

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of April 2017*

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## Carnage in Parachinar again

The scene is grimly familiar, as is the location. A market has been struck in Parachinar — the second market bombing this year in the town and the fourth since 2013.

The Friday bombing, likely aimed at inflicting maximum harm ahead of the weekly congregation at a nearby Shia imambargah, further crystallised what has long been clear about the violence in the Parachinar region of Kurram Agency: militancy with an overtly sectarian dimension. And after rival claims to this year's January bombing in the area, yesterday's attack has been followed by a claim of responsibility from Jamaatul Ahrar, the TTP splinter that has been at the forefront of recent attacks across the country. The long war against militancy, longer in the Parachinar region than most parts of the country, looks set to grind on, undermining the gains made elsewhere.

For Pakistan, the questions are many, and all wearily familiar. The tone of the political leadership may have changed somewhat since earlier this year, when senior government officials openly and at odds with the facts tried to downplay the sectarian underpinnings of militancy, but there is no clear path ahead either. Perhaps nowhere is the connection between extremism and militancy more apparent than at the sectarian intersection. While the roots of the animosity may indeed be historical, stretching back many centuries as some government officials glibly claimed, it is actively encouraged by a vast infrastructure of extremism. The tentative steps taken under the National Action Plan and by provincial governments to fine or arrest preachers of hate has done little to slow the poison being spread across the land. The need for an unequivocal, firm and determined message — that Pakistan is and will remain an inclusive state and society — remains as strong as ever. What the message must be is clear; whether the state has the will or ability to carry it forward until it becomes uncontested and undeniable across the country is unclear.

There is also the problem of the state choosing to emphasise one part of the problem and in doing so distorting the real scope of militancy. With Jamaatul Ahrar claiming responsibility for yesterday's attack, the problem of cross-border militancy and Pakistan's growing discontent with Afghanistan will likely come into focus again. But terrorism and militancy blighted Parachinar before the emergence of Jamaatul Ahrar, and the relationship with Afghanistan is far more complex than the now undeniably serious problem of anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan. The answer lies in drawing together seemingly disparate threads such as NAP, Operation Raddul Fasaad, and national security and foreign policy into a coherent, effective and strategic approach. It will not be easy, but there is also no realistic alternative. The suffering in Parachinar must not be in vain and with no end. The ugly reality of sectarianism must be confronted directly and decisively.

## Park controversy

ENCROACHMENTS are the bane of urban Pakistan, as sidewalks, roads, parks and other spaces meant for the public are easily gobbled up by unscrupulous elements. Sometimes the encroachers come in the form of small-time shopkeepers or peddlers, who set up shop on pavements or roadsides. However, when big money takes over large parcels of public land and is granted 'legal cover' by the state to do so, the problem becomes a tad more complex. Take the ongoing hullabaloo over the vast, decaying expanse of Karachi's Bagh Ibne Qasim, a public park on the city's seafront that has been apparently 'gifted' to property firm Bahria Town by the Sindh government. On Thursday, a notification was issued by the Sindh local government department stating that Bagh Ibne Qasim "has been taken over by the Local Government Department from Karachi Metropolitan Corporation and handed over to M/s Bahria Town Private Limited for adoption. ..." On Friday, the matter was the focus of attention in the Sindh Assembly, as the MQM-led opposition blasted the PPP-led treasury over the decision. Meanwhile, Karachi Mayor Wasim Akhtar said he was not consulted about the transfer, while Malik Riaz, the head honcho of Bahria Town, stated he would not take over the park until all "stakeholders" were on board.

Whatever the intentions of the Sindh government behind the 'gifting' of the park to the property firm, the fact is that this public recreation space is not the property of the provincial government; hence it cannot give it to private parties to 'adopt' via a royal fiat. The park, in fact, is the collective property of the citizens of Karachi, especially those of KDA Scheme 5, as they are the ones who pay taxes for its development and upkeep. It beggars belief that area residents, as well as the elected Karachi City Council, were bypassed regarding the park's 'transfer' to the private firm. The controversy seems to be in line with the unfortunate trend of commercialisation of public parks. Government bodies in Karachi and elsewhere in the country have in fact facilitated the takeover of public spaces entirely or partially by big business, despite the fact that the courts have stepped in a number of times to put a stop to this racket. Instead of pandering to big money, the state must keep the interests of citizens paramount and preserve the few public spaces that remain open to the people.



## Out, but maybe not

PAKISTAN cricket, reliably unpredictable, must find a complicated way of reaching a target. Now try reading this googly by Shaharyar M. Khan. He wants to step down as chairman Pakistan Cricket Board. Then, almost in the same breath he has said he is willing to continue if the board's patron, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, wishes him to. The reaction would be: was this needed at this stage? There are always stories going around about struggle for control at the board and indeed in the past there has been criticism of two centres of power existing at the PCB, represented by Mr Khan and Najam Sethi, the chief executive of the board. Of late, though, there has been a certain kind of smoothness about the working of these two officials: Mr Khan playing the old-world gentleman right out of the aristocratic cricketing tradition, to complement the more enterprising and forever pragmatic slog-over specialist Mr Sethi.

Then why the resignation, and why now? Health and personal reasons as stated? Cricket is important no doubt, but will a PM who is at the centre of a make-or-break Panama case find time to deal with the PCB's affairs at this moment? To many observers, the 2018 general election has a bearing on the timing of the PCB chairman's decision to quit. It is commonly understood that the PCB patron might be inclined to appoint a chairman of the board, for a stipulated three-year term, in the run-up to a general election. This is said to be a desirable arrangement to ensure — in theory — that the nominee is there running the PCB notwithstanding who wins the polls. This is what Messrs Asif Zardari and Zaka Ashraf tried to achieve when the latter was appointed the cricket board chairman ahead of the 2013 election. Whatever the case may be, such speculation is best dealt with through a quick and final response on the issue by the prime minister. The sooner it comes the better.

## Shift in India's nuclear policy?

THE complexity of nuclear deterrence should not prevent a wider understanding of how subtle shifts can lead to a profound increase in threat and danger. A recently released memoir by former Indian national security adviser Shivshankar Menon and comments by an MIT academic have combined to suggest that a shift in India's nuclear 'no first use' policy is being undertaken, moving it away from its explicit policy of not using nuclear weapons first in a conflict with Pakistan and towards a policy of so-called preemption. The effect of that change, or even the possibility of such a change, can be twofold: a continuing nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan; and perhaps a lowering of the nuclear threshold, the point at which nuclear conflict becomes a real

possibility. Unhappily, South Asia appears poised for another round of accusations and recriminations in the most dangerous of arenas.

No first use was always a political statement by India that could change in wartime and it has never been a policy on which Pakistan could base its own nuclear strategy. Simply, in the realm of nuclear weapons there is no room for concessions based on perceived intent, only strategy based on the other's capabilities. But in the ongoing evolution of Indian strategy, a distressing spiral towards ever greater danger in the region is discernible. The Indian and western explanations for the shift are rooted in the perceived threat of a large-scale terrorist attack on Indian soil emanating from Pakistan. That was the justification for the destabilising Cold Start doctrine that led Pakistan to venture down the road to tactical nuclear weapons. Now, in response to Pakistan's response to Cold Start, India is flirting with the idea of a preemptive nuclear attack on Pakistan to ostensibly deter it from considering using tactical nuclear weapons.

What the Indian and western explanations take for granted, however, is that India is a benign power that will only act defensively. For Pakistan, while India must be engaged in dialogue diplomatically, military strategy must be based on the possibility that India will not always have benign intentions. Indeed, in the current climate of growing right-wing political sentiment in India, it is an affront to Pakistan to suggest that Indian policy is necessarily and always will be benign towards it. For all right-minded and sensible people in India and Pakistan, the urgency for dialogue between the two countries is greater than ever. In the cause-and-effect, chicken-or-egg security dynamic between them, the only reality thus far has been an ever more armed region with an ever greater array of the most dangerous weapons known in the history of mankind. The Cold War proved that military logic can lead to ruinously expensive outcomes and wildly disproportionate weapons capabilities. Pakistan and India should take heed before it is too late to pull back from a race to mutual destruction.

