installation.

It has the capacity to be further developed, in addition to there being available other large tracts of government-owned land on roads linking to Sariab Road, which can be used for the same purpose.

In fact, creative investments need to be made in this station and Radio Pakistan itself, so that the full potential can be mined of what is now a giant in decline.

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## Solar strides ahead

THE net metering regulations announced for solar and wind power generation is a good step forward, but more will be required in the days to come to accelerate the adoption of renewable power generation in the country.

Net metering allows parties to sell electricity that is generated from a solar panel or a wind turbine back to the national grid, thus causing their meters to operate in reverse at times when they are supplying power to the grid, and forward when they are consuming.

*Also read: [Nepra to promote power generation by consumers](#)*

There are different ways to implement net metering and the way that Nepra has chosen to do it in Pakistan is to buy electricity at the same rate as it is sold. If customers end up pumping more electricity into the grid than they have drawn from it the surplus will be credited to their next bill.

In any case, net metering is an essential step towards the widespread use of solar and wind power solutions by individual consumers, whether in the home, industry or commercial category, and the opening of the door to this solution ought to be welcomed.

A few problems remain however, and Nepra would be well advised to continue refining their offering further. For one, the application procedure for a party to register as a power generator is rather cumbersome; even in the best-case scenario, the whole process is likely to take more than two months.

The amount of discretionary power given to the distribution companies, or DISCOS, in the application process is large and more likely to be used to drag the process out and discourage applicants.

The reluctance of the DISCOS to enter into a net metering arrangement will be the next big hurdle that must be overcome in order to find widespread acceptance for renewable power generation at the point of consumption.

In fact, Nepra ought to work out incentives for both the DISCOS and the applicants to enter into a net metering arrangement.

Beyond the incentives, there are some technical hurdles. During times of load-shedding, for instance, the net metering arrangement will come to a standstill. Considering the long hours of load-shedding in the country, the resultant losses to the customer are likely to be a source of discouragement.

The only other alternative would be to use a battery to store that electricity, which defeats the real benefit of net metering, because power storage using batteries is expensive.

This has been the experience in India, where net metering was introduced last year; unfortunately, it has yet to find widespread acceptance there. No doubt, Nepra ought to be congratulated for finally taking this important step.

But to clinch the deal it will need to think about incentives to kick-start the process, as well as a technical solution to keep the arrangement working during outages.

## Fifty years on

THE 50th anniversary of the Indo-Pak war waged in 1965 is an opportunity to acknowledge and pay thanks for the sacrifices of the men and women who serve in the Pakistani armed forces. Fifty years ago, Pakistan lost nearly 4,000 soldiers. Those staggering losses, however, do not tell the full story. The strategic mistakes of the military leadership aside, the heroism and bravery of the soldiers and pilots who fought to defend Pakistani soil should not be forgotten. To those ordinary armed forces personnel who displayed extraordinary courage, the country will forever owe a debt. Fifty years on, the militant enemy continues to inflict losses on the armed forces. In Operation Zarb-i-Azb alone, several hundred soldiers are believed to have laid down their lives. Rarely has a country called upon its soldiers to sacrifice so much and so often. The determined rank and file, the valiant ordinary soldier — they have been and continue to be Pakistan's heroes.

How best does a country honour its fallen and injured? By honestly and truthfully reckoning with the past — even as it recalls the courage and sacrifices of its defence forces. Fifty years on, both India and Pakistan appear to be in denial. Unwise and disastrous as operations Gibraltar and Grand Slam proved to be — the extraordinarily reckless attempts by the military leadership to try and unfreeze the Kashmir dispute or even militarily wrest India-held Kashmir from India — they did not occur in a vacuum. Specifically, India had refused to negotiate with Pakistan on Kashmir; it attempted to amalgamate India-held Kashmir via the courts and legal instruments; it attempted to grab territory in the Rann of Kutch in the run-up to the 1965 war; and it embarked on a massive

military reorganisation and upgradation after the Sino-Indian war of 1962. All those factors contributed to the anxiety and urgency in Pakistani policy circles. Therein lies a lesson for both countries: when conflicts are allowed to fester, unintended consequences can cause them to reignite. Refusal to learn that lesson had further disastrous consequences: the Indian territory grab in Siachen region in the early 1980s is widely considered to be the genesis of the Kargil conflict a decade and a half later. Unwise decisions tend to have terrible consequences, often years later.

That bi-national failure to learn from history is once again on full display. A jingoistic Indian government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi seems to revel in India's supposed military prowess. Meanwhile, a military stretched and under threat in Pakistan appears more interested in giving a befitting verbal and visual response to India than focusing on the domestic security challenge. It is a familiar, if distressing, cycle. Fifty years ago, Pakistan and India fought a second war, a thoroughly unnecessary one. Fifty years later, civilians continue to die along the Working Boundary and the Line of Control. If calm does prevail, the real challenge would be to end the cyclical nature of Indo-Pak relations.

*Published in Dawn, September 6th, 2015*

## No thaw with Kabul

NATIONAL Security Adviser Sartaj Aziz's visit to Kabul was not expected to produce any breakthroughs — and that is what appears to have happened. Yet, these meetings are important in that they help both sides address issues face-to-face and there is surely a need for a great deal of frank and open discussion between the Pakistani and Afghan governments at the moment. What is worrying though is that President Ashraf Ghani still continues to publicly jibe at Pakistan. While that may improve Mr Ghani's standing at home, it may end up hardening the Pakistani position when it comes to dealing with his government. The two country's security fates remain very much intertwined. As has become apparent, the military operations in Fata, particularly Zarb-i-Azb, dislodged militants from the Pakistani side of the border, but in many cases caused them to move to the Afghan side. At least in part, the surge in militant violence in Afghanistan over the past year is linked to that phenomenon. As for Pakistan, the sanctuary that anti-Pakistan, TTP militants have found in Afghanistan will likely be a source of long-term trouble. If Afghanistan and Pakistan do not cooperate, both will hurt. This is something they must understand.

More confusing though is quite where the possibility of a resumption of talks between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul stands. Is it simply that talks cannot resume because of intra-Taliban trouble or is that the Afghan government is also baulking at talks resuming at the earliest, perhaps in a fit of pique because of the spate of attacks in Kabul? President Ghani needs to reassess his position on talks soon. As has now been proved, Pakistan can and will nudge the Afghan Taliban to the

negotiating table — but surely only if there is a willing negotiating partner on the other side of the table. It may not make sense to Pakistani policymakers to expend capital with the Taliban insisting that they remain open to talks immediately if Kabul itself is not ready to resume dialogue right away. Yet, Pakistan should also understand the core of Mr Ghani's complaint — he cannot be seen to be trying to make peace with the Taliban if they are violently attacking Kabul. Perhaps a fresh round of border management steps and improved intelligence coordination could go some way in restoring trust. The two states have several options to help stabilise ties quickly.

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## MQM deadlock

THE government's efforts to convince the MQM to return to parliament hit a snag on Thursday as the Muttahida broke off parleys in an abrupt fashion. The MQM — which resigned from parliament last month to protest what it considers is the victimisation of its leaders and workers under the cover of the Rangers-led Karachi operation — left the talks as the party felt the prime minister was too "helpless" to address its concerns. The move has surprised the PML-N as well as Maulana Fazlur Rehman, whom the ruling party mandated to negotiate with the MQM.

In the MQM's case, it is not clear what the party seeks to achieve by quitting parliament and closing the avenues of

dialogue. For one thing, it is unfair for the party to accuse the PML-N of non-seriousness where acceptance of its demands is concerned. After all, if the ruling party wished it could have accepted the Muttahida lawmakers' resignations in August. The fact that the federal government has made efforts to engage the MQM appears to show the PML-N's sincerity. For its part, the government should speed up formation of the proposed committee to look into the MQM's genuine grievances about the Karachi operation. The Muttahida, on the other hand, should shed its rigid posture and concentrate on the upcoming LG polls in Sindh. For while the party scrambles to generate coherent responses to the many crises that confront it, its political opponents are taking advantage of the situation and planning to make electoral gains. For example, at a recent meeting in Hyderabad organised by the Jamaat-i-Islami, a number of parties decided to form an anti-MQM electoral alliance to contest LG polls in the Sindh city. Should the Muttahida cede ground by leaving electoral space open, it will have few to blame but itself. To prove it has severed all links with militant elements and is solely concerned with fighting its battles at the ballot box, the MQM needs to formulate a policy for the LG polls.

*Published in Dawn, September 6th, 2015*

## Plight of refugees

THE issue of migrants and refugees trying to reach countries of Western Europe is neither new, nor surprising.

Even so, the sheer numbers of the exodus — overwhelmingly from war-torn Syria but also from other conflict-ridden countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and parts of Africa — recently have forced the world to pay attention to the human dislocation on a scale that is being compared to the largest seen by that region since the Second World War.

The crisis seems to have finally come to a head, even though it took the discovery of the body on a Turkish beach of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi to wake the world up to the suffering.

*Take a look: [Why don't Gulf states accept more refugees?](#)*

This coincided with the Hungarian police taking action against thousands of refugees, many of whom in desperation started walking towards the border.

The issue has sent leaders of the EU nations scrambling towards talks to come up with a cohesive, regional response. But a consensus may be difficult to reach given that sharp divisions have surfaced among the nations over how to approach the refugee crisis — and racist and xenophobic attitudes have not been rare in this regard.

There is also the battle of narratives as to whether this mass of humanity ought to be classed as migrants or refugees. That debate needs to be put to rest. The UN High Commissioner for

Refugees has called it primarily a refugee crisis, noting that “The vast majority of those arriving in Greece come from conflict zones ... and are simply running for their lives”.

On Friday, the agency called for an integrated response strategy that includes “urgent and courageous measures” that range from emergency reception to mass relocation programmes, larger humanitarian and resettlement admission quotas, and expanded visa and sponsorship programmes.

Fortunately, though recalcitrant elements remain, there is hope: for example, the Hungarian government’s surprise decision to provide buses to refugees heading towards Austria.

Much more concrete action needs to be taken. Not the least of these is accelerating efforts to curb violence in the countries from where the refugees are fleeing and correct the destabilisation in which several nations in the West and the East played a role.

In this context, and given the strength of this humanitarian crisis, it is worth asking why rich, stable countries in the Middle East, from Saudi Arabia to the UAE to Qatar, continue to remain silent. Such states, with both the capacity and the wherewithal to absorb refugees, could lead the way for a global response and intervention — were the political will to exist.

The fact that it apparently does not is a sad reflection on the ideas of ‘brotherhood’ that are otherwise so casually bandied about.

This flood of humanity needs succour, and Europe must do all it can to provide it; even so, other countries do not stand absolved of their responsibilities.

*Published in Dawn, September 7th, 2015*

## Fall in bank deposits

LATEST data for the month of July from the State Bank shows a drop in bank deposits held by private-sector businesses amounting to 5.2pc, leading some to suggest that there is a widespread flight into cash or dollars under way as a response to the withholding tax on bank transactions of non-filers announced in the last budget.

Another data series also shows that money appears to be leaving the banking system, as overall deposits have fallen by 68pc since June, while cash in circulation had increased by 158pc till Aug 22.

Some decline in deposits always occurs in the weeks following the budget, mostly as a correction for inflated June numbers as banks pump up their deposits at the close of their financial year.

*Also read: [Non-filer blues](#)*

But this year’s decline is larger than last year’s by 66pc, suggesting this year might be more than routine. It is still

important to be careful when drawing conclusions based on these numbers though.

For example, a closer look reveals that the decline in deposits held by retail and wholesale segments of the business community is not very large, whereas segments like construction and refined petroleum are showing very large declines.

So it's important to know more about where exactly the decline in deposits is taking place before connecting the phenomenon to the traders' protest against the withholding tax.

Nevertheless, some amount of flight may well be taking place due to the withholding tax on bank transactions, but it is difficult to see how the trend can persist for very long.

In fact, the moment gives the government an opportunity to examine informal payment mechanisms that are being substituted for banking instruments, in an attempt to further pursue its own documentation priorities. And even that portion of the money that has been withdrawn from the banking system is more likely to return in the near future because carrying on high volume business through cash or other forms of promissory notes is not sustainable.

The government should stand its ground against the traders' complaints regarding this tax. The myriad complaints coming from the common citizenry — such as pensioners and widows — deserve more attention, although these can be addressed without compromising on the documentation measure.

It would be a shame if a strong documentation measure of this sort were to be rolled back so easily. The government's energies should now be focused on getting the maximum number of people to file their returns this year.

*Published in Dawn, September 7th, 2015*

## Unvaccinated children

THERE is no end to the self-created sufferings of Pakistanis young and old.

A report says some 440,000 Pakistanis under the age of five have not received the polio vaccination — not even a single dose of it.

The data has been gathered by the emergency operations centre in Sindh, the province securing a shameful second position on the list by showing 75,000 children who have remained out of the reach of the vaccination teams.

*Also read: [Over 75,000 children in Sindh never received polio vaccine](#)*

This is shocking especially given the interest that the PPP's young scions of the Bhutto-Zardari line, have been expressing in the anti-polio drive in Sindh.



At the top of the chart, Balochistan is a story unto itself: Some quarter of a million children under the age of five have not been vaccinated against the crippling disease.

The provincial government in Quetta, which claims to have a wider, deeper base among the people, must be as vigilant against the perils posed by polio as it is against any other existing danger.

It is sad but not at all unexpected to find Fata and KP featuring prominently in this ignominious gallery. Punjab is an exception, but while it stands out, the current situation demands it does not become complacent. It must pursue the anti-polio drive vigorously.

Figures showing the prevalence of polio in various areas and data on the number of children who have not been covered by the vaccination programme do lead to some routine analyses.

Quite frequently, and with a lot of logic, it is pointed out that the situation varies from province to province and thus figures about the number of immunised might not be sufficient to project gains or lack of them in a particular area. It can also be argued that whereas these figures might have been gathered over a period of time, of late, the effort against polio has picked up speed, in the face of whatever threats there have been.

The rules haven't changed. A lot of energy must still go into making the drive successful.

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## Broken system, no reforms

OCCASIONALLY, high state functionaries do try and turn the spotlight on the chronic deficiencies of the state.

Unhappily, the diagnoses tend to be rooted more in emotion than pragmatism or structural reforms. Supreme Court Chief Justice Jawwad S. Khawaja has been using his short stint as the nation's top judge to turn the focus on the needs of the people and why the state is failing the citizenry.

*Know more: [Gap between rulers, ruled deepening, says CJ](#)*

To his credit, in a speech over the weekend, Chief Justice Khawaja acknowledged that the judiciary itself has often failed the people over the decades, there being a lack of systematic and equal access to justice in the country.

The chief justice also admitted that the judiciary itself has ignored the task of reforms or even the gathering of basic data pertaining to the judiciary.

To change that — in the words of Chief Justice Khawaja, reduce the gap between the state and the people — the state will have to undergo deep reform.

As Chairman of the Senate Raza Rabbani's comments in the same seminar underscored, it is not just the judiciary that has to reform; for the elected leaders to be more focused on the needs of the people, there has to be an emphasis on accountability too.

Yet, it is all too apparent that reforms form no part of the present government's agenda. Certainly, the other institutions must also share some of the blame.

The superior judiciary, for example, has tried to position itself as a champion of the people, but it does so largely through the use of suo motu powers. In truth, suo motu powers — the superior judiciary's ability to take up of its own accord matters impacting fundamental rights and the public interest — are a reflection of a system that is broken.

It is precisely because the average citizen does not expect to get justice at the lowest tiers of the state that he turns to the superior judiciary for help.

Curiously, the Supreme Court has appeared to encourage the trend of the public turning to it for help rather than trying to improve the dispensation of justice at the lower tiers.

To be sure, the Supreme Court cannot reform the judiciary by itself. That would require the legislative input of parliament and the assistance of the executive.

But neither has the Supreme Court, including the present chief justice, done much to try and build public interest in judicial reforms or try and make it a national priority.

Sadly, where the judiciary is lacking, parliament is failing doubly so. Senate Chairman Raza Rabbani talked of how accountability is deficient in the country — but what is preventing him and his colleagues in the Senate from making that a legislative priority?

The deference that parliament shows to the elected government needs to be reconsidered, especially when the government appears to have no legislative or reform agenda.

*Published in Dawn, September 8th, 2015*

## Sleeper cells in Karachi

A MEGACITY like Karachi does not give up its criminals easily; particularly so when such elements have been allowed to entrench themselves over a long period of time in the very vitals of the metropolis.

On Saturday, the city police chief and a Sindh Rangers representative, among others, addressed a news conference to mark the two-year anniversary of the ongoing operation to restore law and order in Karachi.

The outcome so far indicates that while much has been achieved, and some processes are being put in place to check criminality, much more remains to be done to instil a sense of security among citizens.

*Also read: [Karachi operation: 'Crime down but sleeper cells still exist'](#)*

According to the police chief, the Karachi operation has led to a 70pc drop in heinous crimes including targeted killings, kidnapping for ransom, extortion and other acts of terrorism.

However, he said, mobile phone and motorbike snatching remained a challenge, with the aforementioned crime actually registering an increase. The police chief also conceded that terrorist sleeper cells continued to exist in the city but that law-enforcement agencies were making efforts to track them down.

The Karachi operation needs to be further finessed if the terrorist menace is to be decisively rooted out. Sleeper cells are a means whereby terrorist organisations make space for themselves in a society; these organisations also create sleeper cells as a survival strategy when they are under threat, such as in Karachi at present.

Because these sub-units consist of a few individuals — who sometimes seem to lead ostensibly ‘ordinary’ lives — and maintain only minimal links with their parent organisation, they can be difficult to detect.

Their ability to inflict harm, however, is formidable, especially when they work in tandem with other cells. The teeming urban enclaves and chaotic labyrinth of unregulated settlements on the city outskirts that were a reservoir for criminality until the operation began in September 2013, possibly still offer refuge to such offshoots and the remnants of the terrorism infrastructure from which they draw sustenance.

Top-drawer intelligence is the only way to eliminate the threat that they pose. Notwithstanding the culpability of some elements in the provincial political set-up, it could also be argued that the Rangers-led operation has spread itself too thin by venturing into the domain of white-collar corruption rather than focusing single-mindedly on eliminating terrorist groups.

Moreover, until street crime continues to flourish, no law and order operation can be considered truly successful or sustainable.

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## United for LG polls

ON Sunday, seven political parties announced they would ‘cooperate’ with each other to counter the PML-N in the LG elections in Punjab and Sindh.

On Monday, a PTI spokesman said his party was not looking to enter into any alliance with anyone and that there may only be some seat adjustments. This clarification has little impact.

Seat adjustments or a province-wide partnership, the PTI has shown it is ready to stand shoulder to shoulder with some of those it had set out to dislodge.

*Know more: [Seven opposition parties team up against PML-N for LG polls](#)*

The seven parties that had a meeting in Lahore to explore an anti-PML front include the much-maligned PPP. It was very surprising to see a struggling PPP inclined towards ‘adjustments’ with not only the PTI but also the Jamaat, one of the parties in the huddle.

The positioning of the PPP, incidentally a party Imran Khan has spoken out against in Sindh in recent days, can be understood in the context of its increasing distance with the PML-N. But it was the PTI that stood out, after being the only ‘effective’ opposition in the centre and Punjab.

There were many ready explanations for the strange get-together. One was the poor showing by the PTI and others in the group in the local body elections in the cantonments held recently, most significantly in Punjab.

Secondly, there was the KP example. LG polls in KP, among many other things, were a lesson in how alliances can help contain the major parties in an election.

The PTI won a majority of areas in that province but while the PML-N secured important districts, the alliances ensured that the JUI-F, ANP and even the PPP managed some successes.

The PTI with others in the group might be tempted by that example of pragmatic politics — choosing its company at the risk of tarnishing its reputation as ‘the alternative’.

But then, it’s been a while since the PTI surrendered to the process aimed at turning it into a usual political party ready to make the necessary adjustments.

*Published in Dawn, September 8th, 2015*

## No coverage for Altaf

The order by the Lahore High Court directing print and electronic media regulators to ensure there is no media coverage whatsoever of Altaf Hussain’s speeches and statements is extraordinarily troubling.

The MQM chief has clearly made some incendiary and disturbing speeches in recent times and wiser political counsel does need to prevail on him. But is it in the interests of the superior judiciary, acting on petitions seemingly moved by individuals with a thinly veiled agenda against the MQM and in favour of the military establishment, to be venturing so deep into the domain of what is quite clearly political speech?

*Know more: [Broadcast of Altaf Hussain's images, speeches banned by LHC](#)*

Where Mr Hussain oversteps the mark in terms of language not fit for general TV viewership, a simple delay by a few seconds of live broadcasts can address the problem.

If Mr Hussain says something that is liable to be prosecuted under the law, the individuals or institution assailed by the MQM supremo can approach the courts directly for redress. Surely though, a state-sanctioned ban on coverage of any kind of leader of a mainstream political party is a step too far.

The public has a right to know what a political leader is saying and the leader has a right to reach out to the public.

Unhappily, the MQM has compounded the problems for itself by its historical mistreatment of sections of the media.

Anyone familiar with Mr Hussain's marathon live national broadcasts would also be aware that no other political figure is accorded such extreme deference.

The reason why a leader of a party confined to mostly a sub-region in one province can dominate the national airwaves is an open secret: threats to and intimidation of the media, which has a massive presence and several organisational headquarters in Karachi, has ensured the blanket coverage of Mr Hussain's speeches and statements over the decades.

Yet, a ban cannot and must not be the answer. The state has a duty to protect the freedom of speech — it cannot be seen to be dismantling that very edifice.

Moreover, in decades past, when state media has blocked coverage of particular political parties and their leaders, it is not as if the message did not filter down to the public. Repression breeds sympathy.

In any case, with the proliferation of social media and internet usage, the average citizen has access to any number of platforms from which Mr Hussain's words can be read, heard and accessed. The Supreme Court needs to set matters right.

*Published in Dawn, September 9th, 2015*

## Stock market reeling

THE wild swings in the stock market might be a good thing if they are genuinely due to the regulator clamping down on unethical practices by brokers, something the latter claim.

Over the years, brokers have developed a habit of functioning without any oversight and of indulging in highly risky behaviour that goes beyond what is allowed under the law. And they are doing all that with their clients' money.

There have also been recent cases of brokers making off with their clients' funds when losses from their excessively risky trades mounted.

*Take a look: [Wilful defaulters to face the music, says SECP](#)*

The regulator is duty-bound to protect the interests of the clients and must enforce the rules that bear upon the segregation of funds by brokers, as well as other types of illegal risks being taken by them.

If such action produces wild swings in the market because various parties run for cover, so be it. The regulator should act without fear of the consequences of its actions.

The market needs to find its real valuation level, which would obtain in the absence of illegal and unethical practices, and the whiff of uncertainty plaguing the market these days might be a healthy disruption in that regard.

If the swings do indeed owe themselves to sharper regulatory scrutiny as some are claiming, then they are signs of strengthening of the capital markets and should be temporary. But if they are coming from the volatility of global markets, it becomes all the more important that excessive risk-taking behaviours be curbed to reduce the kinds of vulnerabilities that can result in a catastrophic crash.

The regulator should go further in its actions and also bring behaviours such as manipulative trades and insider trading under scrutiny. Such actions are likely to net some of the bigger fish that make our stock market so volatile and prone to disruption.

The scrutiny of the market's sources of vulnerability should continue, and perhaps even be ramped up further.

*Published in Dawn, September 9th, 2015*

## Pushback against sectarianism

At long last, it seems the state is prepared to confront the evil that is sectarianism, one that has spawned religious violence in various forms over three decades in this country and laid waste to tens of thousands of lives.

The government's newfound resolve emerged during Monday's news conference addressed by Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan after a two-round meeting with religious scholars belonging to an umbrella body representing madressahs from different schools of thought.

The second round of the meeting, at which the army chief and DG ISI were present, was chaired by the prime minister. The interior minister in his news conference said there will be no tolerance for hate speech against any faith or for statements declaring any sect as non-Muslim or its adherents as infidels.

*Also read: [Govt won't spare errant seminaries, ulema told](#)*

In taking this step, the state is effecting no less than a policy change, and a very welcome one. As is now well known, the religious triumphalism that underpins faith-based violence in Pakistan was from the '80s onwards deliberately nurtured by the state to further its strategic regional objectives.

Patronage was extended to groups/organisations espousing jihadist ideologies; in the process, purveyors of bigotry and divisiveness acquired the space to freely propagate their views.

As the extreme right, through the pulpit and the media, intimidated society into submission, the repercussions of this ruinous policy became manifest in sectarian killings, bombing of religious processions and places of worship, lynching of blasphemy suspects, desecration of graves, etc.

Turning back the tide will be a difficult though not impossible task. Some practical measures at the outset will demonstrate the government's sincerity of purpose.

Where hate speech is concerned it has, to its credit, already begun taking action. A number of clerics have been sentenced to prison — some for several years — for inciting violence, and individuals found distributing hate literature have also been convicted.

Graffiti or banners glorifying religious violence or inflaming sectarian sentiments should also be removed. However, the government's apparent resolve to discard the use of some extremists as tools of statecraft will be tested in other, more telling ways.

For example, will there be a clampdown on banned groups who, despite their overt sectarian agendas, have hitherto been allowed to serve as 'cheerleaders' of state policies?

Will religious extremist groups in Balochistan be put out of business or will they continue to serve as proxies to counter the insurgency in the province?

Ultimately, the battle is about changing a mindset, not only that of a people, but also of those who lead them. Long-term measures will determine our future course.

For instance, curricula must emphasise humanity's shared values rather than religious differences, the blasphemy law should be revisited so it cannot be used as a tool of persecution, and so on. The way ahead is clear, if we choose to take it.

*Published in Dawn, September 9th, 2015*

## School fee hikes

WHAT initially came across as useful intervention in the schooling of children appears to have attained the hues of a cartel — that is what can be read into the predicament described by protesters outside Islamabad's National Press Club on Tuesday.

The group spoke up against the inordinate increases in fees of private educational institutions, calling upon the authorities to streamline fee structures.

*Also read: [Demo against private schools 'fee hike'](#)*

They further complained against many private schools' requirement that uniforms and books be bought exclusively from them and the practice of levying other charges under heads such as extracurricular activities and learning aids.

Their grievances must have resonated with the parents of hundreds of thousands of private-school students across the country. There is no doubt about the gravity of the issue, and

the fact that it is not faced only by those whose progeny go to elite schools.

The fact is that over the past couple of decades in particular, the private-school sector has grown to such an extent that it has affected virtually every section of society — regardless of income levels — that has children in school.

Whether the institution charges Rs1,000 a month or less, or even tens of thousands of rupees, unannounced hikes in fees — often by unacceptably large margins — tend to be the norm.

The problem is not that no effort has been made towards regulation. Tuesday's protesters invoked the Islamabad Capital Territory Private Educational Institutions (Registration and Regulation) Act 2013 and called for interventions to rationalise fee structures and clamp down on unfair practices.

In Sindh and Punjab, too, efforts have been made in this regard. However, the mere passing of legislation — as the situation in Islamabad shows — is not enough.

Urgently needed is an effective implementing and regulatory mechanism that acts as a check on the operations of private schools and ensures compliance with standards.

The schools' view is that people are free to send their offspring elsewhere. In practice, though, this is hardly viable given that private schools' associations function to promote mutual interest, and the public-sector education system is in a shambles, both in terms of quality and the pressure on it.

This is a country where the young heavily outnumber the mature, and where enrolment and literacy rates are already abysmal.

Shouldn't the federal and provincial governments' focus be on doing all that is possible to remove barriers to education, while repairing the public-sector education system in earnest?

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## Mainstreaming Fata

THE call by Fata parliamentarians to have the region they represent merged with and administered by the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has once again shone a spotlight on that most ignored of governance, judicial and constitutional issues: the status of Fata as an integral part of Pakistani territory but deliberately kept outside the normal administrative and constitutional scheme of things.

What the Fata parliamentarians have proposed also carries extra significance because the MNAs are directly elected by the people of Fata. As such, the parliamentarians' recommendations carry more weight than the decidedly less representative and anachronistic system of tribal maliks and jirgas.

*Also read: [Tribal lawmakers ask govt to make Fata part of KP](#)*



In truth, however, the parliamentarians have proposed a halfway house: merging Fata and Frontier Regions with KP and administering those areas as a Provincially Administered Tribal Area.

It is quite possible that the call for a separate province altogether, while deemed desirable was considered unfeasible, given the impact that it would have on the federation, from the composition of the Senate to that of bodies such as the Council of Common Interests.

Whether Fata and the Frontier Regions are to be submerged into an existing province or given the standing of an autonomous province, this cannot be denied: the region needs fundamental reforms that go far beyond anything proposed over the last decade.

The amendments to the FCR, the extension of the Political Parties Act and sundry tweaks to the administration of Fata since 2010 have done little to change the governance dynamics of the tribal areas. It is simply unacceptable that a region that has borne the brunt of militant rule and military operations for over a decade now should be treated as a zone cut off and separate from the rest of Pakistan.

The very least Fata deserves is the sustained economic and administrative assistance of the state — and an iron-clad commitment to ensuring that at the end of the darkness that has engulfed Fata, there will be light for its people.

If Fata has been asked to sacrifice so much — vast sections of its people made homeless for years, the entire region treated as a laboratory for non-state actors and religious wars over the

decades — surely its people deserve to be acknowledged as full and equal citizens of Pakistan.

Ultimately, though, whether change for the better will in fact come to Fata depends on if the national institutions are able to agree on the necessary balance between the security of the country and the socio-economic needs of its people.

Fata's second-tier status has since the very beginning been linked to its proximity with Afghanistan. So long as the latter remains unstable and the border between the two countries remains porous, there will be a powerful lobby advocating a virtual wall between Fata and the rest of Pakistan.

Arguably, however, it is that very wall that led to Fata becoming a hotbed of militancy and a threat to the rest of the country and the region.

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## Witness protection

THE murder of the eyewitness in the Sabeen Mahmud case has once again underscored the urgent need for a witness protection programme.

Ghulam Abbas was working as a part-time driver for Ms Mahmud, the well-known rights activist, and was present at the scene when she was gunned down in Karachi on April 24.

Although it has not yet been confirmed whether the two murders are connected, police have disclosed that during the trial of those accused of Ms Mahmud's assassination, the slain driver had identified some of the men, a fact that increases the likelihood of precisely such a link.

*Know more: [Key witness in Sabeen Mahmud murder case shot dead in Karachi](#)*

Even if Mr Abbas's death does not affect the bearing that his testimony will have on the outcome of the legal proceedings, it is certain to intimidate witnesses in other high-profile cases.

Witnesses are vital for successful investigation and prosecution of crime, particularly in countries like Pakistan where the forensic science regime is not very well developed.

The protection of witnesses is therefore a basic requirement to secure their cooperation and give them the confidence to come forward. On the contrary, however, the intimidation of witnesses continues without let or hindrance, perverting the

course of justice and allowing many suspects, even those accused of heinous crimes, to go free.

The case of Wali Khan Babar illustrates the gravity of the threat. Six witnesses to the murder of the young journalist in 2011 were themselves eliminated one after another over the course of less than two years.

According to a study carried out by the Punjab police, more than 80pc of terrorism cases resulted in the acquittal of the accused because witnesses either retracted their testimony or refused to appear in court because of intimidation by criminals.

Although the Sindh Assembly passed witness protection legislation in 2013, the law is obviously not being implemented. Witness protection programmes need planning, commitment and sufficient funds to be truly effective. It is a small price to pay, however, for ensuring that hardened criminals are sent behind bars.

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## Poverty in nuclear South Asia

Roughly 45 years after the India-Pakistan competition spread to the nuclear domain, the National Command Authority of Pakistan, the apex nuclear programme-related policymaking body, has declared that it is “the national resolve to maintain ‘Full Spectrum Deterrence Capability’ in line with the dictates of ‘Credible Minimum Deterrence’ to deter all forms of aggression”.

Triggered by Indian intervention in what is now Bangladesh in 1970-71 and then turbocharged by India’s so-called peaceful nuclear explosion of 1974, the nuclear competition between South Asia’s two largest countries has insensibly reached the point where the Pakistani security establishment has firmly committed itself to full-spectrum deterrence — in layman’s terms, Pakistan is committed to developing a range of nuclear weapons and delivery systems that can be used to defend against any possible convention or nuclear attack by India.

*Know more: [Broadest deterrence capability to be kept](#)*

While the outside world has been critical of the Pakistani nuclear evolution, the security establishment here has insisted — with some degree of credibility — that the Pakistani response has been developed in view of India’s expanding military capabilities and the mooted of offensive military doctrines such as Cold Start.

In particular, the Pakistani security establishment points to two threat trajectories: one; India’s rapidly growing military budget is a deliberate attempt to unacceptably widen the conventional

military gap between the two countries; and two, India’s latent growth capacity in the nuclear arena could be quickly actualised if it chooses to switch nuclear fuel production from civilian to military purposes at several nuclear installations.

Focusing on a potential rival’s capabilities and not intentions is the core of military preparedness and that logic becomes all the more powerful when the rivalry appears to be growing rather than being nudged towards the normalisation of ties.

It is here where perhaps the greatest challenge lies — the logic of nuclear and military expansion on both sides of the border, a worrying trend if ever there has been one, can only be countered by a powerful peace lobby that seeks to normalise ties between the two countries on the basis of equality and mutual respect.