## Attacks on schools

WITH Pakistan's already dismal record in the education sector, the country scarcely needed any more challenges on this front, but that is exactly what years of militancy have represented. However, violent extremists are not the only ones culpable in the matter, a fact that a new report by Human Rights Watch recognises. *Dreams Turned into Nightmares: Attacks on Students, Teachers and Schools in Pakistan* examines the issue in a more holistic way — even though researchers could not gain access to Balochistan, ironically for security reasons. According to Global Terrorism Database figures that the HRW cites in its report, during the period between 2007 and 2015, there

were 867 attacks on educational institutions, resulting in 392 fatalities and 724 injuries. Based on interviews with students, teachers and parents, the report highlights serious failures on the part of the provincial authorities over the course of the decade between January 2007 and October 2016. Their policy of outsourcing security responsibilities to school authorities has led to financial hardship for the administrations of academic institutions and contributed to the disturbing trend of arming teachers, while criminal cases have been filed against principals for inadequate security measures. The report also includes within its scope the occupation of educational institutions by security forces (in KP and Sindh), political groups and criminal elements. In Karachi, there was a time when some schools in parts of Lyari were turned into MQM sector offices while many others in the area were destroyed or occupied by gangsters.

The report points to the lack of reliable national data on school attacks; this is a critical gap in knowledge which leaves the government ill-equipped to respond to them adequately or institute protective measures. Given it was a horrific attack on a school, APS Peshawar — in which more than 140 were slaughtered, including students, teachers and staff — that proved to be the catalyst for the National Action Plan, it is surprising that none of its 20 points pertains to the protection of education. That oversight should be addressed with the attention it deserves, especially to girls' education, which has suffered disproportionate harm. Priority should be given to setting up rapid response units — that can be deployed in the event of an attack on a school — and to rebuilding destroyed or damaged infrastructure, reclaiming occupied school buildings, and providing psychosocial support to students who have suffered violence. That is one way to secure this country's future.

## Polio vaccination refusals

DESPITE years of effort on an appreciably large scale, and the investment of vast amounts of funds, Pakistan's polio situation remains out of control. Alongside Nigeria and Afghanistan, we remain one of the last three of the world's countries where the virus is considered endemic. The problem lies not just in the challenge of reaching every child in this populous nation, but also in countering the misinformation, confusion and fatalism that has been sown in the minds of parents. The latest news in this regard came on Saturday from Islamabad; it seems that the number of people belonging to better-off classes of society that are refusing to allow their children to be vaccinated is growing. On Friday, an altercation with one such person in the capital escalated to a level that an FIR had to be registered against him, leading to his arrest. According to Additional Deputy Commissioner Abdul Sattar Isani, many people claimed that the

children under their care had already been vaccinated, but were unable to provide documentary evidence in this regard.

In that bland sentence lies the crux of the matter. Its decades-long battle with polio notwithstanding, the country has not made a concerted push to ascertain how many refusals against vaccination during the anti-polio drives mean that the children go uninoculated, and how many refer to cases where children have already been immunised at, say, private facilities. This is a distinction of crucial importance, since it refers to the mistaken belief in even the well-educated that the latter situation makes participation in the anti-polio campaigns redundant. Eradicating the virus involves administering the vaccine to every child in the targeted area over a limited span of time, all at once — patchy inoculation at different times allows the virus to keep popping up. This is no mean task in a country where the resistance to the vaccination is such that refusals have had to be made an offence inviting arrest. Yet it must be undertaken with renewed resolve.

## State Bank quarterly report

WHAT do we make of an economic situation in which everything is rising? The latest State Bank quarterly report, which covers the first half of the fiscal year, shows exactly such a situation. Exports are up, albeit marginally, but finally the spell of 10 consecutive quarters of declines has been broken. Foreign investment is up, although the bulk of the increase owes itself to two acquisitions by large foreign companies, and CPEC related inflows are notably subdued even as machinery imports climb. Reserves have risen too, even if marginally, sufficient to cover five months of imports, a comfortable position indeed. Imports have also risen, faster than any other inflow, driven mostly by oil and machinery. And the trade deficit is also rising, faster than anybody anticipated. Growth is up, inflation is up and so is the public debt and external borrowing.

So how do we describe such a situation? Ordinarily we would say it is unsustainable because the economy is growing but it cannot afford that growth. Exports are not rising faster than imports, and foreign inflows are largely debt creating. The authors of the report seem to understand this, because in describing the external sector, they say “the real challenge emerges from the financing standpoint”. But these are not ordinary times, given the growing Chinese investments pouring into the country and a “game changer” of a plan unfolding. All will be well, we are being told, because once the machinery being imported begins commercial operations, it will boost the economy and then we will indeed be able to afford the higher growth rates we are moving towards.

It is an enticing tale, and could be a source of much comfort, if so much was not riding on it. There is an assumption underlying the tale: that the investments underway will bring a boost that is larger than the costs of their commercial operations. That may yet happen, and CPEC could indeed carry us to the next level much like earlier spurts of investment in the power sector — in the 1960s and again in the late 1990s — did. But there is growing anxiety in the country that things may turn out differently, and the gaping deficits of today could spell trouble tomorrow, leading us to repeat another story of repeated approaches to the IMF once reserves fall. So far it is not a given which way things will go, but the telling of the tale that is propping up this state of affairs could be improved if we had a better idea of the projections that have gone into it. Thus far, though, we have little more than assurances to work with.

## Pak-Bangladesh ties

THE bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh is currently experiencing a deep freeze, as the Awami League-led government in Dhaka seeks to resuscitate the ghosts of 1971, with Islamabad replying in a similar tone. In the latest sign that ties are far from cordial, the Pakistani delegation decided to boycott a meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Union that kicked off in Dhaka on Saturday. According to a report in this paper, Pakistani diplomats and foreign ministry officials said the situation was “not conducive” for Pakistani lawmakers to participate in the moot. National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq also confirmed that the Pakistani delegation would not be attending. Moreover, the Bangladesh Cricket Board has also turned down its Pakistani counterpart’s invitation to tour this country citing “inadequate” security arrangements.

Pakistan-Bangladesh relations have taken a nosedive ever since Sheikh Hasina Wajed started her current stint as prime minister. And with Narendra Modi’s rightist government calling the shots in New Delhi, Ms Wajed’s hard line towards Pakistan has been emboldened. Last year’s Saarc summit in Islamabad was postponed as Bangladesh was among the regional states that had pulled out apparently due to Indian pressure. And on March 25, Dhaka observed ‘genocide day’ to mark the tragic events of 1971. What is more, it has been reported that Bangladesh will write to the UN to observe every March 25 as ‘genocide day’. These moves will do little to improve relations between Islamabad and Dhaka, and will only elicit tit-for-tat responses from this country. Indeed, the powers that be in Dhaka must think about the benefits, or lack thereof, of strained ties with Pakistan. How long will milking the tragedy of 1971 for political mileage continue to benefit the Awami League? There is no doubt that the separation of Pakistan’s former eastern wing has left deep scars in this country as well as Bangladesh. However, the way forward is only through truth and reconciliation, not

through continuing to poison future generations with the venom of the past. Bangladesh should reconsider its attitude to Pakistan and respond to Islamabad's overtures. On the other hand, despite the hostile atmosphere, Pakistan should not have boycotted the IPU meeting; it would have afforded the parliamentarians an opportunity to interact with their counterparts in an attempt to find a political solution to end this Cold War. Pakistan must respond to provocations in a calm and measured tone and resist attempts to isolate it regionally and internationally.

## The case of Urdu

A DIVISION bench of the Lahore High Court has suspended a directive passed by a single-member bench that called for the Central Superior Services examination to be held in Urdu beginning in 2018. The earlier LHC direction had come in the wake of a Supreme Court ruling in 2015 that called for having Urdu as the language for running the affairs of the state. The latest order was passed last Wednesday on an appeal by the Federal Public Service Commission with the next hearing fixed for April 20. In its arguments, the FPSC echoed the views that were widely expressed in the public domain after the court order to make Urdu the medium for the CSS examination.

Talk of Urdu as the language of power typically stirs up sensitivities. Not least among them is the question of native tongues and the view held by so many that Urdu — as yet — doesn't quite have the capacity to cater to the state. Indeed, it is commonly and controversially contended that a switch to Urdu will bring CSS standards down. It is said that the language, because of a sheer absence of sufficient exposure to many modern subjects such as science at the highest level, lacks in certain essential expressions. This often charged debate will continue as the LHC sits down to deliberate upon the matter. It is an important case and the decision will be eagerly awaited by not only the aspiring CSS candidates but Pakistanis at large. A salient point put forward so far is that there is no Urdu syllabus and no experts around who are trained to measure just how competent the CSS's Urdu-medium candidates are. This would entail, first, implementing Urdu as the medium of learning at all levels to enable both the language and the candidates required to take this high-efficiency test in Urdu. Rather than an abrupt transition, there must be a gradual, phased approach towards the creation of a system where the candidate can choose from multiple language options.

## Waiting for a verdict

AT the conclusion of the Panama Papers hearings in the Supreme Court, Justice Asif Khosa, head of the special five-member bench, emphasised that the justices would analyse the matter in depth and would therefore need some time. That was on Feb 23. In the nearly six weeks from then, the Panama Papers issue and the political fate of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif have remained where they have been for a year now — at the centre of the national political discourse. Indeed, yesterday marked one year since the Panama Papers were made public, triggering an international outcry and ensnaring wealthy, politically connected individuals across the globe. The Justice Khosa-led SC bench was right to call for political and media restraint throughout the hearings and it has been right to not succumb to outside pressure for a quick judgement or short order. Yet, an argument can be made that further delay and the political paralysis that it will bring are undesirable and it is time for a definitive and well-substantiated decision by the court.

By now, it is clear that the hearings themselves have become historic. While the Sharif family and the PML-N have tried hard to downplay the legal significance of the petitions, the revelations in court have cast a shadow over the first family's credibility. It is for the court to decide if Prime Minister Sharif and his children are legally liable for their actions, but the political damage is undeniable. The shifting explanations are made worse by the emerging possibility of the first daughter, Maryam Nawaz, as a future party leader. Surely, the rules of the democratic order ought to have developed beyond what was considered acceptable when Mr Sharif made his political debut over three decades ago. At the very least, the next generation of the Sharifs do not appear to understand that in a true democratic order, public representatives must be held to an exemplary standard of financial conduct. Instead, the Sharifs seem to believe that a certain level of political popularity ought to excuse lapses and misjudgements when it comes to managing family finances.

The SC will necessarily have to give a verdict on the Sharifs that strictly adheres to the letter and spirit of the law. Where the court may have some space to be more expansive is in the realm of recommendations that can strengthen the democratic order by tightening the financial rules and disclosures that public representatives must abide by. While the court must be mindful of separation of powers, it is also true that there is a political consensus in the country that the Panama Papers matter ought to be settled by the courts. If the court recommends a specific set of actions to promote financial transparency and accountability, the political class may find itself bound to comply and the democratic order possibly strengthened as a result.

## Sargodha murders

TWENTY people killed in order to 'cleanse' them of their worldly afflictions. It is difficult to recall when the country, brimming as it does with people pursuing spiritual purity or combating all kinds of guilt via various routes, last experienced a similar incident of this magnitude. The mass murder that took place on Friday in Sargodha — though discovered by police on Sunday — at the hands of a shrine custodian and his accomplices, brings a number of ugly aspects to the fore: superstition, isolation from society, patronage of influentials. One may well include intelligence failure in the list, for most ignorant is a law-enforcement set-up that is unaware of what is happening for such long hours at a place potentially as heady as a shrine.

It is never too difficult for a clever individual anywhere to convince a few of those around of the need to clean up their souls but Pakistan's social system facilitates such extreme steps by not doing enough to expose its citizens to the help they so desperately need in terms of their physical and mental well-being. Poverty is an issue in many cases, although this latest instance reconfirms that when it comes to matters of belief, even the supposedly educated can easily fall prey to overwhelming madness. The spiritual side to this story might never be known fully — 20-odd people offering themselves up slave-like, in total submission, in such a manner is a riddle unlikely to be satisfactorily resolved. For the time being, a theory has been tentatively put forward which hints at some succession row at the Ali Mohammad Qalandar shrine where the incident took place, and which may have played a role — given that the spiritual and material often go hand in hand in this business. That said, it is shocking to realise that the man who confessed, did so with an apparent sense of security that he will not or cannot be held accountable for his blood-curdling act. This sense of safety could only come from a real or imaginary immunity from punishment. Although that is an indictment of everyone around, practicality demands that the follow-up also include asking questions of those responsible under the system. How could the police not get a whiff of what was happening at the shrine? And where were the other routine minders, like the local government representatives, while the shrine was being bathed in human blood?



## Dr Riaz Ahmed's detention

IT is a strange irony in Pakistan that those who protest peacefully are silenced by the deep state, while the merchants of hate and death are largely free to stomp across this land with impunity. Take the case of academic and rights activist Dr Riaz Ahmed who, along with fellow educator Dr Meher Afroze Murad, was detained by security forces on Saturday. The two academics were heading to the Karachi Press Club to address a press conference to demand the release of Dr Hassan Zafar Arif — another fellow activist and educator — when they were picked up by the Rangers. While Dr Murad has reportedly been freed, Dr Ahmed has been remanded in judicial custody and a case filed against him for possessing a firearm. A Rangers' official has said he “personally knew Dr Ahmed for his efforts in creating momentum for the release of bloggers accused of committing blasphemy”.

These are very dangerous, and troubling, charges. Those who know Dr Ahmed can testify that he has always advocated peaceful resistance to oppression, so the charge that he was found in possession of a firearm is highly implausible, and all the more disturbing for that. The professor is a member of the academic council of the University of Karachi, where he teaches applied chemistry; and the treatment meted out to him is unconscionable. This rising trend of treating respected academics as ‘security threats’ by the state is highly disturbing. It should be remembered that Dr Hassan Zafar Arif — for whom Dr Ahmed was protesting — has been in detention since October last year. The bail application of the septuagenarian academic — hauled away for his links with MQM-London — was deferred for the third time on Saturday. In the cases of both Dr Arif and Dr Ahmed, detaining these academics as prisoners of conscience due to their beliefs is reprehensible. The government must stop persecuting activists on flimsy grounds, or else Pakistan will earn the unenviable reputation of being a police state that crushes all peaceful dissent.

## Prosecuting money launderers

THE recent sentencing of Altaf Khanani, one of the principal players of the Khanani and Kalia International money exchange company, in a US court must be causing some trepidation in powerful quarters in Pakistan. He was charged with 14 counts of money laundering, and eventually pleaded guilty to one, receiving a very lenient sentence of 68 months in prison and a \$250,000 fine, where the maximum penalty was 20 years for each count. It is intriguing how such a light sentence was managed given he was caught red-handed in a sting operation. All signs point toward the fact that he has

volunteered some very important and detailed information in order to escape the prospect of spending the rest of his life in jail.

Even though the investigation through which he was ensnared was a wide-ranging one, it took very little effort for US law enforcement to actually catch him and bring him to a point where he confessed before a court and volunteered all the information that was asked from him. The sting operation took less than six months to lead to a sealed indictment, and less than three months after that he was arrested. This is in sharp contrast to his experience here in Pakistan, where not just Khanani but the entire management and owners of KKI were arrested in 2008, and the full record of all their servers was seized. Yet despite being in custody for three years, and despite the enormous volume of evidence gathered from their servers by the FIA, they were ultimately released due to a series of mysterious errors and omissions in the material presented before the court. This clearly pointed towards the intervention of higher powers that had mobilised to protect the accused.