The security arguments of the warriors on both sides of the border notwithstanding, it is a fact that Pakistan and India are home to two largely poor populations that lack access to basic health, education and job opportunities.

Pakistan needs to be kept safe — but so does its population need to be healthy, educated and productive. The same applies to India. Both countries have so much more to gain by engaging each other in trade, economic and social ties than keeping erect the wall that has been built between the two.

As India has learned with China, so it can learn with Pakistan: economic cooperation can exist side by side with strategic and security-related rivalries.

Unhappily, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears determined not to talk to Pakistan for now. Perhaps common sense will prevail and a peace process will be resumed at the earliest.

*Published in Dawn, September 11th, 2015*

## Madressah finances

THE words sound serious, but we'll have to wait to see if the action that follows is too.

Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan upped the ante somewhat when he said recently that the finances of religious seminaries must be scrutinised, and the latter will have to be encouraged to use registered bank accounts to transact and make payments.

Although the State Bank claims there is no policy barring madressahs from opening bank accounts, the reality is that many of them continue to use the personal accounts of their staff to carry on their financial affairs.

*Take a look: [Geo-tagging of 3,662 madressahs in Sindh completed](#)*

This practice conceals the source of funding, as well as the identities of the parties with whom they are transacting, opening the door to abuses that might even dovetail with extremist activity in some cases.

If the minister is able to get madressahs to start using their own bank accounts, it will be a positive step towards bringing some transparency into their affairs.

But the job is likely to prove harder than what the minister imagines. Simple jobs regarding the madressahs have taken far more effort than the state imagined.

Take as an example the relatively straightforward task of counting the number of madressahs in each province, and then geo-tagging them so as to have a map showing locations and other details of each of them.

Punjab had a very difficult time obtaining an exact count of the number of madressahs operating within the province, and more recently Sindh has concluded an exercise in geo-tagging them. Through that exercise it has been learnt that almost one-third of all seminaries in the province are unregistered.

This is a large number and getting them to first register themselves with the state, then compelling them to open bank accounts in their own name and using only these accounts to carry on their financial affairs will take a great deal of focused effort and coordination.

The exercise must be carried out though because transparency in sources of funding for religious seminaries is required, and this cannot happen so long as their dealings are either done in cash or through accounts opened in the names of their staff members.

One only hopes that the minister has thought his statement through and intends to follow up on it with energy, because the

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wider goal of uprooting extremist narratives and hate-filled ideologies cannot be fulfilled without plugging this vital gap.

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## Killing of media workers

THE attacks on professionals associated with the media over the past few days in Karachi and Peshawar are the most recent tragic additions to the list of journalists and other media workers who have been harmed or killed over the years in Pakistan.

Late Tuesday night, a Geo News [DSNG van came under fire](#) in Karachi, seriously injuring two men. While the driver was reported to be in stable condition, sadly satellite engineer Arshad Ali Jafri succumbed to his injuries.

A day later, in the same city, former television journalist Aftab Alam sustained fatal bullet wounds when two men on a motorcycle opened fire on him. The grief and agony of the families of these latest victims are unimaginable; and yet, there's more.

*Know more: [Senior journalist loses life in Karachi gun attack](#)*

Also on Tuesday, journalist Abdul Azam Shinwari, who reports from the tribal areas, was injured when he was fired upon after an elaborate waylay procedure. One is not sure of

the motive behind the attack in the case of Mr Shinwari, as the assailant chose not to kill the journalist.

However, this in no way detracts from the seriousness of the crime; in fact, it underscores the impunity with which media workers are targeted in the country, by a variety of actors.

Where shadowy elements within the state have not escaped being accused of using violence against journalists — the case of the slain Saleem Shehzad remains unresolved — other groups, from separatist elements in Balochistan to militants in the northwest, have often enough displayed their willingness to literally shoot the messenger.

The state, meanwhile, has erected for itself a pantheon of shame through its refusal to pursue such cases with vigour and alacrity.

To date, the only media person's murder that comes to mind as having being resolved is that of Wali Khan Babar.

Media organisations, too, appear willing to sacrifice a few pawns rather than cooperate and come up with joint strategies to protect their workers. Meanwhile, intimidatory tactics continue against Pakistan's media workers, who, it seems, have nowhere to turn.

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## Palestinian flag

FOR the Palestinian people, who have to face the brutality and humiliation meted out to them by the Israeli state on an all too frequent basis, it is a small victory.

In a recently held vote, the UN General Assembly decided in favour of a Palestinian resolution that will now allow the Palestinian people to raise their flag outside UN buildings.

Of the 193 members of the global body, 119 voted in favour of the move while expectedly, Israel and the US were firmly against the resolution.

*[Know more: UN strongly approves Palestinian proposal to raise flag at HQ](#)*

The European Union was split over the matter, with many states within the bloc abstaining; however, major powers such as France and Italy voted for the resolution.

This is just the latest in a series of moral victories the people of Palestine have chalked up in the international arena in recent years.

Already 135 countries around the globe — arguably the vast majority of the international community — have recognised Palestine while some European parliaments have also pledged support for statehood.

Moreover, Palestine had already secured non-member observer status at the UN in 2012, while Palestinian officials hope the

latest success will be a step in the direction of full UN membership.

Clearly, the sufferings and injustice endured by the Palestinians over the last many decades have been recognised by the world community and there is widespread sympathy for their cause.

Yet reassuring as these diplomatic and moral victories are, the comity of nations needs to do much more to end the Palestinians' long nightmare. Having been uprooted from their own land, they are subjected to frequent Israeli brutality.

The most recent episode was last year's assault on Gaza, where Tel Aviv's aggression resulted in heavy civilian casualties.

There must be a concerted international push to bring Israel to the table in order to work out a just peace in accordance with the two-state solution that respects the fundamental rights of the Palestinians.

Unless this is done, moves like the UN resolution will have few long-lasting benefits for Palestinians.

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## Gender-based limits

FOR women in Pakistan, the law itself is usually the least of their problems.

That is, of course, not to say that legal hurdles do not hamper their quest for economic empowerment; the challenges for them in this sphere are explored in a new World Bank report which examines laws that impede women's entrepreneurship and employment in 173 countries.

Among some of the gender-specific requirements for Pakistani female entrepreneurs is for married women to include — in the presence of a witness — their husband's name, nationality and address while registering a business.

*Also read: [Restrictions holding women back in Pakistan: WB report](#)*

Moreover, there is no legislation to guarantee equal pay for work of equal value, nor to prevent discrimination against women in hiring. Gender-based job restrictions are a fairly common phenomenon globally: according to the report, they are present in nearly 100 countries.

In 18 countries, husbands can even legally prevent wives from working, although that is fortunately not the case in Pakistan.

However, there are other pressures of a pernicious kind in this society that hamper many women from reaching their full potential in the economic sphere and marginalise those within it.

These are the cultural attitudes — intangible yet more potent than any law — powered and reinforced by a patriarchal society where a women's identity is derived from her male family members, specifically her father and (later) her husband.

The idea of male 'superiority' and the higher value assigned to men is internalised at a very fundamental level.

It manifests itself in various ways: from gender-biased language by both men and women that equates negative traits like weakness, and worse, with femininity, to the insufficient resources dedicated to girls' education, the negligence of women's sexual and reproductive rights, and prevailing violence against women.

A woman's worth is based upon her role in the domestic sphere; the public sphere, conversely, is seen as a 'male' domain where females are virtually interlopers.

Despite this, largely out of economic necessity, an increasing number of women have been entering the workforce in recent years.

During the same period there has been a spate of legislation to protect women's rights and curb violence against them in the name of tradition, mainly as a result of higher representation of women in the national and provincial assemblies who worked across the aisle to push the laws through. Implementation, however, has been largely unsatisfactory.

As a result, cultural biases continue to reinforce the disadvantages for women in the workplace.

## NAP progress

Since its launch the National Action Plan to counter terrorism has scored some impressive gains, but going by the reports emerging from the deliberations of Thursday's high-level meeting to review its progress, it is clear that much work remains to be done.

It is encouraging to see a consensus emerging at the top that the menace of sectarianism needs to be pursued with vigour, along with the agreement that concrete steps would be taken to achieve this.

It is equally heartening to see a renewed focus on choking off the sources of terrorist finances, and mobilising alternative narratives against the hate-filled ideologies that fuel extremist actions.

*Also read: [Military asks govt to choke terror financing](#)*

The regular rounds of consultations at the top, involving civil and military leaders, to review progress and agree on a course forward indicates that some stock-taking is taking place at regular intervals and the implementation of NAP is not as lacklustre as some reports earlier in the summer may have suggested.

On the other hand, it is obvious that progress is patchy in many areas. For example, following the latest meeting, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan underscored certain tasks that were going to begin in earnest.

These include reviewing gun licences, registering seminaries and putting an end to terror financing. It is discouraging that these tasks still remain to be done more than 260 days after the announcement of the anti-terrorism plan.

Choking off terror financing is a key objective of NAP, and the interior minister had announced as early as January that all efforts would be made to accomplish this goal. So why are we still talking about getting started on the job, some eight months later?

How much has actually been done to enable the superior tracking of terrorist finances since that decision in January?

In fact, the words that leak out of every such 'high-level meeting' to review action under NAP indicate that whereas some progress has indeed been made in hunting down terrorist personnel and organisations, progress to close down the spaces that allow such militant groups to exist and ply their trade has been slow.

This means that the gains of today can be reversed tomorrow as the organisations under fire at the moment can reconstitute themselves quickly if the swamp that breeds and nurtures them is not drained.

It is high time that implementation of the plan moved towards denying the terrorists this space in our midst and expanded its focus to suppressing militant narratives and choking off extremists' access to funds, supplies and recruits.

Military means alone cannot accomplish the goals set out in NAP to rid ourselves of the menace of terrorism.



For that to happen, greater clarity will be required in the precise objectives that are being pursued under NAP, and a willingness to acknowledge not just what we are fighting against, but also what we are fighting for.

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## Working Boundary, LoC concerns

AFTER the fiasco and farce that was the aborted talks between the Pakistan and Indian national security advisers, the lower-key talks between the directors general of the Indian Border Security Force and the Pakistan Rangers appear to have taken place in a focused and professional atmosphere. Even the political aspects of it — DG Rangers Maj-Gen Umar Farooq Burki's meeting with Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh — produced an air of unexpected goodwill with the latter asserting that India will ensure that it does not fire the first bullet, though adding that Pakistan should make sure that infiltrations across the LoC and Working Boundary are curbed. The proof of success will be in the days and weeks ahead — both in terms of fewer incidents along the LoC and Working Boundary and a quicker and smoother resolution of incidents of violence breaking out. What is encouraging is that both the security delegations appeared keen to find ways to reduce the violence rather than grandstand before the media.

With a second round of meetings scheduled for early next year, the measures agreed in Delhi could have immediate effects. In truth, the personnel patrolling the international border, the LoC and the Working Boundary are best placed to discuss measures for reducing violence — not only do they know the areas in question well, it is they who are directly in the line of fire alongside the rural communities that rub right against boundary fences. The suggestions of more and frequent contact between security personnel on the two sides and at both more junior and senior levels can greatly help reduce violence — if the two sides do act on the intelligence and information shared via phone or even email now, as has been reported. Pakistan and India managed a ceasefire along the LoC and Working Boundary for the best part of a decade starting 2003 — if the two sides want to, they can surely find a way of putting a stop to the stream of allegations of infiltrations, illegal constructions and the disproportionate use of force.

But as ever, the onus will remain on the political leaderships and military establishments of the two countries to address issues at a policy level. At the end of the day, the BSF and the Pakistan Rangers can only manage conflict — it is the national leaderships that must have the courage to work to resolve them. The resumption of violence along the LoC and Working Boundary last year had a great deal to do with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's aggressive approach of using disproportionate force. For its part, the Pakistani state has not very credibly addressed Indian allegations of infiltrations and ceasefire violations. With the BSF-Rangers meeting over, the next step according to the Ufa plan is a meeting of the directors general military operations. Perhaps the cancelled NSA talks should also be rescheduled.

## Monetary policy

IT is becoming difficult to tell where the State Bank stands on some of the biggest economic issues facing the country today. Inflation may well be coming down, and the bank is clear enough in pointing towards the reasons behind the sustained declines seen in this area. But inflation is not the only indicator coming down. Foreign investment and exports are also registering steep declines, as is private-sector utilisation of bank credit. Deposit growth has slowed quite fast since July and large-scale manufacturing remains in the doldrums. What does one make of an economy where consumption is high but investment is low? Where remittances and borrowing are financing imports as exports languish? These are important questions and the State Bank has taken some trouble to avoid addressing them in any meaningful way in its latest monetary policy statement. Instead, the announcement of a rate cut — which was expected — is couched within an analysis of the economy that is part hope and part prayer.

In previous announcements, the State Bank used to point towards declining manufacturing numbers by saying that lower interest rates would help reverse that trend. When sustained lower interest rates did not cause an uptick in manufacturing activity, this time they changed the variable on which they have pegged their hopes; instead, we are being told that better law and order and improved energy supplies is likely to give further “traction” to manufacturing. Where exactly will the “improvement in energy supplies” come from? Simply a decline in global prices? How come that decline hasn’t produced such “traction” in the past one year? Or will it be the China corridor projects that will spur growth? In which case we

might be in for a bit of a wait. Any expectations of a revival in exports are similarly pegged on a distant hope — “US economic recovery and through further gains in EU’s GSP-Plus scheme”. Coming on the heels of a large meeting between the prime minister and industry leaders across the country, this analysis of the core ailment that continues to afflict the economy comes across as evasive. It is as if the State Bank wishes to opt out of the resultant conversation for fear of offending any of the parties involved. This is unacceptable behaviour on the part of a key institution; those at the helm at the central bank are reasonably expected to not be so fearful in discharging their most rudimentary obligations.

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## Makkah crane crash

ORGANISING and overseeing Haj is not an easy task with two million pilgrims expected in Saudi Arabia for the annual religious obligation. Over the years, the Saudi authorities have done a fair job of handling the massive gathering of humanity. But as Friday’s tragic crane accident in Makkah illustrated, unless all bases are covered where the safety and security of pilgrims are concerned, accidents and mishaps can have deadly consequences. At the time of writing, over 100 fatalities have been confirmed as a result of the crash; the giant crane came down onto a section of the Grand Mosque due to a bout of inclement weather. Over 200 people have been injured in the accident, among them many Pakistanis, reports indicate. Some of the injured are said to be in critical condition. With Haj just

under two weeks away, this is the time for Saudi authorities to review all safety precautions and address the shortcomings before the pilgrimage gets under way.

As incomes have risen globally and air travel has made distances shorter, the number of people visiting the holy cities in Saudi Arabia from all parts of the world has increased tremendously. Numbers are especially high during Haj as well as the month of Ramazan. Around 800,000 people are currently in the kingdom for Haj — with more expected — while over two million pilgrims visited last year. To deal with this influx, Saudi authorities have launched a sweeping reconstruction drive to expand the capacity of the Grand Mosque. Yet some Saudi activists have pointed out that there has been negligence in the placement of the cranes around the mosque. Riyadh needs to scale down construction activity during high-volume periods like Haj to decrease the chance of accidents, along with reviewing safety protocols especially where machinery and other equipment are concerned. Moreover, until the construction work is completed, perhaps the Saudis should reconsider the number of pilgrims allowed in for Haj and ensure that it does not cross the limits set by safety considerations.

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## Foreign policy trajectory

THE inaugural Foreign Ministers' Forum held by the Institute of Business Administration in Karachi over the weekend brought together the men and woman who have steered the Foreign Office over much of the past decade: Khurshid Kasuri, Hina Rabbani Khar and Sartaj Aziz.

What they demonstrated was a collective – and reasonably consistent – understanding of Pakistan's place in the region and the world today.

*Also read: [China's rise, Russia's interest in S. Asia significant, says Aziz](#)*

The focus on good neighbourly relations, internal security and economic growth amounted to putting the people at the centre of national policy – exactly as it should be.

There was even some candid talk about which institution steers key foreign policy and national security decisions: the military-ISI combine or civilian institutions.

Yet, for all the forthright and commendable analysis and first-person accounts shared in the Forum, what was missing was a road map for how Pakistan is to go from a relatively insecure state with troubled regional relations to a stable, robust and economically vibrant one.

How, for example, does Pakistan move towards a foreign policy that is more economically oriented than security heavy?

As Ms Khar herself pointed out, be it in terms of trade relations with India or the perceptions of preferred, so-called Pakistan-friendly groups leading Afghanistan, the security dimension appears to trump very real economic opportunities.

The geostrategic potential of Afghanistan and Pakistan as regional trading hubs is ever clear, but connectivity is seemingly forever stalled. Afghanistan has long sought better and more direct access to Indian markets via Pakistan, but old suspicions dominate.

In any case, Pakistan has closed the door on MFN status for India, while the more palatable nomenclature of Non-Discriminatory Trade Access is stuck in limbo. Even where there is a genuine ally, as in the case of China, Pakistan has long struggled to develop a favourable and healthy trading relationship. Just how and where should the state begin overhauling foreign policy if it is to align more closely with the needs and aspirations of a relatively poor population? There were few meaningful suggestions in the Forum on that count.

It is possible to explain the poor foreign policy and national security choices the country has made over the decades in terms of the civil-military divide, but it is not particularly helpful.

If the army-led security establishment has an extreme security-centric view of key foreign relationships, it is for the civilians to develop the capacity to articulate a different, more nuanced worldview and the means to implement it.

What was on display at the Foreign Ministers' Forum was a broader failure of the political class – there is no

institutionalised thinking within political parties of how to address long-term national security and foreign policy issues.

Unless a reservoir of talent is nurtured within political parties and parliament invests in research and analysis, foreign policy will remain an ad hoc affair on the civilian side – allowing the old formula of military dominance to continue.

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## Electronic crime

Changing circumstances require adaptation, and nowhere is this more true than in the legislative framework that defines and codifies a country.

And there's no argument that the coming of age of the digital world and, in particular, the use of the internet and information technology in problematic fashions, has become a challenge that Pakistan must contend with promptly.

Amongst the circles that have access, the use of these technologies has spread extremely fast, throwing up legislative grey areas that need definition and resolution.

*Also read: [Analysis: The dangers of fighting terror with a cybercrime bill](#)*

From the use of technology and the internet in crimes of a heinous nature, such as militancy and terrorism, to the more pedestrian but no less damaging (on the level of the individual) problem of online stalking and data theft, over recent years the issue of cybercrime has emerged often enough.

Yet precisely because of the free and fair nature of the online world, where space is available for voices of all stripe, any move made in this regard on the legislative front needs to be thought out in great depth, presented to stakeholders for back and forth, and only then be put forward as proposed legislation.

On all these counts, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Bill, which is nearing the final stages of evaluation and approval by the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Information Technology and Telecommunication, appears to be failing.

The problems with the bill in its current form are myriad and have been identified by IT experts. These include a distortion of focus, so that the mindset underpinning it is security-related; this means that while the law is meant to fight terrorism, once Pakistan's war against militancy is over it will yet remain draconian and unrelenting.

Further, critics of the draft say the proposed law does not provide adequate security to internet users, and introduces harsh punishments for 'crimes' that can easily and unintentionally be committed.

There are yet more questions, including possible overlaps with the jurisdiction of other pieces of legislation. In short, there is enough to suggest that at the very least this bill needs re-evaluation and a serious hearing of the criticism against it, with

willingness on the part of the legislators to accommodate advice and amend it.

The digital footprint across Pakistan will only spread; right now, at the introductory stage of formulating cybercrime laws, there is time for careful consideration. The voices urging caution must not be ignored.

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## Business as usual

GOING by reports, the meeting between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and business leaders of the country last week appears to have been anticlimactic.

Both sides, it seems, ended up talking past each other. And the fault for this lies with both parties. The business delegation, from the looks of it, did not bring any fresh thinking to the table, sticking to talking points that are many years old now — mostly of tax relief and subsidies through lower energy prices.

The government stuck to its own talking points, going on at length about the military operation and the sacrifices of the soldiers, as well as opportunities in the form of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Neither side came out feeling that they had accomplished much.

*Also read: [PM courts industry with package to boost exports](#)*

*September 2015*

To some extent, this was to be expected. Meetings of this sort rarely achieve anything other than each side simply restating its position.

The government ought to have known at the outset what these business leaders would say if asked point-blank to state their grievances and make their recommendations. Instead of simply summoning them all to Islamabad, it would have been better to have had a more methodical process to first develop the agenda, debate the talking points in advance, and try to sharpen the focus of the conversation that both sides were hoping to have.

The last government discovered the uselessness of these exercises when they took to holding meetings of this sort with power-sector professionals every time a new load-shedding crisis materialised in the energy sector.

Nothing was ever achieved in those meetings and in every case the government resorted to getting the turbines spinning by dousing the circular debt with an ever-increasing quantity of money.

One can only hope that the PML-N government will not walk down that road by resorting to the same tactics year after year in trying to generate ideas for the more complex problem of ailing exports and sluggish manufacturing.

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## Juvenile terror suspects

IF there is a red line in any criminal justice system, it should be this: children must never, ever face the possibility of execution and in all cases the emphasis should be on rehabilitation rather than punishment of those convicted by the system.

Following a Peshawar High Court order late last month to suspend the death sentence handed down by a military court to an individual, Haider Ali — whose parents claim he was a juvenile at the time of his detention by the military — the federal government has sought proof of the adulthood of at least 10 individuals that the security establishment wants to try under the 21st Amendment-sanctioned military courts.

The government has acted sensibly, humanely and in a timely manner — now it is up to the military to demonstrate that juveniles, ie individuals under the age of 18, are not being lined up for trial in opaque military courts, which have the power to hand down death sentences to defendants.

Worryingly, however, as reported in this newspaper yesterday, there are voices calling for the law to be amended to allow juveniles to be tried in military courts — the argument being that the militants have trained and attempted to use under-18 suicide bombers who risk being turned loose by civilian courts.

But that would be a clear expansion of the ambit of military courts, which the government had pledged would only apply to so-called jet-black terrorists.

A child suicide bomber is not and cannot be a militant mastermind. If anything, a child is a victim himself of a perverse ideology that specifically targets young, impressionable minds to act as foot soldiers in a war that they cannot possibly understand.

Of course, juveniles accused of terrorism should not be simply set free or handed down the lightest of sentences — the state must work with rehabilitation and child experts to find a way to gradually prepare them for an eventual reintroduction to mainstream society.

If there are hardened juvenile terrorists, they should be kept in a safe and humane environment until their full sentences are served out and then possibly monitored upon release.

It is simply wrong to suggest that the regular juvenile justice system is incapable of handling terrorism-related cases.

To be sure, reforms are needed — though perhaps the government in trying to replace the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance, 2000 with the Juvenile Justice System Bill, 2015 is unnecessarily trying to re-invent the wheel.

The age of criminal responsibility is too low at the age of seven, allowing very young children to be hauled into the criminal justice system. Perhaps specific measures should be introduced for the detention and rehabilitation of juvenile militants that keeps them both separate from adult militants and regular juvenile offenders.

Surely, the country that has already failed these children in allowing them to become terror recruits should not fail them twice over.

*Published in Dawn, September 15th, 2015*

## Nandipur fiasco

THE ego-fuelled haste with which the Nandipur power project was hustled along towards completion has now yielded up its fruit.

The power plant remains idle despite massive cost overruns, and the government, which once touted the project as an emblem of its can-do credentials, is now calling for an audit of the scheme.

What makes the whole affair even more troubling is that it comes in the middle of a large spurt in power projects, many of them connected with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, and which the government is similarly trying hard to own as emblems of its success.

*Also read: [Nandipur power plant failure: what needs to be probed?](#)*

The Nandipur fiasco has rightly cast a shadow over those as well, since any government that can botch up this project can make a mess of the others too.

One large CPEC project in Gadani has already been wound up because it ran the risk of becoming another example of failure, but on a far bigger scale. Given this context, it is imperative that the Nandipur fiasco be examined very closely and the right lessons be drawn from it.

An audit of the project's finances is certainly in order, but perhaps an investigation into the massive cost overruns, including an \$80m remobilisation advance for the contractor and a \$30m tab for conversion to a different fuel, should also be carried out.

But it is also important to add that thus far there is little to no evidence of corruption or any other irregularity that would merit the use of the word 'scam'.

The project has suffered from a wide range of governmental failures — incompetence, poor planning, haste, lack of coordination — but whether or not there has been any criminal irregularity has not yet been determined.

The NAB investigation into the project is very old, and its results are yet to be known, but its focus is also on the earlier phase when the project languished due to neglect by the previous government.

The political parties that are seeking to raise this issue in the next session of parliament ought to direct their fire towards demanding greater scrutiny of the cost overruns, and the sequence of decision-making that resulted in a series of reversals in crucial questions, such as the choice of fuel for the power plant during its construction stage.

Who made what decision and when? If evidence of wrongdoing surfaces after this, it should be pursued with vigour.

*Published in Dawn, September 15th, 2015*

## Dangerous spray

THOSE looking for reasons behind the two recent incidents where schools in upper parts of Punjab were sprayed with substandard anti-dengue solutions are zeroing in on the usual, easy suspect: undue haste.

The provincial government's admonishments, warnings and outright threats to slow and lazy officials, mostly routed through the chief minister, can lead to hectic and rushed activity, and not infrequently to panic in the execution of the simplest of jobs.

The two incidents, [first in Attock](#) and [then in Jhelum](#) a couple of days later, have raised alarm.

Senior officials from Lahore have visited the schools where the incidents took place, and the ritual in which the chief minister suspended the entire local administration in the two areas has been performed.

Not just that, the transfer of the provincial secretary of the local government is also being attributed to the same cause.



The exposure of scores of students to the dangerous spray is waiting to be probed beyond this customary sequence where blame is placed invariably at the door of an individual.

In the most pressing of situations, the erring individual may belong to the government and if the situation so demands, he or she may be castigated or legally held accountable for the satisfaction of the people.

The crucial question here is about the procedure of using anti-dengue spray. There have to be some procedural issues that have now been highlighted by the worrying scenes relayed from Attock and Jhelum.

These raise concern regarding the level of administrative preparedness when it comes to dengue, which Punjab has been fighting otherwise with much-publicised resolve and considerable success over the years.

The administration would do well to have a closer look at the anti-insect spray business that has been given a boost by the threat associated with dengue in recent times.

There is, unfortunately, much room for the use of substandard substances — with serious consequences. Such a threat should lead to a campaign that focuses on regulating the sale of chemicals in the country in general.

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## Parties' stance on corruption

IMRAN Khan's call for a military-led anti-corruption drive in Punjab and PPP senators lashing out against what they termed the selective focus on corruption in Sindh are likely to build political pressure on the PML-N government to take accountability more seriously.

To begin with, the PPP senators appeared to speak more sensibly than the PTI chief.

*Take a look: [PPP senators protest against 'selective accountability'](#)*

While acknowledging the need for accountability in Sindh, the PPP senators took issue mostly with the use of anti-terrorism laws and the federal government bypassing the Sindh government in corruption investigations.

Yet, theirs was a clearly partisan stance: at no point did any of the senators see fit to call up the Sindh government to take governance and accountability issues more seriously and to demonstrate an immediate and clear public stance against corruption.

So commonplace have allegations of corruption against the PPP government in Sindh become that it is remarkable no one within the party has yet spoken out against it. That silence only underlines the deep and continuing problems within the PPP.

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Mr Khan's demand, however, is beyond the pale. Punjab needs accountability as much as Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa do.

*Know more: [Imran demands anti-corruption crackdown in Punjab](#)*

There are ways and means to build public and parliamentary pressure on the PML-N governments at the centre and in Punjab to take accountability more seriously.

Why then does a national politician leading what is effectively the second-largest political party in the country need to call upon the military to take up what is a politician's job?

Is Mr Khan admitting that his party is incapable of using the instruments available to it in the Punjab Assembly and parliament to try and unearth the truth about the so-called mega-corruption campaigns that the PTI frequently alleges are taking place?

While the PTI cannot by itself ensure that the relevant provincial and parliamentary committees probe corruption allegations, any attempt by the PML-N government to block such moves would be a public-relations setback.

Unhappily, it still appears that Mr Khan regards democracy more as an electoral process than a progressively stronger set of civilian institutions.

To be sure, when it comes to accountability and corruption, the PML-N has remained largely disinterested. Whatever the senior party leadership may claim, the operation in Karachi

now appears to be fully military-run with minimal civilian input. As for the power sector, signs of incompetence and possibly corruption are growing. The fiasco over the Nandipur power plant; the inability to ensure new and adequate gas flows for the upcoming winter; stalled reforms; opaque pricing mechanisms — the power sector that was the sole focus of the prime minister himself in his first months in office has not shown the fruits of competent, professional management. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif frequently talks of transparency and accountability — but has he really done much on either of those fronts?

*Published in Dawn, September 16th, 2015*

## Bureaucracy reform

THE government has created a grand map for reforming the civil service of the country, and shared some details of it with the media at the 'unveiling ceremony' in Bhurban on Monday.

The plan is to be implemented next month — not long after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif declared he had no confidence in the country's bureaucracy and asked for wholesale changes in the system.

Some of the basic reforms envisaged include: hiring of specialists through separate exams for each service group rather than the current system where all candidates sit for the same test and the successful amongst them are able to choose

their beats; increase in the retirement age; lifting of the ban on lateral entry into the civil service; allowing hiring from the private sector; and of course, offering higher salaries and better perks, as is always the intention, to prevent corruption.

*Also read: [PM calls for reforms in civil bureaucracy](#)*

This is quite a bureaucratic shakeup in the offing. The plan that lies at the very heart of the system seeks to introduce the standards followed by the private sector — this in turn will have repercussions all over the country and will affect the lives of all citizens.

There will surely be objections, but let them be corrective and constructive in nature rather than a hurdle in the way of what everyone agrees has been needed for a very long time now.

Reform in the bureaucracy is every government's dream. But while the civil service is thought to have lost its efficacy, this is a simplistic, convenient explanation.

Quite often censuring a government functionary could well be a cover for much else that is wrong with the system. The counter argument is that the need is not to recreate officials or the system but to give both the confidence to work by the book and free from any undue influences.

There is also a view which says matters concerning the bureaucracy have improved with greater awareness and a vigilant media.

There are cases of young government officers in commanding positions, sometimes preferred over civil servants much senior

to them, performing feats that were least expected from the old-style 'babus'. The officers have to be sufficiently empowered and free to be able to perform.

This remains a crucial question in the context of a party known for concentrating power in its hands, whose leaders are attempting to set the bureaucracy right.

*Published in Dawn, September 16th, 2015*

## Gas shortages

ONE would have to look really hard to find any glimmer of hope in the latest remarks by Petroleum Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi.

Sui Northern, or SNGPL, the company responsible for gas distribution in Punjab and KP provinces, will have barely enough gas to meet the requirements of domestic consumers, and there will be none left for any other category of consumers throughout the winter.

Gas prices cannot be revised downward for exporters, the minister says, because this would place too large a burden on the exchequer.

*Take a look: [No gas for industrial consumers this winter: minister](#)*

Shale production is not economically feasible in the context of low oil prices. System losses in SNGPL have increased over the past five years, but he is powerless to reprimand the managing director of the company. That job must go through the company's board, which, Mr Abbasi alleges, is populated with people having vested interests and looking after their personal concerns and nothing more.

To top it all off, his pet project on the LNG import terminal is increasingly coming under the glare of an indignant public fed up with publicly funded energy projects that are unable to begin commercial operations.

The lack of good news was not unexpected. But what is surprising is that we are still talking about the problems, and tossing around various hypothetical solutions such as regulating LPG all over again as an alternative to natural gas, past the midpoint of this government's term.

This state of affairs was known many years ago, long before the current government came to power, and yet the minister is talking about these problems as if they materialised only yesterday.

By now we reasonably expected that the conversation would be about the progress made towards resolving these problems, but it seems we still have not moved forward.

The fact that this is happening in the third year of the government's rule shows a grave situation has developed in the energy sector, and his own words at the news conference indicated that the minister has precious little to show by way of progress.

## Reality of civil-military ties

THE International Day of Democracy is less than a decade old. The UN General Assembly voted in 2007 to celebrate it every Sept 15, but it has already caused some controversy in Pakistan.

At an event to commemorate the day, Senate Chairman Raza Rabbani and several other PPP senators challenged the government's claim that the civil-military relationship is working smoothly and is in line with constitutional requirements.

Take a look :[Safeguards against military rule eroding: Rabbani](#)

Senator Farhatullah Babar went so far as to point out that under the previous PPP government, similar claims of a stable, functional and constitutional civil-military relationship were made, but the reality was otherwise.

Clearly, the government's claims about who is directing, for example, the operation in Karachi, the relationship with the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban, and ties with a right-wing Indian government are scarcely credible.

It is fairly obvious that the military has encroached deep into civilian terrain, and perhaps more so than at any point since political circumstances forced retired Gen Pervez Musharraf to step down as president in 2008.

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Yet, are the alarm bells that the PPP is ringing of late about anything more than the pressure the party has found itself under?

It ill behoves the PPP to try and raise the spectre of military intervention at the national level simply because its alleged corrupt practices in Sindh are being clamped down on by the military.

Perhaps the PPP should focus on improving its own governance and accountability record in Sindh.

Surely, there could not be more robust ways of improving the quality and durability of democracy in the country than having a political leadership that is focused on governance and is seen as clean by the electorate.