It is those higher powers who should now be worrying about what, and how much, information has been volunteered by Khanani in his plea bargain, and what consequences might follow. Given the prevalence of corruption in Pakistan, and the long list of clients served by KKI, there are likely to be some interesting disclosures in the times ahead as law-enforcement agencies from various countries begin acting on the tips and clues provided by him. Eventually the enterprise of money laundering will have to close down, or at best will be able to continue only in a severely restricted form, since the global regulatory regime is tightening with each passing year. If it does not end, then the consequences for Pakistan's banking system, and its wider economy as a consequence, could be severe. The KKI episode is a vivid example of how the crimes of the rich and powerful exact a terrible cost from us all, by tarnishing the country's image, robbing its economy of its vitality, and weakening its institutions to the point of helplessness. It is time to wrap this business up.

## Army chief's UK visit

THE UK's role in helping stabilise and nudging along Pak-Afghan ties is well known in security circles. As one of Pakistan's most stable bilateral relationships and an important contributor to the US-led war effort in Afghanistan, the UK has been well positioned to use its influence to try and curb the very worst aspects of the Pak-Afghan relationship. Moreover, with the US seemingly caught in strategic uncertainty in Afghanistan, the UK has assumed a more active role among the Western nations committed to the Afghan project. It is with that background that army chief Gen Qamar

Bajwa's comments in the UK on Afghanistan are particularly welcome. In meetings with both UK and US leaders on Afghanistan, the army chief emphasised that Pakistan is committed to peace in Afghanistan and wants to work more closely with Afghanistan on shared goals. After several months of seemingly heightened diplomacy by Russia and, earlier, by China on Afghanistan, Gen Bajwa has struck the right tone in the UK: peace and stability in Afghanistan will only become a possibility when all the major actors in the country over the course of the war are drawn into a common diplomatic cause.

As ever, there are no guarantees in Afghanistan and a set of positive statements in London will not automatically effect peace. Clearly, Pakistan has its own set of grievances when it comes to Afghan policy towards this country. The closure of the border with Afghanistan for over a month after the carnage in Sehwan suggests that the security establishment is deeply frustrated with Afghanistan's inability or unwillingness to help Pakistan build on the gains of counter-insurgency campaigns in Fata. The UK — which appears to have helped broker a deal for the reopening of the Pak-Afghan border last month — can help stabilise the Pak-Afghan relationship, but ultimately it will come down to the two sides not only accepting that cooperation is necessary, but finding a way to achieve it. Pakistan does not want to — indeed, must not — seek an adjustment with the TTP and sundry anti-Pakistan militants who have found sanctuary in Afghanistan; Afghanistan both needs and, among its more sensible elements, desires a political settlement with the Taliban. Perhaps a mechanism where Pakistan uses its influence with the Afghan Taliban to push for a negotiated settlement with the Afghan government, thereby freeing up space for the Afghan government to act on Pakistan's security concerns, is the delicate synchronisation that is needed.

## T20 series win

It is said that a victory often puts inadequacies in the shade. For Team Pakistan, that especially holds true as, despite some wins, the inherent deficiencies in their cricket are a big deterrent to their sustaining their act as a leading cricketing nation. No doubt their 3-1 win over the West Indies in the T20 series has been a sound team effort by Sarfraz Ahmed and his men that has propelled them to fourth spot in the ICC T20 rankings, but their unreliable batting has continued to irk both fans and critics. Veteran Kamran Akmal's lusty hitting and opener Ahmed Shehzad's welcome return to form did give the fans something to cheer, but the top order's failure to post totals in excess of 170 calls for more application from the batsmen.

Having said that, Sarfraz's aggressive style of leadership has clearly infused a fighting spirit in the team. With the ODI reins in his hands as well, there is an unmistakable

spring in the skipper's step and an air of confidence that comes with authority. Sarfraz would also be considerably indebted to all-rounder Shadab Khan, the find of this year's Pakistan Super League, who took the West Indies completely by surprise with his wily spin. Unlike Yasir Shah, the 18-year-old bowls a perfect googly and, more importantly, is a thinking bowler. West Indies, on the other hand, has had to grapple with a number of issues. Theirs was a depleted lot in the T20 contests, whose performance at best could be termed mediocre. The team's long tussle with the West Indies Cricket Board has seen them losing several match-winners, while their replacements have failed to show promise. That augurs well for Pakistan, though, for whom the upcoming ODI series holds tremendous significance. A comprehensive victory in the ODIs will enable them to improve their position in the ICC ODI rankings in order to directly qualify for the 2019 World Cup, but there is still a long way to go.

## PTI spokesman's interview

WHAT could well have started out as an April Fool's joke has become distinctly unfunny. It began with a column by Nazeer Naji that appeared on April 1 with a continuation the next day, in which the writer suggested that retired Gen Ashfaq Kayani — unnamed though clearly identifiable — influenced the outcome of the 2013 election with the knowledge of senior PML-N leaders. The purported intention behind the conspiracy was to prevent Imran Khan from coming to power. A disclaimer rounded off the two-part column telling readers to not take it seriously but instead "enjoy the tone". PTI spokesman Naeemul Haque did not get the memo. In a talk show on Monday, he constructed a substantial edifice of allegations about a "grand scheme" involving several actors, including the US, Saudi Arabia and elements in Pakistan, including the then army chief, who conspired to steal the election from the PTI. The next morning, Mr Haque tweeted that the views he had expressed the night before were his own, and did not reflect that of his party.

The merits of the article aside — indeed one could take issue with the content as contributing to neither one's entertainment nor one's knowledge — Mr Haque's falling on his sword, undoubtedly after his tactless on-camera remarks caused some consternation within PTI, is scarcely plausible. When the spokesman of a political party utters words in an official capacity, in which capacity Mr Haque was clearly giving the interview, he can scarcely hide later behind the 'personal opinion' fig leaf. More important, however, is the insouciance with which Mr Haque — and by extension PTI — levelled such serious allegations on the talk show, not only without presenting any proof, but asserting that no proof was even required to back up the claims. Granted PTI has made a career (which has included staging more than one dharna) of claiming that

the 2013 election was stolen from it. However, it is high time the party looked ahead and, some would say, within as well.

## US on Pak-India talks

US AMBASSADOR to the UN Nikki Haley, a rising star in the administration of President Donald Trump, has made another blunt statement that has drawn the ire of a third country and elicited a restatement of more traditional policy by the State Department. Ms Haley ought to be applauded for her straight talk: speaking at a news conference on Monday, the ambassador claimed that the administration she represents is concerned about the relationship between India and Pakistan and that the US wants to “find its place” in talks between the South Asian rivals before a conflict situation arises. The Indian response to that somewhat soft and fairly sensible statement by Ms Haley was swift: the foreign ministry spokesperson insisted that India-Pakistan talks should be strictly bilateral and could only take place in what India describes as an “environment free of terror and violence”. In essence, the Indian position is that dialogue on matters that concern Pakistan should be bilateral, but India welcomes international pressure on Pakistan to address India’s complaints of militancy and terrorism against Pakistan. One-sided and self-serving as the Indian position is, it is compounded by the reality that India is not even willing to engage in bilateral dialogue currently.

Likely in response to intense complaints behind the scenes by India, the State Department has now reiterated that it desires “direct dialogue” between India and Pakistan. But Ms Haley’s comments have echoed what then president-elect Trump said to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif last November: “I am ready and willing to play any role that you want me to play to address and find solutions to the outstanding problems. It will be an honour and I will personally do it.” According to Indian media reports, those early remarks by Mr Trump also drew a strong reaction from India. Yet, India’s objections do not undermine the logic of the US offer. While India resists so-called hyphenation by the US — approaching US ties with India and Pakistan as interconnected — such an approach could have beneficial consequences for both countries and further the cause of peace in the region. Moreover, given America’s long-standing concerns about militancy in Afghanistan and terrorism in India, it is difficult to argue that even the softest of US mediation would undermine India’s stance against terrorism and militancy. If anything, Pakistan could be encouraged to find a regional solution to the use of proxies and militants by all sides that has so destabilised the neighbourhood.

Ultimately, India and Pakistan will have to engage in dialogue again. History has proved that there is an alternative, especially now that war has become unthinkable between the two countries. The Pakistani military leadership has been clear it does not seek conflict, and the political leadership that it wants dialogue. Surely, India must recognise the desirability and inevitability of dialogue soon.

## Lahore attack

On Wednesday, terror returned to Lahore, which we have been officially told was on high alert. Precious lives were cut short; serious injuries were caused to many.

The militants had targeted Pakistan Army soldiers who were on their way to accompany the census enumerators. The vehicle hit had been on its way to drop off the men at various points at the start of the working day.

The government came up with its usual reaction to what appeared to be a suicide attack. There was a show of sympathy for those who lost their lives, which included at least one civilian. There were vows to defeat terrorism. Also tucked in somewhere in the pile of official responses was an old clarification about how difficult — almost impossible — it was to thwart a suicide attack.

Whatever the government might have had to say, the blast did not really come as a surprise. A number of men in uniform — soldiers — moving about in a vehicle in public spaces was surely a risky activity given that the city was on high alert and the country continues to battle militancy.

In such circumstances, surely there was a need for tighter security measures than what appeared to have been taken. Although the relevant authorities in Lahore have not been too forthcoming in their answers to the probing queries put to them by journalists after Wednesday's tragedy, the suspicion generally is that the suicide assault came about after some reconnaissance on the part of the militants. The latter appeared to know the time the vehicle carrying the army men working with the census teams would arrive at the point where the attack took place.

Lahore was shaken badly. The city has been the venue of many terrorism-related incidents of late, just as it has been at the receiving end of official reassurances since a suicide attack in front of the Punjab Assembly in February.

A favourite measure to instil a sense of security in the citizens was once again on display as the explosion was initially projected as a cylinder blast. This refrain in the immediate aftermath of the explosion had just the opposite effect on the people — it made them angry as they saw it as a move by the government to conceal the facts.

Such prevarication on the part of the authorities may well result in a trust deficit that could prove disastrous in these times.

## Poll reform and census

THE fundamental interconnectedness of a timely and accurate census, electoral reforms and fair and transparent elections is well known. What is now coming into focus is a race against time: can the census and electoral reforms be completed before the Election Commission of Pakistan must, by law, turn to the task of organising the next general election? With parliament set to complete its full term in June 2018, a general election is due in the third quarter of next year. If the government chooses to exercise its right and call an early election, the poll timeline will be pulled forward accordingly. Meanwhile, the draft electoral reforms presented by the government mandates that all laws and rules that are applicable to polls must be finalised at least six months before an election — a sensible stipulation that promotes transparency and awareness.

Where the problem arises is as follows. The ECP must draw constituency boundaries and allocate provincial shares of seats on the basis of the provisions in the Constitution, which are somewhat contradictory in Article 51. The ongoing census will almost certainly change the population shares of the provinces, necessitating a change in the seat share prescribed in Article 51. Whether that is done strictly on the basis of the population share of each province or the current formula that gives Fata an advantage, a constitutional amendment to change the specific seat allocation in Article 51(3) may become inevitable. But that cannot be done until the census results are finalised. Moreover, within each province, the ECP has to redraw constituency boundaries on the basis of a set of factors that need to be revised — which requires legislative changes, ie the electoral reforms package languishing in parliament. The current system has produced severe anomalies in the population-seat ratio within and across provinces and the logistical feasibility of some constituencies needs to be reassessed — the inevitable result of population shifts within the country.

Much will depend on when the census results are finalised and made available to the ECP. A clean, true census is essential, and while compromises must not be made, the system may need to be tweaked to speed up the process without compromising on

accuracy. In the meantime, the political class can and should work on finalising the electoral reforms package and pay special attention to ECP rules governing constituency demarcation. Perhaps a two-pronged approach can be adopted. The first should focus on the normal rules that will govern constituency demarcation and provincial shares after the results of the new census are made available. The second could focus on special rules that can be used when a census is more than 10 years old and, therefore, markedly inaccurate. In either scenario, the emphasis of electoral reforms and rule changes should be on drawing constituencies that are as close to the population realities in any given election as possible.

## IMF assessment

IN a carefully worded release, the IMF has just warned the government that it would be a mistake to draw too much comfort from the few indicators that appear to show an improving economic situation. It may be true that growth is rising and reserves are at a high level, sufficient to cover five months of imports. But the IMF has just concluded a detailed assessment of the country's economy, called an Article IV consultation, and although the full report will take some time, the release issued at the end of the talks points to "challenges" in the fiscal, energy and external sectors of the economy. After noting that growth will rise to 5pc by the end of the fiscal year, and could accelerate to 6pc in the medium term, the Fund says that "stronger fiscal consolidation" is needed since revenue in the first half of the quarter has suffered due to the incentives given to boost exports. It also wants to see "greater exchange rate flexibility" to help meet expected outflows as well as the growing trade deficit, "bringing the power sector to full cost recovery" to deal with the circular debt, and a "prudent" monetary policy. These are not minor steps, and whether or not the government can muster the will to undertake them remains to be seen.

What also remains to be seen is how long the present moment of comfort will last. For a while now, the Fund has been saying that Pakistan is in the middle of a "moment of opportunity", and strong steps are needed to put this comfort on a sustainable footing. But this is a country where many moments of opportunity lie buried. The government needs to take these words seriously because they are being echoed more widely with the passage of time, and our history shows that there is a long track record of squandered opportunities with repeated approaches to the IMF once a comfortable level of reserves dissipates. Of all the challenges, the one facing the external sector deserves the most serious attention, although the government is coming under increasing pressure to mobilise resources to maintain present levels of development spending along with a growing security bill. With large outflows expected to begin in a few years,



while exports and remittances continue to suffer, the external sector could see renewed stress sooner than expected. This is not a time for complacency.

## Trump-Sisi bonhomie

FLUSHED with success he may be, but Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi should know there is no guarantee that the praise Donald Trump heaped upon him will translate itself into more American aid. At the White House on Monday, the American president went overboard in welcoming the Egyptian strongman and said Mr Sisi should know that he would find “a great friend and ally” in the United States, because Mr Sisi was doing “a fantastic job in a very difficult situation”. What exactly is the “fantastic job” Mr Sisi is doing? There is no doubt Egypt, too, faces a terrorist challenge from the militant Islamic State group in the Sinai and obviously needs support from the world community, including, of course, the superpower. But there is nothing “fantastic” about it, for Egypt’s terrorism challenge is far less severe than what many other Middle Eastern nations have been facing. Mr Sisi’s regime is guilty of gross human rights violations, including the crackdown on dissidents, following the overthrow of Egypt’s first elected government headed by Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Since that unconstitutional seizure of power, Mr Sisi has held bogus elections to have himself ‘elected’ president. This sabotage of the Arab Spring doesn’t seem to attract President Trump’s attention, and all he could say by way of criticism was that he and Mr Sisi had “a few things” on which they do not agree — these “few things” included Egypt’s 40,000 political prisoners.

What actually has endeared Mr Sisi to the US president is the former’s virtual abandonment of Egypt’s role in the Palestinian question. Throughout last century, Egypt had played a key role in the Arab awakening, especially during the Nasser era, but Mr Sisi’s abandonment of this role is a tragedy for the Arab world. However, as US officials have hinted, there is no guarantee of more American money for Egypt, because the Trump administration has decided on a 28.7pc cut in the State Department budget.

## US air strike in Syria

SYRIA, in the throes of a destructive civil war since 2011, may be on the precipice of even greater peril. In the early hours of Friday, American Tomahawk missiles rained down on an air base in Homs province, killing at least six individuals. While the US has been targeting hard-line militants in Syria for some time — without the permission of the regime in Damascus — this is being touted as the first direct American military action taking aim at the Syrian state. Although the Obama administration had long supported the ‘moderate’ rebels battling Bashar al-Assad’s government, Donald Trump’s predecessor resisted targeting the regime in Damascus through direct military action. Now, under the constantly evolving Trump doctrine, the Assad administration appears to be fair game. The trigger for the American assault was the chemical attack earlier this week in Idlib, which Washington and its allies blamed on Damascus.

The reactions to the missile attack have been in line with current geopolitical divisions. America’s allies have hailed the military intervention. These include the European states, Turkey, many Arab countries as well as Israel. On the other hand, Russia, Mr Assad’s key military backer, has come down hard on the US for launching the strike. Iran, another major supporter of the Damascus government, has also condemned the US military action.