Where Mr Rabbani and senators of other parties who spoke on Tuesday were closer to the truth was in their urging that the system of democracy in the country needs to be brought more in line with the needs and aspirations of the public that it represents.

Simply put, a system that delivers basic services to the public and does so transparently, a system that is not built on cronyism, nepotism and access is the only real buffer against direct military interventions. As

Mr Rabbani mentioned, the strengthening of Article 6, which deals with treason against the Constitution, has not guaranteed anything — it is only when the people themselves believe democracy is the final and only answer that the door to military intervention will be shut forever.

Where the government and parliament are failing is in their ability to build democratic continuity and strengthen institutions.

Civil service reforms, changes in judicial and policing processes, strengthening the independence and autonomy of economic institutions to deliver job-led growth — none of these seems to be part of the agenda of this government and parliament. The custodians of democracy have a great deal left to do.

*Published in Dawn, September 17th, 2015*

## Farmers' package

ON the face of it, the package of incentives announced by the prime minister for small farmers is a welcome development.

The agricultural sector has been suffering from stagnating prices of produce amidst the rising costs of inputs.

Farmers' incomes have been squeezed in recent years, which urban consumers have experienced — and enjoyed — in the form of low-cost food and industrial raw material. But a closer look reveals that the package may not add up to what it pledges.

*Also read: [PM unveils Rs341bn package for farmers](#)*

More than half of the Rs341bn promised under the package is in the form of agricultural loans, which only marginally qualify as an incentive considering the difficulties that small farmers have in securing access to bank credit.

The package does try to enhance farmers' access to credit through various guarantees and by bearing the cost of loan insurance, but the impact of these is likely to be small.

The promised reduction in fertiliser prices is already a part of the budget, but whatever declines are eventually achieved, the main problem of fertiliser distribution will still remain unaddressed, resulting in the benefit passing to large landowners with political connections instead of the small farmers.

Cash support for small cultivators of rice and cotton is indeed welcome, although once again provided the targeting of this can be effective.

Moreover, the coordination with provincial governments to implement some of the provisions of the package is likely to prove challenging.

The subsidy on solar tube wells is promising, and any effort to advance the adoption of solar power ought to be welcomed — but that scheme, which totals Rs14.5bn, is also part of the budget.

It has been rightfully pointed out in some of the commentary on the package that many of the initiatives announced under it are already in place in the budget and should not be considered part of any new offering.

The subsidy on electricity tariffs for tube wells ought to have been avoided since the latter are becoming a rigid subsidy item in the overall scheme of power tariffs in the country. It is also worth asking why the government is announcing such a large measure well into the fiscal year.

The timing suggests political motives, which by itself may not necessarily be seen as negative. But it still strengthens the suspicion that our economic policy is far more ad hoc and hostage to political compulsions than the government would care to admit.

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## YouTube: pointless ban

ON the issue of the blockade placed on access to YouTube, the poet's words regarding "decisions and revisions that a minute will reverse" come to mind.

It has been three years since access to the site from within Pakistan was curtailed, following a furore in the Muslim world caused by a certain mischief-making film trailer.

Back then, it was promised that some way of filtering content, or getting YouTube's parent company, Google, to do this, would be found.

*Also read: [Senate body seeks legislation to lift YouTube ban](#)*

Since then, though, the matter has been reduced to the level of farce. Various government functionaries have promised solutions, but nothing has happened. The superior courts have used their time to puzzle over the problem, all to naught.

On May 6 last year, the National Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution to lift the blockade; and on Tuesday, the Senate Standing Committee on Information Technology also directed that YouTube be unblocked.

Will this be enough to see the ban lifted? Citizens are justifiably wondering what it will take, or at what level a consensus could be reached, to reverse one of the most ridiculous bans slapped by the state?

It is an open secret that the blockade is pointless, given that there are several methods through which the ban can and is being bypassed.

Indeed, submitting the resolution last year to the National Assembly, MNA Shazia Marri noted that people were using proxy servers.

Are we to understand, then, that the ban remains because its lobby group has fallen silent?

The government needs to own up to the fact that open access to the internet, especially those sites that are used for research and educational purposes, is the citizenry's right.

It will never be possible to entirely control the flow of online content, and the attempt to do so is futile. A much better route would be to educate the populace on surfing safely.

It is high time that the YouTube ban was lifted, as the Senate standing committee has directed.

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## Regional arms buildup

THE establishment of the India Rapid Reaction Cell at the Pentagon should be cause for much disappointment among peace-minded people in both India and Pakistan.

The cell is designed to streamline the coordination required for India's procurement of American arms; its creation shows the eagerness with which the US government wants to tap into India's growing weapons procurement drive.

The idea for the cell, the only one of its kind, had its origins in President Obama's visit to Delhi in January. The cell is set to ramp up its work in the months to come.

*Know more: [Special cell in Pentagon for defence ties with India](#)*

It is already working on the development of an aircraft carrier for India, and its work goes far beyond simply streamlining coordination for procurement, as it also facilitates the design of weapons systems and other measures to enhance technological collaboration.

Over the past few years, India has emerged as the world's largest buyer of weapons systems as the arms build-up gathers momentum. Many of the weapons systems in which India is showing an interest make little sense for a country that faces no serious conventional threat from any of its neighbours.

This procurement is fuelling an inevitable arms build-up in Pakistan too, which is in the midst of a weapons acquisition drive of its own. When India demonstrated its keenness to buy the French Rafale fighter jet in early summer, for instance, Pakistan announced its interest in buying the SU 35 from Russia.

And more worryingly, as India ramps up its conventional capability, Pakistan increases its reliance on non-conventional capabilities as a cheaper alternative.

This arms build-up by the two countries is hardly necessary in a region that badly needs to sow the seeds of cooperation rather than increase rivalry.

And it is disappointing, as well as self-defeating for America that it should be facilitating the arms race for its own commercial purposes, especially since its foreign policy objectives in the region call for greater harmony and integration.

It would be naïve to underestimate the power of greed and ego that is fuelling this regrettable enterprise. Rationality will need to shout to be heard in the midst of this turbo-charged arms build-up that is escalating in both countries, but the voice of reason and peace has rarely been needed more.

Peace-minded constituencies on both sides need to similarly boost their efforts to be heard, and keep up the argument of regional cooperation and shared prosperity regardless of how difficult it might be to imagine these values in such times. South Asia has the benefit of being relatively removed from the growing conflicts to its east, and the rising tensions to its west.

It would be fit and proper to build our future away from the clamour of conflict and nationalistic bombast. That is the rare gift of geography to us. Let us not squander it.

*Published in Dawn, September 18th, 2015*

## Passport black list

THE interior ministry's attempt to streamline the process by which Pakistani citizens are denied the right to travel abroad or even to be issued passports is a welcome and much-needed move.

While the Exit Control List is a well-known and much-abused mechanism, Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan revealed a far greater problem: the existence of a so-called black list maintained by the immigration and passports department, with upwards of 60,000 names.

The black list was originally conceived of to deny the issuance or re-issuance of a Pakistani passport to a wide variety of individuals, including Pakistanis who had attempted to acquire



multiple passports; foreigners who had acquired fake CNICs to obtain a passport; citizens who had been deported by a third country and who were required to be denied travel abroad again; children involved in custody disputes; and a list of individuals that various government agencies had deemed should be blocked from holding a passport. It is this last category — those placed on the immigration and passports department black list at the behest of government agencies — that was particularly prone to abuse.

*Know more: [65,000 names taken off ECL, passport blacklist](#)*

Government officials acknowledge that individuals who should rightly be on the ECL or were wrongly implicated in crimes committed in Pakistan were arbitrarily and endlessly maintained on the list.

Now, in a bid to streamline and rein in the process, the government has abolished the black list and introduced new, specific and transparent rules for an individual's inclusion on what will be known as the Passport Control List.

That is the right and just thing to do. It is simply unacceptable that Pakistanis be denied the right to state documentation that allows them to travel abroad because of a broken or abused system.

Going forwards, administrative or law-enforcement agencies will no longer have the ability to arbitrarily manipulate the ECL and the Passport Control List.

What the interior minister's reforms also demonstrate is that when various government departments work together

purposefully and with the goal of improving the citizen's interaction with the state, meaningful results can be achieved.

An Exit Control List is surely required, but its use should be limited and lawful.

Meanwhile, the black list was an unnecessary, expansive and regularly abused device. The Passport Control List, to be applicable to three categories of individuals transparently defined, is a measurable improvement.

Thousands of individuals have been saved from bureaucratic purgatory thanks to the work of the interior ministry and its constituent departments.

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## Exorbitant fees

THE state's retreat from several critical sectors has left the field open for cartels and commercial elements to move in and make incredible amounts of money at the people's expense.

Sectors like health, security and education are today dominated by private players willing to offer their services to anyone who can afford them.

For those with deep pockets, the police's ineffectualness matters little as they can hire armed guards, while if one wants quality medical care, the only option is expensive private hospitals, which can cost an arm and a leg.

*Also read: [Protesting parents threaten to stop paying exorbitant school fees in Karachi](#)*

The same is the situation with the education sector: private schools are the only refuge for parents who want to give their offspring a relatively decent schooling.

Private institutions have a captive market and owners realise this, exploiting the situation by raising fees arbitrarily. But over the past few days, parents in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad have held several protests demanding an explanation for this as well as a reduction in fees.

The protests have attracted the attention of the prime minister, who will reportedly take up the issue with the provincial chief ministers soon. The administrations of Sindh, Punjab and Islamabad have also been jolted into action.

The contention of some private school owners that fee hikes are a problem only of the upper-middle class is disingenuous, as steep rises affect nearly all income brackets.

There should be a short- and long-term approach to handling this problem. In the short term, the provincial governments need to monitor fee hikes regularly to ensure institutions are not fleecing parents. However, the real solution to this lies in the rehabilitation of public-sector education.

Parents must be convinced of the fact that sending their children to state schools will not dim the students' future prospects and that they will be given quality education.

Considering the state of public schools, this is a Herculean task, yet it must be undertaken if parents are ever to be freed from the clutches of exploitative elements.

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## Badaber attack

MORE than a dozen attackers, some 30 dead, over two dozen injured — the militant attack on a Pakistan Air Force camp in Badaber, Peshawar was a highly orchestrated strike with deadly consequences.

While the military has rightly emphasised the valour and bravery of the security personnel who helped prevent even more carnage — the kind of weaponry the attackers were armed with, as reported in sections of the media, suggests many more casualties and perhaps a lengthy siege was the ultimate aim yesterday — there are an unavoidable set of questions that have yet again been raised by the events in Peshawar.

*Know more: [Army captain among 29 killed in TTP-claimed attack on PAF camp in Peshawar](#)*

To begin with, while the Badaber area is close to the tribal region and is densely populated, it is also a sensitive location where past attacks, including the ones on planes landing at the Peshawar airport, have been launched from.

Surely, for more than a dozen armed militants to disguise themselves as security personnel, travel through the Badaber area and arrive undetected at the entrance to the PAF camp is a security failure of some degree.

Moreover, it has already been claimed that there were intelligence reports of a possible strike in the area — who then

was responsible for failing to tighten security quickly and adequately enough?

Then, there was the rather astonishing competition between the ISPR and the Taliban spokesperson, Muhammad Khurasani, to shape the narrative of the attack in real time.

While the ISPR was live tweeting the military's response to the attack, the banned TTP was seemingly live blogging it — repeated messages were received by journalists from Khurasani giving an obviously one-sided though blow-by-blow account of what was allegedly taking place inside the PAF camp.

The basic question then, how were the militants able to use uninterrupted lines of communication to, firstly, communicate between themselves and, secondly, to communicate with the media?

Even if the command centre was in Afghanistan — though this has yet to be proved — it is troubling that the TTP continues to enjoy such direct and untroubled access to communications.

Furthermore, given the number of attackers, there was surely some kind of communication in the run-up to the attack between the perpetrators and the planners.

Why was all of that able to take place unhindered? If there is a plausible answer, the technical and physical limitations should be explained to the public.

It is disturbing that the TTP spokesman or his counterpart in other militant groups can continue to conduct communications with such ease inside Pakistan.

Finally, there is the issue of the National Action Plan. While the KP government and the provincial police leadership provide frequent updates about alleged terror suspects rounded up and various raids made, it still remains fairly obvious that the desirable level of cooperation and coordination between the civilian and military arms of the security apparatus is not there. Will anyone explain why and suggest immediate fixes?

*Published in Dawn, September 20th, 2015*

## NAB resumes probes

AFTER what appears to be a brief hiatus, the National Accountability Bureau is again springing into action and starting to pursue cases against a long list of names.

There are a few personalities of note on this list, including some MNAs and MPAs, but other than that the list comprises mostly low-level government officials.

The last time that NAB presented before the Supreme Court a list of 150 scams under investigation, it sparked an uproar because names like those of the Sharif brothers and former president Asif Ali Zardari were on it.

*Also read: [NAB moves against lawmakers, former AGP](#)*

The list was hurriedly withdrawn and a fresh one submitted that did not contain the names of such heavyweights.

Other mega scams, like the Ogra reference, have moved towards prosecution, but the pace of proceedings again has been very slow.

It is encouraging to see NAB moving ahead with investigations on a large scale once again because the country needs to probe corruption and ensure accountability. But what is also needed is credibility and independence in carrying out these investigations, and here NAB's record leaves a lot to be desired.

The history of the body is a string of serious failures and compromises over the years: it had to give a clean bill of health to the leadership of the PML-Q in the days when Gen Musharraf needed political support as he prepared to break his promise to shed his uniform; it watched helplessly as the military balked at its requests for cooperation in the investigation of the NLC scam; and it was forced to withdraw its list of 150 scams under investigation as a result of severe political pressure.

Lacking independence, NAB has been forced to trim its sails in proportion to the winds of politics.

In this context, the mystery of the sudden mobilisation of the bureau against a host of small fry and a few big ones connected to the main political parties may seem encouraging on the surface, but inspires important questions about the motives that are driving the whole enterprise.

For a real fight against corruption, and for real accountability, the country needs a (constitutional) body that can be trusted and whose decision-making is manifestly above board and

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above reproach. NAB may have tried over the years to live up to this billing, but has not managed to do so.

There is, therefore, little reason to suppose that the present burst of energy will end any differently.

*Published in Dawn, September 20th, 2015*

## Scuffles and democracy

AT first they decided the issue by fighting amongst them. Then they came up with houses where they could sit and resolve problems amicably without having to resort to violence. Today, they sometimes clash like old warriors in forums of their own making.

Sometimes, they come to blows over the question of avoiding war — as happened in the Japanese parliament on Thursday.

It is ironic that while the opposition members wanted to prevent their country from possible participation in the violence that is war, the scenes inside the august house crossed all bounds of parliamentary behaviour as a scuffle broke out amongst the MPs.

The occasion itself was a historic one. The prime minister was determined to commit his country's return to active combat, under the UN's umbrella, after decades.

The repercussions for Tokyo, its relations with regional countries such as China, and with a world dominated by a US that 'must' fight from time to time, were not a sobering enough thought for the legislators. They ensured that the unruly scenes in parliament climaxed in fistfights.

But even as the sun rises in the East, the world continues to learn. Emotions spill over in the unlikeliest of places as discussions get heated — a calm, rational debate is not considered effective enough.

Consequently, push leads to shove, and shove to a few punches thrown at the adversary. This happens in many parliaments all over the world, and while regrettable, a more charitable view is that such robust debate is a sign that democracy is evolving — indeed, the merits of democracy themselves are hardly ever in question as fights break out and egos clash.

This is a useful lesson for those of us in Pakistan who believe that the quality of politics within and outside parliament is reason enough to decry democratic traditions and to call upon extra-constitutional forces to strengthen the national edifice. Most of the world has moved on, and it is time that we did so as well.

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## TTP sanctuaries

THE militant attack on the PAF camp in Badaber, Peshawar, appears to be part of a trend that demands a serious rethink in both Islamabad/Rawalpindi and Kabul: when Pak-Afghan relations are strained, it is usually the militants on both sides of the border who benefit. If, as the military has alleged and the banned TTP has claimed, the Peshawar attack was conceived of and orchestrated from TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan, it would be further evidence of the long-running problem of military operations in the border region causing militants to scatter and then eventually regroup in more hospitable locations. The problem is a multifaceted one. To begin with, most military operations inside Pakistan have not led to the capture or elimination of the senior-most militant commanders. Then, the porous Pak-Afghan border requires constant vigilance and a great deal of security and intelligence cooperation between Pakistani and Afghan security if militants are to be interdicted or the flow in both directions of militants is to be curbed. Finally, once militant groups do find new sanctuaries along the border region, it becomes a question of political will for Pakistan and Afghanistan to take the matter seriously.

Pak-Afghan cooperation on combating militancy is possible. After the Army Public School attack in Peshawar last December, Pakistan requested, and Kabul assisted in providing, intelligence cooperation against TTP elements in Afghanistan. Later, the Afghan security forces undertook some limited military operations in regions thought to be the hideouts of TTP militants now based in Afghanistan. Unhappily, the breakdown of ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan following

the cancellation of talks between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban appears to have eroded both the tenuous trust and the newfound security cooperation between the two countries. It must be urgently repaired. The ISPR chief, Maj-Gen Asim Bajwa, set the right tone by not blaming the Afghan state for the Badaber attack. Afghan officials could take a cue from their Pakistani counterparts by similarly refraining from blaming attacks in Afghanistan on collusion with militants by the Pakistani state. The emphasis, instead, should be on rebuilding intelligence cooperation and better border management.

In addition, there is a need to work on a framework for the resumption of talks with the Afghan Taliban. Now that the succession issue has been seemingly settled and Akhtar Mansour is believed to be consolidating his position, the Afghan government needs to reassess its reluctance to talk after a series of devastating attacks by the Afghan Taliban. Partly the logic of talks with the Afghan Taliban was rooted in the emergence of a common potential threat — the self-styled Islamic State. The TTP in particular has shown its willingness to embrace IS and its message. The Afghan government should be wary of tolerating sanctuaries for anti-Pakistan militants who have a transnational agenda. Resumption of talks with the Afghan Taliban could help block space for IS in Afghanistan.

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## Curbs on cyberspace

THE issue of formulating a law regarding cybercrime — which has slowly but surely been acquiring urgency given how internet tools and features can and are occasionally being used to facilitate a whole range of transgressions from militancy to blackmail — has been with Pakistan for several years. The 2007 Pakistan Electronic Crime Ordinance lapsed in 2009, and since then there has been much back and forth over the matter. However, the draft law that was finally produced earlier this year by the National Assembly Standing Committee on Information Technology and Telecom came under a barrage of criticism from digital and human rights groups on the basis that it was a loosely worded piece of legal drafting, contained ambiguities and did not answer questions about overlaps with other laws. Detractors insisted that the draft betrayed a poor grasp on the technological and technical aspects of the World Wide Web and digital communications, and could be used to, for example, stifle political criticism, hold users responsible for a transgression even if accidental or committed unawares, and restrict free speech. When the National Assembly committee held further consultations with experts in May to correct the problematic sections of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Bill 2015, therefore, the move was greeted with relief.

That gain, however, now stands all but lost. The draft cleared by the committee on Thursday, say rights groups, is the same troubling piece of legal drafting as it had been earlier, with merely some clauses having been lightly amended. And, indeed, there is certainly enough in the draft to indicate that much more thought needs to be put in, particularly since the proposed legislation will not only be bringing a hitherto

unlegislated-upon domain into the ambit of the law, but will also become the baseline standard for future formulations. The bill is now to be tabled before the National Assembly, and it is vital that members familiarise themselves with the draft, and the criticisms against it, so that they are prepared for debate on the matter. It must not be allowed to be rushed through, for the issue is simply too connected to the fundamental rights of the citizenry. The information as to how a fair and forward-looking cybercrime law should be shaped is available with all the rights groups that have been campaigning on the matter. It is necessary for the people's representatives to step up and carry out their responsibilities.

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## Tax puzzles

THE latest testimony given by the chairman FBR before the Senate Standing Committee on Finance has raised more questions than it has answered. For one, we were all told in the budget speech that starting this year, our CNIC number would become the National Tax Number, meaning one step in the registration process will be eliminated and it will bring more people into the tax net. Now we learn that this is not really about to happen. It will still be necessary to register people first with the FBR, so the NTN's are going to be required for the foreseeable future. One would think that they would have thought through the process of replacing the NTN's with CNIC's, but apparently they had not.

The hearing also saw the re-emergence of the controversy over how many individuals the FBR has identified who are leading a lavish lifestyle but are not registered with the tax authorities. An earlier exercise had produced 700,000 families on this list, but the current FBR chairman has been refusing to own that number, claiming his list has only 43,000 families on it. The number of cases pending appeals was also questioned, as were the amounts of refunds stuck up with the FBR. One senator shared a rather intriguing new method for conducting cash transactions that he claimed was gaining in popularity, involving bank lockers with money stashed away and their keys used to represent the value of the funds within them, which he said was a response to the withholding tax on bank transactions of non-filers. The hearing made clear that the FBR has a hard time determining the number of people that are evading its net, the amounts owed to those who are within its net, and the fact that it may face new challenges in its attempts to get people to register themselves as taxpayers. If anyone needs an idea on why this country has such a hard time developing sustainable sources of revenue, he or she need not look beyond this hearing.

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## Challenge of accountability

ACCOUNTABILITY of and corruption by public officials may dominate the political discourse, and rightly so, but rarely is this understood in its proper context. A trio of articles in this newspaper yesterday provides a convenient sample of the scope and depth of the problem. To begin with, the NAB chairman, Qamar Zaman Chaudhry, defended his organisation against claims that some individuals are let off after returning less than the corruption proceeds that they are accused of. The chairman explained the difference between voluntary return and plea bargaining and denied that anyone investigated for or accused of corruption can return less than the principal plus mark-up and still strike a deal with NAB. However, he did not dwell on the details of which category of individuals is allowed or encouraged to make voluntary returns or reach a plea bargain and whom NAB decides to bring the hammer down on. Discretion and its misuse, then, remain a fundamental problem. Moreover, in some high-profile cases, the scams can be multiple – allowing the return of some money while failing to unearth the totality of stolen wealth is just another way of allowing true accountability to fail.

In another case, senior bureaucrats are believed to be blocking, most likely in collusion with their political bosses, the amendment to rules that would allow the FIA to register cases against the uppermost tiers of bureaucrats, Grade 20-22 officers. The current conflict of interest is quite clear: for the FIA to register a case against a senior bureaucrat, it must first seek the permission of the Federal Anti-Corruption Committee, a body stuffed with senior bureaucrats. To be sure, there are some safeguards needed when it comes to proceeding against



senior officials, especially given the vulnerability of bureaucrats to political pressure and petty rivalries that dominate the executive. Yet, a system that effectively allows bureaucrats to work in collusion with politicians to block the FIA from proceeding against senior bureaucrats is an unacceptable situation. It also demonstrates why, despite a litany of allegations, senior bureaucrats somehow largely avoid trouble with the FIA.

Finally, there is the case of the Balochistan chief minister, Abdul Malik Baloch, complaining to the Benazir Income Support Programme chairperson, Marvi Memon, of corruption in the disbursement of BISP funds. In effect, unscrupulous individuals are exploiting the poor literacy of the target group of the BISP and taking advantage of their failure to understand automated disbursements or how to navigate the lower tiers of bureaucracy. Yet, the problem is also a failure of awareness-building and information dissemination. The Balochistan government, as other provincial governments, and the BISP itself can develop and sustain more targeted information campaigns that can discourage the exploitation of beneficiaries. The lesson is the same in all three cases: better rules, stronger systems and more transparency alone will lead to real accountability.

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## LNG labyrinth

ANOTHER week, another setback. The continuing difficulty in making arrangements to import and distribute LNG within the country is turning into an evergreen theme. After nearly a week of back-to-back news conferences by the petroleum minister, we now have to contend with the refusal of the new managing director at SNGPL — the company that is tasked with distributing the imported gas to key customers who need it the most in Punjab — to go along with the plan that has been drawn up by the minister. One almost feels like sympathising with the minister at this point. He has shared with the country the difficulties he is faced with in arranging long-term supplies of gas, and putting in place proper systems for importing and distributing it. There are powerful vested interests, we are told, who are stymieing his efforts because they profit from the country's dependence on oil. There are bureaucratic hurdles and lack of cooperation from other government departments and ministries. But the only thing that really registers with the public is that after building an LNG import terminal “in record time” and then bragging endlessly about it, the government is stuck with a terminal and no long-term supply of gas.

The minister ought to dilate upon some of the points he made in his news conferences recently. He said a “mafia” tried to bribe him to prevent the LNG import terminal, that it asked him to sign a summary that would have damaged the terminal's operational chances. He should name this mafia and tell us about the contents of that summary if he wants these allegations to be taken seriously. He should also explain what role the domestic gas-pricing regime is playing in defeating his efforts to arrange long-term supplies. He should also answer

why much of this work was not done in the 18 months during which the terminal was under construction, and why we have had one deadline after another since then but no functioning arrangement of the sort that was promised to us. Given the aplomb with which the government congratulated itself upon seeing the terminal through to the start of commercial operations, it is now incumbent upon the authorities to either complete the remaining formalities or come up with a viable road map for utilising this capacity. The continuous news of setbacks and explanations needs to end and results need to be produced on an urgent basis.

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## Undernourished children

IT is impossible to build a progressive, modern state if millions of children in this country remain undernourished. Regrettably, as a recently released report indicates, the situation where child nutrition in Pakistan is concerned is critical, and unless the state responds with alacrity, another health crisis may be in the making. As per the Global Nutrition Report 2015, only a minority of children in Pakistan are growing healthily, whereas half of the children under five are stunted or wasted. These figures are corroborated by similar findings, including those of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation, which say that the nutritional state of children in this country is "exceptionally poor". Expectedly, the problem is particularly acute in rural and less-developed areas, especially Sindh and Balochistan.

The report also discusses the link between climate change and malnutrition; it says that even small seasonal fluctuations can have "big impacts" on food availability.

Experts have noted the need for "critical nutrition actions" to confront this crisis, which is by no means limited to Pakistan, as many other developing states are experiencing similar difficulties. Such findings on child nutrition have been discussed before. However, this sad state of affairs has failed to rattle the state or society out of complacency. Only when a large number of children die — as was the case in Thar last year — do we sit up and take notice, only to forget about the crisis as the next disaster begins to dominate the relentless news cycle. Clearly, Pakistan faces a child nutrition crisis and unless the state intervenes in an integrated, sustained manner, targeting the most at-risk children, this disaster will continue to unfold. There are many difficult obstacles standing in the way of a brighter tomorrow for Pakistan's children. However, malnutrition is not an insurmountable problem and can be overcome should the state possess the will to confront it. The provincial and central administrations need to realise that this is a crisis of national importance and they must respond to it accordingly.

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## Power sector audit

A NEW audit report has highlighted the scale of the mismanagement that lies behind the country's power crisis. The report says that embezzlement, misappropriation and irregularities totalling Rs980bn have been found in the accounts of the power sector for fiscal year ending June 2013 alone. The figure is staggering, although it includes many irregularities for which there may be an innocent explanation. Nevertheless, many of the more detailed inquiries reveal that the power sector was overwhelmed with governance problems in that year, including non-recoveries of bills, overpayment, cost overruns on projects that were delayed for one reason or another, and many other failures to properly account for finances or execute projects within cost. The internal controls of the sector entities were found terribly deficient by the auditor general of Pakistan who conducted the audit, and their capacity was further deteriorating. The frequency with which the same irregularities were found "cast a shadow of doubt on the effectiveness of this internal control system", said the AGP in the report.

The power sector has become notorious for its many structural weaknesses over the years. The situation did not materialise in one year alone, but reflects a steady descent into today's state of misgovernance and failure. The report finds that Rs401bn could not be collected from various defaulters. Line losses at various distribution companies were found to be higher than what they were reporting, and there were widespread instances of "poor monitoring of revenue collection, embezzlement of funds, misappropriation and theft of material, misuse of public

funds, incorrect billing, non-implementation of commercial procedure and non-adherence to provisions of power policy".

This is a long and rather damning list of failures and highlights the immediate need for greater transparency in the power sector. Professional management is urgently required to rectify its many failings, yet these very failures could dissuade professionals in the private sector from laying their hands on any power-sector entities. A regular disclosure cycle for key data from the power sector — units generated, sent out, billed as well as financial data — ought to be mandatory to report publicly on a regular cycle, just as in the case of listed companies. This will inculcate a sense of discipline in the power sector, as well as make it easier to catch irregularities earlier. Many of the problems that plague the power sector are simply the result of a bureaucratic culture still mired in the past, and without a strong and sustained effort to reform and bring in more transparency and accountability on a day-to-day basis, the power crisis in the country will persist. Occasional reports highlighting deficiencies from two years ago are not enough. The government needs to wake up to the governance challenges that are aggravating the power crisis, and stop seeing the latter as growing simply out of a lack of generation capacity.

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## MQM's appeal

OVER the last several months, in its responses to the action being taken against it during the Karachi operation by the Rangers and police, the MQM has traversed much of the terrain that lies between baleful defiance and tight-lipped restraint. The statement issued by its coordination committee on Sunday, however, appears for the first time to cross into the realm of abject capitulation. In it, the MQM has appealed to the establishment for clemency similar to that announced for “the estranged Baloch people” and to “heal the wounds of Mohajirs by forgetting past bitterness”. The statement also reiterates the party’s unwavering loyalty to Pakistan.

When a political party in an ostensible democracy appeals to the establishment for clemency, there is clearly something amiss. The MQM’s victim narrative does not behove the fourth-largest party in the National Assembly, with a formidable vote bank — particularly in Karachi and Hyderabad. In the last two elections, almost a quarter of all votes cast in Sindh went to the MQM. At the same time, the party’s democratic credentials have often been called into question on account of its activists’ strong-arm tactics at the hustings, to enforce strike calls, etc. Since the Karachi operation began, the allegations have expanded to include a slew of criminal activities ranging from extortion to murder. Nevertheless, the results of Karachi’s NA-246 by-election in April, held under close scrutiny while the operation was in full swing, were telling: the MQM won with 74pc share of valid votes, in a poll with a 37pc turnout — far higher than the norm for a by-election. Firstly, this illustrates that the party has an important role to play in the country’s political landscape, and

it should go about doing so — shorn of its militant element — especially with local elections around the corner. Secondly, when supporters of a party — especially one based on ethnicity — perceive it is being subjected to unduly partisan treatment, the sympathy vote will come into play. That can also, more worryingly, engender a siege mentality. Here the role of the powers that be is relevant, something the MQM, unwittingly or otherwise, has alluded to in its statement. The establishment’s predilection for meddling in politics — which has contributed in no small measure to the MQM’s periodic rise and ‘fall’, and to the birth of the MQM-Haqiqi as a counterbalance — does not take into account the dangers inherent in marginalising a large chunk of the population.

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## Cricket with India

PAKISTAN’S cricketing ties with India have hit another obstacle with the death of Jagmohan Dalmiya, chief of the Board of Control for Cricket in India. A visionary, Dalmiya, along with Pakistan’s Arif Abbasi, was the brain behind bringing the World Cup to the subcontinent in 1987. His induction at the helm of the BCCI earlier this year in place of the controversial N. Srinivasan was seen as a positive development by Pakistan that has been anxiously waiting for its arch-rivals to honour their long-standing commitment of playing a series either in Pakistan, or at a neutral venue. The BCCI, though expressing its willingness to send the Indian

cricket team to the UAE for a full series in December this year, has been clearly undermined by the strong anti-Pakistan stance of the Narendra Modi government. Hence the uncertainty over the series.

Pakistan Cricket Board chief Shaharyar Khan, himself a seasoned diplomat who toured India in July this year to salvage the situation, finally lost patience last week to state that Pakistan did not need to beg India for a cricket series. He further said that Pakistan could easily survive in the world of cricket without India's support and that the PCB would soon opt for 'Plan B' — which is to invite another leading cricket-playing nation to play a series in December. It is, indeed, lamentable that India continues to mix politics with sports, treating the sincere efforts of Pakistan's cricket administrators and ex-players for revival of the game with utter disdain. The constant snubbing of Pakistan players in the IPL, and more recently in the Indian Hockey League, is a testament to the Indian authorities' closed-minded attitude. What is even more regrettable is the toothless approach of the International Cricket Council in the matter. The world cricket governing body has been led by India's desires all this while, and has failed to impose any penalty or sanction on the BCCI for defaulting on its commitments with Pakistan during the past four years.

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## Pakistan's bond story

FOR a while now, the government has been revelling in accolades from the international community about the improving economic picture in the country.

Articles in the international media and statements from major league investors have spoken of Pakistan's economic turnaround in glowing terms, and credit rating agencies have acknowledged an improvement in the economic situation.

The IMF has also given a glowing review. For a while now, the government has basked in these assessments, and never failed to cite them in domestic political disputes as evidence of its superior handling of the economy.

Now a moment of truth approaches as the government mounts a road show to drum up investor support for a bond floatation scheduled for later this year.

*Also read: [Moody's maintains stable outlook for Pakistan](#)*

The moment will reveal whether the accolades have been little more than polite applause or if investors are actually willing to put their money into economic ventures.

From remarks made by the finance secretary ahead of the road show, it appears the government is building its case on the successes of the military operation. Security is returning, we are being told, and foreign investors and customers for exports are returning to the country.