The Idlib chemical attack, in which over 50 people are believed to have perished, was an abominable crime, as indeed are all attacks which involve such ghastly weapons. It is also true that Mr Assad’s forces have employed brutal methods in crushing dissent, while the rebels — moderate or otherwise — have replied in similarly brutal fashion. However, it is necessary to note here, and without getting bogged down in conspiracy theories, that where the chemical attack is concerned there is need for caution. If Mr Assad’s forces were involved in the Idlib attack, they must face justice. However, in the past there have also been strong suspicions that extremist rebels have carried out chemical attacks; American journalist Seymour Hersh wrote that the 2013 Ghouta chemical attack may have been carried out by the Nusra Front. But regardless of who is responsible for such chemical attacks, it should be the UN’s responsibility to investigate and bring to justice the perpetrators. The US cannot be allowed to unilaterally play the international policeman; its record shows that previous military interventions have only exacerbated the situation. The removal of Saddam Hussein, under the pretext of ‘weapons of mass destruction’, springs to mind. Syria is a mess, with hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced — and the US should not be igniting a wider conflagration through the use of its military muscle. The world community, under UN auspices, must act to prevent any future use of chemical weapons, as well as a further expansion of the Syrian conflict through unilateral actions.

## IHK defiance

AN entire cricket club team in India-held Kashmir detained for wearing the uniform of the Pakistani cricket team and standing up as Pakistan's national anthem was played.... Kashmiris do have a knack for showing their defiance in bold ways. No talk of peace between Pakistan and India can disregard the plight of the Kashmiris across the LoC. The issue will dominate the agenda of Pakistan-India engagement at any level. In fact, in the past, Kashmiris in the held territory have employed even more innovative tactics than donning the Pakistan team's green jersey. But this method was also effective. IHK has been seething with anger in the aftermath of the killing of Burhan Wani last July. The emphasis on the BJP-driven Hindu nationalism has been asphyxiating — and not just for Kashmiri Muslims, whose feelings must have been compounded by the sense of insecurity that is being experienced by minorities all over India. Against this background, the statement made by the young cricketers in held Kashmir provides a useful insight into the high level of disillusionment that prevails. The gesture was reflective of the people's desperation — a sentiment that is also echoed in the official step to detain the cricket team for the unforgivable folly of creating a Pakistani island on the disputed land. It is improbable that any government would have ignored it. Letting it pass without condemnation and without cracking down on dissenters would have been an unlikely scenario, especially considering the harsh tone that the BJP, which is a coalition partner in IHK, has repeatedly adopted on the issue.

From another perspective, the latest show of defiance by the Kashmiris may also give the practitioners of the politics of divisiveness and hate an opportunity to cite the incident as 'proof' that the Kashmiri uprising, before and after the Wani killing, has not been as indigenous as many describe it. The Kashmiris will not mind this at all. The display of reverence towards the Pakistani colours and national anthem — whatever the original intention may be — does convey a strong message far and wide. That this show of defiance did not involve any violence on the part of the Kashmiris may be a sign that it is in the interest of all parties to seek solutions without resorting to violence. This is what should set the tone for the dialogue with India which Pakistan has once more said it is ready for.

## Misbah's retirement

IT may be a tad trite to say 'he came, he saw, he conquered', but perhaps the phrase best sums up the distinguished career of Pakistan Test captain Misbah-ul-Haq, who has announced his plans to retire at the end of the series against the West Indies that starts later this month. There is hardly a job that is more challenging and thankless in world cricket than being captain of the Pakistani team. But Misbah, who had a mountain to climb when he took charge of a disgraced unit in the aftermath of the spot-fixing scam in England in 2010, bore his load without fuss. Calm and affable, and always a man of few words, Misbah has achieved a great deal in his rather short career by hoisting the team to the top of the ICC Test rankings last August. His dislike of arrogance on the field and his uncomplicated manner of playing the game are qualities alien to many of his charges. However, his obstinacy and skill at the crease have often proved intimidating to bowlers and have earned the respect of colleagues and adversaries alike.

Of course, Misbah wanted to win everything, and almost did as Pakistan cricket enjoyed a golden run in the UAE, its adopted home since 2009. But his credentials as a natural leader were questioned by some critics who blamed him for inculcating a defensive mindset in the team. Heavy defeats in South Africa in Test matches and the recent drubbing Down Under also somewhat blotted his otherwise almost unblemished career as captain, though he led Pakistan to a famous drawn series with England last year. At 43, Misbah remains the fittest and most competitive of Pakistani players, traits that convinced the PCB to overlook the need to groom his successor in the game — although, by Misbah's own admission, the dashing wicketkeeper-batsman Sarfraz Ahmed is ready to assume the role. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that Misbah's will be a tough act to follow.

## Jihad policy blunder

IT is a debate that eventually must be held if the historical record is to be set right. And if Pakistan is to prevail in the fight against militancy, there must be a consistent, historically accurate narrative. Imran Khan has spoken correctly: creating a culture of jihad and a generation of jihadis to fight the Russians in Afghanistan was a historic blunder. Until and unless Pakistan debates the history of armed jihad in the region, acknowledges the state's role in fomenting militancy, and formally renounces the idea of jihad as ever again being a part of state policy, the country's fight against militancy, terrorism and extremism will meander on. Indeed, the caveat offered by Mr Khan — that just as the jihad against Russia was wrong, it was wrong of Pakistan to participate in the

US-led war in Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al Qaeda after 9/11 — illustrates the difficulty of maintaining a consistent narrative. The war in Afghanistan after 9/11 was sanctioned by the UN and triggered by Al Qaeda's transnational war on the US.

In a welcome complement to Mr Khan's candid remarks, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa has been quoted by the ISPR as having told the Afghan defence attaché in London that he feels the pain of every victim of terrorism in Afghanistan as much as he does that of Pakistani victims. The general's comments are important because it signals a shift away from the acrimony earlier this year, especially after the Sehwan carnage and the closure of the Pak-Afghan border. As Gen Bajwa appears to be recognising, language and tone matter; the disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan are too serious and complex to allow emotionalism, however understandable, to further complicate relations. Pakistan has rightful concerns about anti-Pakistan militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan and the significant gains in the fight against militancy domestically cannot be allowed to be compromised or reversed because of Afghan inaction. Yet, there is a sensible way for Pakistan to press its concerns and a mutually beneficial, cooperative framework can be established. After all, Afghanistan has long-standing concerns and demands of Pakistan and the dictates of geography, history and populations all point to cooperation as the only path to sustainable regional peace.

First, though, an internal reckoning must take place in Pakistan. Between Mr Khan's candour and Gen Bajwa's empathy lies a possible response: a combination of reassessing history in light of what are now clear policy mistakes and a people-centric view of security in the region. Afghanistan has been wracked by war almost continuously for nearly four decades now; Pakistan shaken by more militancy and terrorism since the turn of the century. The reasons can be debated, but the connection between peace and stability in Pakistan and peace and stability in Afghanistan is undeniable. All policies of both countries must recognise and positively act on the interconnectedness.

## Climate oddities

THE irregular pattern of snowfall in Murree and the wider Galiyat area is yet another sign that, slowly and perhaps irreversibly, our climate is changing. This is the first time in 39 years that snow has fallen in this area in the month of April; March also saw unusually warm temperatures followed by heavy snowfall. Add to this the fact that the region saw its hottest summer on record in 2016, and we have a picture of very odd climate patterns battering the hills. Pakistan is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change as it depends heavily on river flows that originate from mountain

snowfall. Each monsoon season has been bringing with it unusual rainfall, and now winters and spring are also beginning to see bizarre weather patterns emerge. As an agrarian country, there are grounds to be extremely concerned about the impact this situation will have on cropping cycles and patterns.