The improved security environment will spur growth, he has said. The story is a good one, but will the investors buy it? A ratings report from Moody's issued only days before the road show began suggests that the investors will be looking elsewhere for their comfort with the Pakistani bond.

That release says in Pakistan, "institutional effectiveness has been hampered by factious relations between the executive, military and judicial branches of government" and "political event risks remain relatively high ... despite recent stability".

Downward pressures on Pakistan's credit rating come from "very low fiscal strength, due to its high debt levels and weak debt affordability in light of a narrow revenue base", says Moody's.

Meanwhile, ratings are held up by "support from multilateral and bilateral lenders" alone, which raises several questions given the approaching end of the IMF programme next year, and the choppy waters between Islamabad and Washington D.C. these days.

Despite rising reserves, "the level of external public debt poses a moderate degree of credit risk". The picture painted by Moody's offers a sharp contrast to the turnaround story that the government has been basking in for some time now.

Clearly, investors remain focused on the fundamentals in spite of the government's attempts to change the topic to improved security and rising reserve coverage of imports.

The bond offering is likely to be successfully subscribed, but all eyes will be on the level of participation and the spreads offered, which were very high during the last such exercise.

The government deserves some credit for having stabilised a deeply troubled economy, but the bond exercise will show to what extent investors actually believe in the larger story of a financial turnaround.

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## Sugarcane crisis

THE issue is an old one, even if it is tempting to link the Punjab government's takeover of a handful of sugar mills in the province to the ruling PML-N's newfound love for farmers.

The sale of the mills' assets is deemed as a last-resort measure to ensure a basic act of trade: payment of dues to the cane growers, in this case for their produce sold in the year 2014. The law stipulates payment within 15 days of procurement.

In reality the mills have for long frustrated the farmers' wishes and have added to an already extensive list of grievances in which the 'sugar barons' appear to exploit those who till the soil.

The millers say they now owe ‘only’ Rs3bn of the original outstanding amount of Rs134bn to be paid to the farmers for the cane bought in 2014.

The counter argument is to the point and reasonable. The delay in payment badly hurts the unpaid farmers who are not in any small number and leaves them struggling for resources. It shakes their confidence and they remain vulnerable to all kinds of unwanted advances for future crops.

The farmers’ case is simple — but the same cannot be said for the government which has intervened with this takeover of the sugar factories to ensure that the growers get their due.

There are complications. The millers have long been seeking interest-free loans from the government citing a ‘liquidity crunch’. The millers in Punjab give Sindh’s example where the sugarcane is, officially, much cheaper.

Asking for a level playing field, the millers in turn report non-payment of Rs2.66bn that was due in rebate three years ago — in addition to Rs2.5bn the State Bank was to pay them as rebate in the last fiscal.

Just as the farmers must get their dues promptly, other problems, including those linked to official promises, should not be eclipsed by the growers’ cry of anguish. Short of an adherence by everyone to system, the pain could return frequently.

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## Labour inspections

While the state and political forces claim to hold the interests of the labour force dear, the fact is that working men and women in Pakistan often get a raw deal.

Though laws to protect working people’s rights are on the books, as in other sectors it is their proper implementation that is lacking.

Speaking at an event in Lahore on Monday, the outgoing country director of the International Labour Organisation pointed out some of the achievements the country has made — as well as several lacunae — where protection of the labour force’s rights is concerned.

For example, the ILO official said that while the country has ratified 36 conventions, implementation of these remained an issue. The fact that home-based workers in Pakistan are now unionised was also praised.

*Take a look: [‘Pakistan lags behind in implementing labour conventions’](#)*

Yet amongst the biggest obstacles standing in the way of better and safer working conditions for the labour force was the lack of an adequate number of labour inspectors.

The ILO country chief said it was “unfortunate” that in a country of around 60 million workers, there were only about 336 labour inspectors, with only three of these being women.

The provinces need to address the yawning gap in the number of inspectors without delay. Some experts familiar with labour issues are of the opinion that in the post-devolution period, the system of labour inspections is relatively better in Punjab — though far from ideal.

However, in the other three provinces it is highly unsatisfactory. The fact that many workers are part of the informal sector is also problematic.

While the workforce has grown considerably, clearly, the state's legal and administrative structure to protect workers' rights has not kept pace.

When unscrupulous employers know that the system of checks and balances is highly flawed, they can get away with violating workers' rights.

While small-scale abuses and violations at the workplace are common, there are also occasions when the state fails to keep an eye on conditions on the factory or shop floor, and tragedies, such as the Baldia Town fire, take place.

The Baldia incident, in Karachi in 2012, in which hundreds were injured and over 250 killed is considered the country's worst industrial accident.

To prevent such tragedies from recurring and to eliminate the abuse of workers' rights, two major initiatives are required: the state must formalise the informal sector, while the system of labour inspection needs to be revitalised and made more effective.

## President's office

CONTROVERSY knows no limits and may frequently be found stalking the unlikeliest of personalities. The latest evidence of this came with a handout released by Prime Minister House indicating that

President Mamnoon Hussain, along with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, had co-chaired a gathering of PML-N members from the party's Sindh chapter.

An explanation by a PML-N stalwart said that the reference to Mr Hussain as co-chair in the handout was nothing more than a gesture of respect for the office of the president, while yesterday, the presidency refuted reports that Mr Hussain was involved in the PML-N's poll politics.

*Know more: [Presidency rejects PPP claims of Hussain's involvement in politics](#)*

Reacting to the meeting, the PPP, which has had to deal with several challenges arising out of Asif Ali Zardari's tenure as head of the Pakistani state, spoke of déjà vu and double standards as it recalled a 2011 judgement of the Lahore High Court which had barred the president of the country from taking part in political and party activities.

The court decision had a debilitating effect on the party. It hampered the activities of Mr Zardari, who was the pivot the PPP revolved around, as he was prevented from having PPP meetings at the presidency and from presiding over any party gatherings elsewhere.



Affected quarters criticised the ruling, terming it as discriminatory, hostile to democracy and even an infringement of the rights of an individual.

The difference here is that while Mr Zardari was both the president of the country and an active party co-chairman, Mr Hussain has been more discreet when it comes to publicly indicating his political preferences — he is hardly likely to be judicially reprimanded on this count.

Nevertheless, no amount of justification from the PML-N is going to change the fact that what was considered valid for Mr Zardari as president must also be legally binding on his successors in the presidency — although, instead of viewing it through the lens of discrimination, the PPP would do better to see the neutrality of the president's office as a principle that must be accepted by all political parties.

At the moment, it is more concerned with pointing out how one decree can treat two presidents differently, seeking to build upon perceptions of how it has been a victim of the legal system in times where it is under increasing threat of being held accountable for its deeds by the law.

Meanwhile, in giving his assent to the legislative business of the state, and issuing ordinances, for example, the president is not totally divorced from the 'politics' of the country.

However, his is largely a ceremonial role and should be kept as such as he is instructed by the Constitution to "represent the unity of the republic" — and one of the most effective ways of doing so would be to distance himself from the activities of political parties.

## Mansour's message

THE first official Eid message of the new leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Mansour, suggests that an immediate resumption of talks with the Afghan government is unlikely — and that divisions within the Taliban leadership still exist.

While the Eid messages of the previous Taliban chief Mullah Omar — now believed to have been authored over the past couple of years by Mullah Mansour himself — routinely emphasised the need for all foreign troops to leave Afghanistan, the new leader's message has called for the scrapping of the bilateral security arrangement between the US and Afghan governments that has allowed a residual American military presence to remain in Afghanistan.

*Also read: [Afghan Taliban factions issue contradictory Eid messages](#)*

But it is more than the seeming addition of a new precondition: the tone and tenor of the message suggest the emphasis is still on consolidating his leadership rather than continuing with his/Mullah Omar's gradual opening up to the possibility of a negotiated settlement. While the goings-on inside the Afghan Taliban leadership are notoriously opaque and difficult to predict, Mullah Mansour's switch from tentative peacemaker to placating the most hardline elements in the Afghan Taliban suggests he is yet to fully tamp down dissent against his rule.

The fact that a competing Eid message was issued by some Afghan Taliban leaders is indicative of lingering internal legitimacy issues.

Intriguingly, the new Taliban leader also made a mention of “foreign pressure” to resume talks being counterproductive and suggested it would create more problems than it would solve. The comment was likely aimed at Pakistan.

Again, however, it is difficult to know what prompted it: is he trying to appease the hawks among the Taliban or did the process of his installation as the next Taliban emir lead to some genuine friction with the Pakistani state?

The assumption thus far has been that the security establishment preferred the Afghan Taliban remaining united under Mullah Mansour and had worked with him earlier to make the Murree talks happen.

Could it be, though, that the extent of Pakistan’s influence over him has been exaggerated, just as it was argued that Pakistan controlled the Afghan Taliban and could dictate policy to them?

Whatever the truth about the relationship between Mullah Mansour and the Pakistani state, it is relatively clear that the latter has its work cut out for it. Nudging the Taliban to the negotiating table and stabilising ties with Kabul should be the immediate priorities.

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## Tax deadline

THE time of year has come around when we must get down to filing our taxes. And, as has been the norm for many years now, voices are once again being raised to ask for an extension in the deadline.

Once again, these voices ought to be given consideration. There are various reasons for this, some old and some new. Amongst the new reasons is the fact that the software that has been launched to handle electronically filed returns is proving to be a bit cumbersome for many filers.

The software was only introduced in August and many experts are still struggling with it, trying to understand it let alone complying with filing requirements.

*Take a look: [FBR fails to resolve e-filing problems](#)*

Two of the largest tax bar associations in the country have asked for an extension in the deadline on this count, and their voice should be given due weight in the decision.

There are other reasons to consider an extension. The filing deadline is very close to the end of the Eid holidays and people will have fewer days to devote to the exercise.

There is also widespread apprehension about tax matters not progressing as they should, with provincial authorities justifiably ruffling feathers as they make an effort to get people to register themselves, and non-filers up in arms over withholding tax on bank transactions.

In such an environment, it is important to hold the tiller firm but show flexibility where one can. Given the efforts of the government to encourage the filing of returns, it stands to reason that there will be many people this year filing for the first time, and they might need a little additional time to get their affairs straightened out and to understand what the system of taxation demands from them.

The government ought to sit with the tax bars to figure out how the IRIS system for electronic filing can be streamlined, while allowing more time for people to bring their affairs together and prepare to file.

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## Tragedies compounded

THIS year, a number of tragedies have marked Haj, even as the general state of affairs in the Muslim world remained deeply problematic.

On Thursday, the pre-Eid mood in Pakistan was sombre as news broke of the stampede in Mina, with reports indicating that hundreds of pilgrims had died or were injured in the tragedy that occurred in the site outside Makkah.

Similarly, the run-up to Haj had been marked by the loss of over 100 lives as a crane crashed at Makkah's Grand Mosque.

*Also read: [At least 717 killed, 863 injured in Haj stampede at Mina](#)*

This is not the first stampede during Haj; hundreds have died in similar incidents during past pilgrimages. Saudi authorities have taken measures to address issues like crowd control and pilgrim safety.

Nevertheless, a detailed study of the whole Haj process is required to improve management of the pilgrimage and minimise chances of accidents.

Moving beyond the immediate misfortunes, the Saudi Grand Mufti's Haj sermon in Arafat on Wednesday was significant — both for what the cleric said and for what was left out of the sermon.

Shaikh Abdul Aziz al-Shaikh raised the alarm against “misguided people” in a reference to the self-styled Islamic State. He also termed Yemen's Houthi movement, against whom a Saudi-led coalition is fighting a war on behalf of the Yemeni government, as “deviants”. It is unclear why the cleric chose the Haj sermon — which is supposed to be free of sectarian or nationalistic rhetoric — to forward the aims of his country's foreign policy.

There was also much the Grand Mufti did not say, at least not in unambiguous terms. For example, while IS has gained ground at an alarming speed in Iraq and Syria, it is also true that much of the Muslim world's present miseries are due to the lack of sagacity on the part of Muslim leaders.

Take the Yemeni and Syrian wars: instead of choosing to resolve these conflicts through dialogue, some Muslim states have, instead, fanned the flames. The result has been a brutal, extended nightmare for the Yemeni and Syrian peoples with no end in sight.

Similarly, it is odd that the Grand Mufti did not mention the migrant crisis: arguably most of the migrants making their way to Europe hail from failed Muslim states, which is a stinging indictment of the Muslim world's collective failure. In fact, the rich Gulf monarchies have been criticised for not doing enough to lessen the miseries of those fleeing conflict-ridden Muslim states.

The Haj sermon is a critical vehicle that can help shape debate in the Muslim world. Rather than expressing concerns in nebulous terms or promoting national agendas, it should be used to address concrete issues. Unless the Muslim world — especially its leaders — confront issues such as terrorism, extremism, disease, poverty and illiteracy that are rife in Muslim-majority states, it is unlikely that the future of over a billion of the world's people will change soon.

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## US-India declaration

THE hyphenated relationship is back, it appears. Pakistan-India, or India-Pakistan to much of the outside world, has at various points in history irritated one side or the other, the contention of Pakistan and India being that the other country's issues and concerns were being given too much weight.

During the Af-Pak era, the hyphen was dropped by the US. Now that most of the US troops have gone from Afghanistan and the US-India strategic partnership is getting fresh attention, the hyphen appears to be back.

*Take a look: [US-India joint statement assails LeT](#)*

Following the India-US Strategic and Commercial Dialogue, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj issued the Joint Declaration on Combating Terrorism. Its Pakistan-heavy emphasis will surely upset security establishment circles here.

Not only did Pakistan earn an explicit reference — “call for Pakistan to bring to justice the perpetrators of the 2008 Mumbai attack” — but so did Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, the Haqqani network and the so-called D Company.

Over and on top of that, there is specific condemnation of the Gurdaspur and Udhampur militant attacks earlier in the summer — attacks that India blames on Pakistan-based militants.

Set aside emotions and there are really two aspects to consider here. First, for all the various claims made by both sides in recent years, the Pak-US relationship is essentially transactional in nature and, on key issues, there is a great deal of divergence.

Because national security here has been militarised, there continues to be a degree of security cooperation between the US and Pakistan. But there is little real understanding, sympathy or even interest in Pakistan in the US beyond the narrow security-based relationship.

The US may be one of Pakistan's biggest trading partners and a significant percentage of Pakistan's, admittedly paltry, foreign investment comes from there, but economically and politically the relationship is stagnant.

Worryingly, Pakistan has few friends in the US Congress, suggesting more episodes such as the recent withholding of a portion of CSF funds may be on the cards.

Second, this country and its leadership need to ask themselves a hard question: why does Pakistan continue to be such a hospitable place for extremist and militants elements that threaten the region and friendly countries further away?

There may be a right-wing government in India hostile to Pakistan, but the latter's terrorism problem has much deeper roots. Zero tolerance for extremism and militancy is in Pakistan's interest. Such a policy though has yet to manifest itself here.

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## Hide collection

FOR many, a day that should be dedicated to profound reflection on the spirit of sacrifice becomes a time to worry.

The growing populations of Pakistan's cities over the years coupled with urban density and the lack of adequate civic management means that citizens are generally forced to carry out the Eidul Azha sacrifice in whatever space is at hand — with all the attendant problems of hygiene.

Moreover, there is the issue of the proper disposal of the unusable parts of the animal. Thankfully, in recent years, the major cities have seen some increased activity in terms of the collection of waste and the cleaning up of streets.

*Also read: [Going door to door to collect hides banned in Sindh](#)*

It is to be hoped that today and over the next two days, the citizenry as well as civic management authorities act responsibly in this regard.

Where the hides of the sacrificed animals are concerned, though, there is another situation since the numbers in which they are produced, as well as the need of tanneries and other industries for them, means they are as good as cash in hand.

While their disposal may be an issue for the average citizen, this is not the case for organisations that every year put up banners and create collection points in every city.

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These groups include many that have been banned or are suspected of indulging in problematic religious, political or sectarian activities, yet they continue to operate. This raises the problem of cash from the sale of sacrificial hides being used for the purposes of crime and terrorism.

In lawless Karachi, there is the added challenge of criminals seeing Eid as an opportunity to snatch hides at gunpoint. City and law-enforcement authorities are working on the issue and the incidence of this crime has come down in Karachi since the clean-up of the city began. But a much more stringent effort must be made.

The people, meanwhile, can play their part by making sure that the group to which they donate the hides of the animals they have sacrificed are not suspect in any way.

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## Pak-India challenge at UN

WITH Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in New York this week for the 70th UN General Assembly session, there is an opportunity for some serious diplomacy to be undertaken. Unhappily, the one meeting that the world at large would have been hoping for — between Mr Sharif and his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi — has not been scheduled, leaving perhaps only room for a scripted handshake.

Instead, the Pakistani prime minister is expected to use the occasion of his address to the UNGA to bring the global community's attention to tensions along the Line of Control and Working Boundary and the broader Kashmir dispute.

He will have his work cut out for him.

While the outside world has been concerned by the persistent tensions along the LoC and Working Boundary, it is also keen to do a great deal of business with India, be it in terms of trade, investment or military contracts.

Moreover, the US-India Joint Declaration on Combating Terrorism, following the first ever US-India Strategic and Commercial Dialogue, indicated just what a tough sell Pakistan faces: while the two countries specifically called on Pakistan to bring the perpetrators of Mumbai attacks to justice, Kashmir was only mentioned in the context of the militant attack in Udhampur on Aug 5.

Also read: [\*India converting LoC into quasi border, UN told\*](#)

Mr Sharif's task will be further complicated by the memory of Ufa. The joint statement following the July prime ministerial meeting proved to be a foreign policy debacle and a public relations disaster for the PML-N government.

However, Ufa is not dead and the recent meeting of the directors general of the Pakistan Rangers and the Indian BSF proved that the two sides can in fact get work done.

How then does Mr Sharif balance the need to put the Kashmir dispute front and centre again – as demanded by the hawks domestically and supported by the security establishment – while also keeping the door open to dialogue with a reluctant Mr Modi?

Thus far the Pakistani prime minister has not given much reason for confidence that he can pull off such a delicate balancing act. What is also disappointing is that there have been few ideas emanating from the political government on how to move the relationship forward.

Where there has been movement, it has seemingly been done in an ad hoc manner and with a view to doing whatever it takes to bring the Indian government around to talking. Ufa epitomised that careless thinking.

If there is to be no forward movement in the bilateral relationship in New York, what next? Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry has already outlined the substance of Prime Minister Sharif's speech at the UNGA on Wednesday: reiterating Pakistan's commitment to regional peace and briefing the world community on the situation along the LoC and Working Boundary.

That though does not suggest there is much thought being given to, for example, resurrecting the cancelled NSA talks or working on the other steps in the Ufa road map. Unless the political leadership shows some initiative, Pak-India ties could be set to drift for a while.

Also read: [UN chief urges Pakistan, India to hold talks](#)

*Published in Dawn, September 28th, 2015*

## Bank profits

ANOTHER quarter of record-high profits has put a lot of smiles on the faces of a lot of bankers. Profits in the banking sector have surged by 52pc in the quarter from April to June, with a large share of the increase coming from interest from loans extended to the government, a State Bank report shows.

These include direct investments in government bonds, or lending to public-sector enterprises, which appears to be the core mission of the banking system. These loans are easy to approve since they have the backing of a government guarantee, carry minimal risk, and are profitable.

Bankers in Pakistan are quite possibly minting some of the easiest money being made in the country these days. The sector as a whole raked in a total of Rs171bn in profit in the quarter.

These figures would not be all that surprising if it were not for the fact that banks are relying increasingly on liquidity provided by the State Bank to carry on their highly profitable trade. In effect, the government is pumping money into the banks, then borrowing it back in the form of debt.

In the process, the banks are raking in stupendous profits for doing very little other than shifting the funds from one place to another. This triangle creates a few winners, letting the government effectively bypass a limit placed by the IMF on direct borrowing from the State Bank and allowing banks a short cut to the hard road of raising deposits and taking risks with business enterprises.

Lending to the private sector remained subdued in this period, rising by a meagre 1.8pc. The appetite of the bankers for government debt remains unabated, however, with total holdings rising to Rs5.66tr. Much of this is held in long-term bonds which carry higher yields, and have a very liquid secondary market, and are “expected to shield the profitability of the banking system” even if interest rates should decline further.

These facts show that a decline in interest rates only helps the government lengthen the maturity profile of its domestic debt, while the banks continue to support the fiscal dysfunctions of the state with their deposits and liquidity support from the State Bank.

The interest rate’s easing appears to have had a marginal impact on reviving economic activity otherwise — an issue the State Bank ought to consider dilating upon in its subsequent reports.

## NAB’s exit doors

NOBODY doubts that accountability is necessary in this country to clean up a culture of corruption. It is equally clear that such accountability should be carried out by a fair and impartial body, and in a manner that is itself above reproach.

Emotion and witch-hunts have no space in a clean and transparent process of accountability, which must be thorough and meticulous in its evaluation of the facts that are relevant to any accusation.

The recent voluntary return of a portion of the funds alleged by NAB to have been fraudulently acquired by Qasim Zia, the PPP’s former Punjab president, fails many of these tests.

Detaining somebody on an allegation of misappropriating public money only to strike a deal later suggests that the exercise of accountability is either being used to victimise somebody on political grounds, or that it is being turned into an informal recovery drive to elevate the amounts they can show to have recovered.

The process of accountability as it is conceived in the NAB Ordinance contains a set of exit doors for the accused to pay up a portion of the funds allegedly embezzled and get off spending time in jail.

These exit doors are used quite liberally, and in July a sceptical Supreme Court even demanded that NAB submit a breakdown of how much of the Rs256bn it claimed to have recovered from



persons accused of corruption was genuine recovery and how much a settlement under the terms of these exit doors.

The first principle in accountability is due process, which means innocent until proven guilty. This entails careful framing of the charges so that recourse to bargains, either during the inquiry or investigation stage, should be used only in extraordinary circumstances.

The fact that we are seeing such deals being struck months after the Supreme Court had voiced its own scepticism about them shows that the accountability process being followed by NAB still needs to mature before it can be considered credible.

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## Bond questions

THE government's latest Eurobond issue has raised as many questions as it has dollars.

The exercise was successful to the extent that it met the target for raising the required amount of dollars, but participation was far weaker than it was during last year's bond exercise, and the yield did not come down despite higher reserves, improved security, rising growth and controlled fiscal deficit.

In fact, given that the yield on the 10-year US Treasury bond has fallen since the last Pakistani bond, the spread between our yields and the international benchmark has actually gone up.

*Know more: [Analysis: Eurobond attracts controversy](#)*

The level of interest also fell from the last such exercise, when the government set a target of \$500m, and attracted bids worth \$8bn. This time the target was the same, but the bids attracted were just about \$1bn.

Pakistan's 10-year bonds floated in April 2014 traded on a premium of more than 4pc on Monday, unusual given they are still nine years away from maturity.

Earlier this year, the premium had shot up to 10pc. The latest bonds too are expected to command a significant premium in the market, suggesting that the government may have overpriced them.

Why was there such haste to hold this exercise given that reserves are at a comfortable level, and global markets are still jittery over China and the possibility of a hike in US interest rates?

The finance team should explain the matter clearly. Overall, the bond exercise can be said to be narrowly successful given that the targeted amount was raised, but it appears investors remain wary of the government's story of a significant improvement in the economic situation; these questions prompted the government to highlight during its road shows that another IMF programme next year might well be an option for Pakistan.

Clearly, the improvement in the reserve coverage ratios is not enough to assuage the concerns of lenders, and the government ought to be careful about overselling these as its success story.

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## Education crisis

A CRISIS that has been several decades in the making, increasing in intensity while government after successive government was allowed to evade its responsibilities, appears to be reaching a head.

What started off as some protests by citizens against private educational institutions raising their fee, appears to be snowballing into a larger, countrywide debate — with growing criticism being directed against what is being seen as a sector that effectively operates as a cartel.

From the highest level of government, the Prime Minister's Office, has come the assurance that 'something will be done' — though exactly what, remains uncertain, given that access to good education has for years been understood in this country as a commodity, the purchase of which is the privilege of those who can afford to pay.

That private institutions should be carefully regulated and be required to conform to standard requirements cannot be argued against.

Yet forgotten in all the hue and cry being raised by both the parents' lobby and the government is the core issue: the shambolic state of affairs that prevails in the public education sector ie, the very ugly reality that led to the creation of the private institutions' so-called cartel in the first place.

The argument being offered by various private school associations is correct to the extent that it is the duty of the state and the government of the day to make quality and affordable education available.

The incumbent administration entered into a thoroughly self-congratulatory mode when Article 25-A regarding universal education was inserted into the Constitution.

Yet it continued to ignore the fact that it is presiding over a public school system that may be largely affordable but is grossly insufficient for the needs of a burgeoning population, has severe quality and standards' problems, and is plagued by issues such as faculty incapacities and absenteeism, corporal punishment, and the like.

The problems are well known but they have been entirely ignored because the middle and affluent classes — that ought to have been the lobby group for reform, as they are now for private institutions — chose instead to 'buy' themselves other options.

Now that matters have come to a head, the process of the repair and capacity-building of public-sector education must be initiated — a process that will be as long as it will be difficult, particularly since the stakeholders here do not include

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influential sections of the citizenry. That can fairly easily be remedied.

Would parliament be bold enough to, for example, debate legislation making it mandatory for all elected representatives and government servants to send their children to public-sector schools?

Such a move would immediately provide the reform project the galvanising shot in the arm it so desperately needs. And while this may seem too utopian a scenario, consider this: the government school system used to work well; it must be made to do so again.

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## Mina tragedy

THE stampede in Mina last week at the culmination of Haj has sent shockwaves across the Muslim world, mainly due to the number of casualties in the incident.

As per official Saudi figures, over 750 pilgrims died in the tragedy which occurred at the site of the ‘Jamarat’ just outside Makkah, while over 900 have been reported injured.

Given the high human toll, the Saudi authorities must take an unbiased, transparent look at Haj management — pilgrims have died in numerous similar incidents over the past few

decades — in order to spot the flaws and prevent the recurrence of such calamities.

*Also read: [Death toll of Pakistani pilgrims in Mina rises to 40](#)*

While there has been a construction boom in both Makkah and Madinah over the past few years, it is debatable if this development has kept in mind the safety requirements that such a large number of pilgrims — over two million hajjis now reportedly visit the holy places every year — demand.

Secondly, the Saudi Grand Mufti has cleared the royal family of all responsibility for the tragedy, saying that “fate and destiny are inevitable”.

Considering that Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy and everything is overseen by the royal family, the cleric’s remarks seem premature.

Moreover, the Saudi health minister’s comments blaming pilgrims soon after the tragedy were hasty and insensitive — how could the official make such a sweeping statement so soon after the disaster?

Within the Muslim world, the harshest criticism of Saudi Arabia’s Haj management efforts is coming from Iran; this is mainly because the Islamic Republic lost the biggest number of pilgrims in the stampede — around 130 individuals.

Be that as it may, Tehran should refrain from point-scoring in this regard. What is needed is a thorough investigation to look into all aspects of the tragedy.

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For example, some eyewitness accounts claim major roads around the Jamarat were blocked in the run-up to the stampede, which swelled the size of the crowd, while others claim there was a lack of adequate police presence.

All these angles must be investigated. Since it is true that many pilgrims do lack discipline, it should be incumbent upon Muslim states to make safety training a compulsory part of Haj classes, along with religious rituals.

The Saudis should involve experts from other parts of the Muslim world to help make Haj safer, while limits should be considered for the number of times people can go for Haj once they have performed their obligatory pilgrimage.

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## Afghan Taliban's victory

THE fall of Kunduz may have been near inevitable, but the effect has nevertheless been dramatic.

First, there is the symbolism: the fall of a northern city, far removed from the sanctuaries Pakistan is accused of providing and even further from the Afghan Taliban strongholds in the south of the country; its occurrence on the eve of the unity government's first year in charge; a significant Taliban victory as the annual fighting season approaches its end; a provincial

capital falling back into the hands of the Taliban some 14 years after they were swept from power by a US-led coalition.

*Also read: [US air strike hits Taliban in captured Afghan city: Nato](#)*

Then, there are the grim realities of the war itself. This fighting season has been unprecedented in terms of losses suffered by the Afghan National Security Forces and gains made by the Afghan Taliban. Kunduz was under Taliban assault last September and again this April, and each time the same pattern revealed itself: poor coordination among the Afghan army, police and local police and an abject lack of leadership.

While the Taliban assault does seem sophisticated and well-coordinated, a great deal of the problem appears to have resulted from the failure of the ANSF.

There is even speculation that Kunduz was allowed to fall because rushing in forces from neighbouring provinces could have worsened the security situation in other regions. That theory will be tested now that the Afghan government has declared retaking Kunduz a priority. It will not be easy, however.

With Taliban forces now inside the city and mixing with the local population, fighting will likely cause civilian casualties and damage to the city's infrastructure.

Victory, if the Afghan state does succeed in retaking Kunduz, may well be a Pyrrhic one. The problems for the Ashraf Ghani-led government though go far beyond Kunduz.

A year on, the unity government appears to be going nowhere. If anything, it appears to have been a strategic error by the US to force Mr Ghani and his rival for the presidency, Abdullah Abdullah, into an arrangement that neither really wanted.

The Afghan government was never a service-oriented, people-centric entity under president Hamid Karzai, but that was precisely what Mr Ghani had vowed to change. Instead, he has been bogged down in the endless politics of maintaining an unnatural coalition.

Worrying too are the prospects for the resumption of talks between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government.

Even as Mullah Mansour's negotiating position appears to have hardened, the Afghan government seems unsure about engaging the Taliban in talks at all. Perhaps, following the collapse of the second round of the Murree talks, elements inside the Afghan state had hoped that the Taliban would splinter so that they would be easier to deal with on the battlefield.

But that has not come to pass — leaving the Afghan government seemingly at a loss about how to proceed.

*Published in Dawn September 30th, 2015*

## Power gaps

THE power-sector regulator has given us a good look into the myriad weaknesses that plague the energy industry, but the question remains whether or not it can play any role in helping to lessen them.

The picture that Nepra's latest annual report reveals about the performance of various power-sector entities, pertaining to both the generation and distribution side, is truly dismal.

*Also read: [All power companies sent wrong bills to consumers: Nepra](#)*

Wrong bills were sent to customers and rectification was delayed on purpose to artificially inflate the recoveries. Transmission and distribution hardware were in dilapidated shape, transformers in many areas were overloaded many times over their capacity, and load in most areas was far above what was sanctioned for them, with no attempts being made to update the information.

Frequent tripping was attributed to these hardware and governance failures. Moreover, generation units were being operated with little regard for efficiency, and some units that ought to have been abandoned years ago were still being maintained, even though they contributed nothing to the grid.

Jinnah Hydropower, a project initiated in recent years, was experiencing repeated technical problems and had still to start commercial operations.

The picture that emerges from even a quick reading of the report is of a power sector in the grip of severe mismanagement.

The energy bureaucracy is manifestly unable to live up to the requirements of a rapidly growing power sector, resulting in inefficiencies and losses that are mounting to a point where nobody in the government is really in a position to take credible remedial measures.

The report is a stark reminder that nothing short of structural reform of the sector will rid us of these problems, and the lynchpin of that reform is to allow a greater role for private-sector management and incentives.

A market for bulk sale and purchase of electricity is essential to eliminate distortions brought on by an outmoded tariff regime that is responsible, in substantial measure, for the circular debt.

Likewise, empowering the boards drawn from private-sector professionals for overseeing the affairs of various power-sector entities is essential to removing the operational difficulties that have engulfed them.

Nepa has pointed out the problems in the sector, but it cannot play a role in mitigating their effects in any meaningful way. For that to happen, deeper structural reform is needed. It is indeed a pity that the power regulator stopped short of calling for such reforms in its report.

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## Bill Gates on polio

MEETING Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly anniversary functions, Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates said that it is possible for Pakistan to eradicate polio by the end of this year.

It is not clear whether this was an expression of hope, or a statement of confidence — largely because regardless of how much help is proffered by international forums, from UN subsidiaries to others including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, it is Pakistan, and Pakistan alone, that is the architect of its own future on this front.

*Also read: [Bill Gates lauds Pakistan's efforts to eradicate polio](#)*

The country has indeed seen some success in recent months. As the prime minister informed Mr Gates, this year has seen far fewer reported new cases emerge — less than 40 so far — as compared to nearly 400 over 2014.

Murderous attacks on polio workers too have lessened; many of them now work under armed protection. And it has been possible to vaccinate hitherto unvaccinated children, especially those from the northwest of the country. Even so, daunting challenges face Pakistan as it attempts to contribute to the international push for global polio eradication.

Consider, for example, the administration of the vaccine to children from Fata and other inaccessible areas.

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This was only possible because of the mass-scale exodus from the area as a result of the army operation against militancy, which forced tens of thousands of people to flee their homes and head towards major cities such as Peshawar and Karachi; inoculation at check points along the way was made mandatory, hence the uptick in the numbers of vaccinated children.

Consider also the implications of the fact that while the efforts of the Expanded Programme for Immunisation do have an impact, routine immunisation rates, amongst even middle-class sections, have taken a downturn in recent years. Yet, the efforts must continue — and succeed — because a cold reality stares us in the face. This is one of the world's last two countries that remain polio-endemic. Pakistan and Afghanistan stand to bring the world's efforts to naught.

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