That concern needs to be felt at the highest levels of government. At the moment, the climate change ministry is mostly involved in public relations work. It should take the challenge more seriously; it needs to lead the effort to improve weather monitoring and the forecasting capabilities of the Met department, as well as coordinate with the provincial governments to develop and disseminate adaptive strategies for farmers. Hardly any research has been done in the country to look at what adaptive strategies might be available — such as new seed varieties that are more resistant to changing weather patterns. Far more also needs to be done to generate flood alerts and response plans, for which coordination with the local authorities is crucial. Pakistan is flying blind into a possible storm without making efforts along these lines. All manner of help is available from the international community, but thus far, nobody from the government, not even the climate change ministry, seems particularly interested beyond attending a few regional seminars. The ministry's website shows only two books and two monographs published over a decade ago as its research output. Of the nine projects listed there, more than half were also from a decade ago. Signs of climate change are all around us now, sometimes coming in benign forms like a spring snowfall, and at other times as massive cloudbursts that cause floods and glacial lake outbursts. But each time our response is to muddle through and revert to business as usual once the skies clear.

## Landslide tragedy

THE tragedy that overtook Zamir Gul and his family in the Gulshan-i-Ghazi area of Karachi's Baldia Town in the early hours of Thursday is of such proportions that it is difficult to dwell upon it. The family of eight, along with an aunt and cousin, were asleep in their house — which appeared a fairly solid bricks-and-mortar construction — when a massive piece of rock detached itself from the hills. The ensuing landslide buried their home, and although horrified neighbours came out almost immediately to try and rescue the inhabitants, Zamir Gul and two of his daughters were dead, as was their cousin. Gul's son died subsequently in hospital, while three daughters were injured but, fortunately, survived. Why did the landslide occur? Officials blame the 'encroachments' that the hills are covered with, where land upon which to construct is almost literally 'created' by carving out space from the rocks. Further, sewage from the homes here

flows directly into the mud. This has the effect of loosening the soil over a period of time and thus making the terrain more prone to landslides and collapses.

The administration has ordered evacuation from other structures and initiated an anti-encroachment drive with the help of heavy machinery. But it cannot be allowed to put the entire blame on the encroachments. It is true that low-income groups often build on land that might not be regularised or even safe. But what needs to be addressed is why this practice has become so prevalent — not just in Karachi but across the country. Over decades, successive governments at the centre and in the provinces have failed to make low-income housing or locations for it available in the numbers required. Resultantly, people build wherever they can. Unless this glaring inefficiency is rectified, such tragedies will strike again and again. Evacuations and anti-encroachment drives are all very well, but it is also the job of the state to concern itself with where the people are meant to live.

## Sluggish response to militancy

IN the long war against militancy and the fight against extremism, there have been recurring questions about sustained institutional responses. Militarily, the country's brave soldiers have adapted to the demands of counter-insurgency and counterterrorism, and the country, especially Fata, is undeniably more stable than it was before the multiple and difficult anti-militancy campaigns in various parts of the country. But the militants have adapted too and found ways to survive, whether in the form of latent terror cells across the country or in sanctuaries in Afghanistan. It is in this area that the problem with the state's response lies — the evolution of the state's response to terrorism lags behind the evolution of the militants themselves. And one of the principal reasons for the lag appears to be an unwillingness or inability on the part of the state to empower institutions.

The much-lamented fate of the National Action Plan and the moribund National Counter-Terrorism Authority in Pakistan are perhaps the most visible failures. In the wake of a particularly devastating terrorist attack or a wave of attacks, a by now familiar series of reactions occurs. A public and media outcry puts pressure on the state; the civil and military leadership hold emergency meetings; some highly visible actions are taken; and solemn promises are made to tackle the more complex facets of militancy, terrorism and extremism on a sustained basis. But the sustained response does not materialise, at least not in a meaningful manner. Consider the most recent days in the country: a relatively calm spell with no major acts of terrorism is precisely the time and space in which empowered institutions such as Nacta and empowered committees

dealing with specific parts of NAP ought to have been working in the background. Yet, there is no evidence to suggest that is the case, especially since Nacta remains grossly underfunded and counter-extremism appears to have again fallen off the agenda.

To be sure, a wave of attacks requires an urgent response by the state. But the probability of another series of attacks can only be lowered if empowered, well-resourced, terrorism-specific institutions are allowed to function during the relatively calm spells. Counter-extremism in particular cannot be conceptualised and a policy road map drawn up or executed in a sporadic manner. Speeches by the prime minister and expressions of resolve by the military leadership do not amount to a counter-extremism policy. In this regard, the onus is necessarily on the civilian leadership. Why is Nacta moribund, NAP patchily implemented and a counter-extremism policy as elusive as ever?

## JUI-F's centenary

THE Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam has become a constant feature of mainstream politics in Pakistan, especially the faction led by Maulana Fazlur Rahman. It is a party with a distinct conservative vote bank while the maulana has played key roles in governing coalitions, joining forces with both likeminded political forces as well as those more to the left of the ideological spectrum. This weekend, in the town of Azakhel in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Nowshera district, the JUI-F celebrated its centenary. It is actually the centennial of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Hind as the JUI was formed much later, but the JUI-F — considering itself the most worthy spiritual heir of the JUH — feels it is best placed to mark the milestone in Pakistan. The gathering featured some high-profile guests, including one of the imams of Makkah's Masjid al-Haram, as well as the Saudi religious affairs minister. Additionally, in this era, where religious militancy poses an existential threat to Pakistan and many other Muslim states, Maulana Fazl seemed to be making all the right noises at the centenary celebrations. On Friday, he told a massive crowd that his party rejected violence, while also condemning sectarianism and extremism.

Although the JUI-F's politics are undoubtedly conservative and it can hardly be considered a progressive force, the democratic superstructure in this country should be strong enough to support various political ideologies, as long as parties adhere to the Constitution and the fundamental rights enshrined therein. The JUI-F, regardless of its right-wing stances, has pledged to work within the system and at one time even resisted the Ziaul Haq dictatorship. Having said that, the party has had a complex relationship with militancy. For example, some unabashedly sectarian and extremist characters have emerged from within its ranks and then left it to form or join much more violent



outfits. However, Fazlur Rahman has talked of moderation; in fact, around a decade ago, the JUI-F's Nazaryati (ideological) faction in Balochistan — now having rejoined the party — split from the main body as it perceived that the maulana was not vocal enough in his support for the Afghan Taliban. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing him today is to resist hardliners within the party, as well as to not change the JUI-F's narrative to please extremists on the outside. The JUI-F can play a key role in moderating rightist elements, and convincing them to play by the rules of the democratic system.

## Child sexual abuse

THE effort to effectively address any social evil must be underpinned by legislation that is adequate in its scope and the sanctions that it imposes. However, our existing laws dealing with child sexual abuse fall short; and there seems to be woefully inadequate motivation on the part of the government to change this reality. This was illustrated by the response that met the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill 2016 in the meeting on Friday of the National Assembly's sub-committee on interior. The bill, tabled by MNA Mussarrat Ahmed Zeb after the Kasur and Swat child sexual abuse incidents came to light, sought to enhance the punishment for these crimes to life imprisonment or death. As the MNA herself pointed out, this would bring the sanctions on par with those prescribed for rape. While Dawn remains opposed to the death penalty, the fact is that at present, offenders are awarded only five to seven years in prison. However, the bill was rejected, with the convener of the meeting saying that punishment for the crime is already on the statute books and that it could not be equated with rape.

Crimes against children, particularly in societies like ours that delude themselves that their family structure insulates minors from the violence and inequity around them, elicit public revulsion in the extreme. However, notwithstanding the enormity of the incidents in Kasur and Swat — which involved scores of victims, if not hundreds — there has been little progress on strengthening the legislation that deals with child sexual abuse and pornography. The convener's remark, while unfortunate, is not an isolated opinion. There remains a widespread lack of understanding of the issue, of sexual coercion and what constitutes 'consent', not to mention the long-term repercussions of the crime. In the internet age, physical proximity is immaterial for 'grooming' children. The deep web has websites and chat rooms where paedophiles can indulge their illicit predilection, share images etc. Protecting children from predators has become more complex than ever, but we remain in blissful ignorance.

## Gap in CPEC payments

THE unusually wide gap in import payments recorded by two different government departments needs an explanation — especially since it appears to be related to CPEC machinery imports. The State Bank has highlighted the discrepancy in its latest quarterly report, saying that the gap between imports recorded at the port, and import payments made from the banks has widened to \$3bn for the first half of the fiscal year, where the 10-year average for this gap is more like \$1.6bn. Since a large part of the gap owes itself to the import of machinery for power generation, “it is highly probable that the widening gap between the two import datasets is linked with the CPEC accord” says the report. On the surface, this may appear a somewhat technical issue to most people, but it has deeper meanings, some of which could border on the sinister.

For one, the gap and the subsequent reconciliation exercises launched to bring clarity to it are evidence that the State Bank does not have a clear picture of the inflows and outflows associated with CPEC’s growing presence in the country. This could be one reason why we are unable to generate a clear picture on what liabilities and future outflow burdens are being taken on under the CPEC umbrella. The lack of transparency is evident because even the central bank, the custodian of the country’s foreign exchange reserves, cannot make the projections so vital to building a medium-term view on the viability of the external sector. But more troubling are the deeper ramifications. How much of this gap is covering misdeclarations in CPEC imports through over-invoicing? The matter is of urgent public interest because ultimately these imports will be paid back from money collected through the power tariffs to be paid by the consuming public.

Once the data is reconciled, there is going to be a large jump in the current account deficit of the country, which has already ballooned to troubling levels. We are assured that the net effect on the balance of payments will be zero, since this will be covered by a corresponding increase in financial account inflows, but those are debt-creating and we will still need a clearer picture on how their repayment obligations will be met. Meanwhile, a significant amount of damage has already been done to the integrity of our data, and by extension, to the financial credibility of the projects whose import requirements are responsible for this discrepancy. The finance ministry and Planning Commission must do more to ensure that all inflows and outflows under the project are in compliance with the country’s data reporting requirements because they are the primary stakeholders in the economic picture that CPEC is working to build. If Chinese enterprises have been given a free hand to bypass Pakistani reporting requirements, then this allowance must be withdrawn.

## Icon of peace

In a country with a more assured sense of identity and its place in the world, Malala Yousafzai's latest accolade would have been cause for an outpouring of national pride. After all, being appointed a UN Messenger of Peace, the highest honour that can be bestowed by the UN secretary general, is no mean feat — even for a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and the youngest ever laureate to boot.

This time around too, Malala, now 19, is the youngest ever messenger of peace, and the first Pakistani designated as such. To appreciate the enormity of this achievement, consider some of the distinguished high-achievers currently on the list: among them, astronaut Scott Kelly, anthropologist Jane Goodall and cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

Why then the deafening silence from the government and the churlish lack of acknowledgement from most of Malala's fellow citizens — who do not hesitate to play up the Pakistani connections, however nebulous, of people with far less consequential achievements?

Therein lies a clue to our society's contrariness and the confoundedly perverse lens through which it views the world, indeed to the self-fulfilling prophecy of its perpetual victimhood.

For Malala was an advocate for education long before she was shot in the head by a TTP militant in October 2012 when she was 14; she had even won a certain degree of international recognition for her courageous activism.

But the attack, which required her to be flown to the UK for treatment, elevated her global profile exponentially. It was then, inexplicably, that perceptions about her in her country began to shift. The more praise she garnered from world leaders — which increasingly became the case given that her brush with death did nothing to deter her from tirelessly campaigning for universal education — the more reviled she became at home.

Though but a child, she was labelled a 'Western agent', a 'traitor', 'anti-Islam' etc. The malevolence directed at her since then has been such that Malala who should have been the pride of Pakistan, is forced to live in self-exile, the threat to her life in her country very real and ever-present.

Meanwhile, her Malala Fund continues doing laudable work for girls' education in several African and Middle Eastern countries. And also in Pakistan, whose people sadly do not have the clear-headedness to see this remarkable young woman for what she is: an eloquent force for good in an increasingly violent world.

## World Parkinson's Day

TODAY as we mark World Parkinson's Day, medical experts have renewed calls for increased funding into global research for new treatments for a motor neuron disease that is not only afflicting an older population, but even those under 40. In Pakistan, 600,000 patients are believed to suffer from Parkinson's — the number is estimated to double by 2030. It is unfortunate, then, that most medical practitioners remain unaware of its symptoms, diagnosis and treatment. Resulting in the degeneration of the central nervous system, this disease directly impacts nerves that handle the body's motor functions. When the brain stops producing neurotransmitters, namely dopamine, nerve cells impact normal muscle functions. Physical symptoms include tremors, slow movement, rigidity and impaired balance. Poor sleep, depression and dementia may also be signs. And although it has been 200 years since Parkinson's was first recognised as a health condition by a London-based doctor, James Parkinson, there is still no cure to halt or reverse the disease, one which is heartbreaking for families as they watch their loved ones struggle to walk, talk and sleep. Because the main drug prescribed — levodopa — has not changed since the 1960s, it is imperative that global health organisations are allocated increased funding for developing therapies and medicine.

It is worrisome to note that doctors say that over 100 people are diagnosed daily with Parkinson's in Pakistan, and, although its exact cause is unknown, it is often linked to both environmental and genetic factors,. Although most patients receiving diagnosis and treatment should live long and active lives, new drugs are needed to reverse the progression of this disease. This is also because it frequently strikes young people, such as actor Michael J. Fox, leaving them with debilitating mobility issues. It is difficult to detect Parkinson's in the early stages, and doctors must learn to observe patients closely to administer treatment. Further, because this disease is often misdiagnosed as an old persons' ailment, the global research community should campaign more vociferously for better treatment and an eventual cure.

## Sentencing of Indian spy

THIRTEEN months since the arrest was sensationally disclosed, the case of accused Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav has taken a darker turn. Convicted by a military tribunal for espionage and sabotage activities against Pakistan, Jadhav has been sentenced to death. Instantly, the already troubled India-Pakistan relationship has been plunged into deep uncertainty. Despite Jadhav's conviction, there remain many unanswered questions. Start with the official Indian version of events and the many reports in the Indian media. Simply, the explanations offered by India are not credible. Everything from Jadhav's official documentation to his alleged business ties in Iran suggest a spy's cover story. The Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan border region is a vast, sparsely populated area with well-known security and strategic dimensions. Pakistan has long claimed that outside powers have tried to both meddle in Balochistan and use the border region to destabilise Pakistan as a whole. Jadhav's arrest and now conviction suggest an effort by the security establishment to put a face on the long-alleged crimes against Pakistan.

After years of allegations, the broad contours of Indian involvement in Balochistan in particular, perhaps Karachi too, have become apparent. The present right-wing government in India may be more frank in its willingness to pursue covert actions against Pakistan and may have ratcheted up those activities, but Indian interference in Balochistan has been a steady complaint of the Pakistani state for over a decade. It is not clear what India hopes to achieve through such activity. Among more hawkish elements in the state and conservative elements in society here, the Indian interference has become yet another reason to not seek engagement with that country. As for the long-running Baloch insurgency, rooted in some legitimate political grievances, the taint of any association with India is enough to put the insurgency's goals even further out of reach. All such interference appears to achieve in the province is a small and bloody-minded sense of retaliation. It must stop.

Finally, there are questions about the way forward. Spy wars between India and Pakistan erupt on occasion; the tit-for-tat actions against high commission officials in Islamabad and New Delhi last year being the most recent public incident. But Jadhav's case is far beyond routine action and could herald a new, highly destabilising round of covert actions by one country against the other's security and intelligence apparatus. It can only be hoped that back-channel communications or third-party interventions will help India and Pakistan quickly de-escalate tensions and, if necessary, establish new rules on the spycraft that all countries carry. Surely, no matter what the unspoken rules of spycraft may be, there ought to be no space for Indian nationals to be prowling around in Balochistan, let alone unauthorised entry anywhere in the territory of a nuclear-armed rival. The case of Kulbhushan Jadhav must not be allowed to repeat itself.

## Well-deserved Pulitzer

THE Panama Papers leak by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) was arguably the biggest journalistic scoop ever, and possibly the first time that journalists working together managed to create a splash whose impact was felt worldwide. One is hard-pressed to think of any other story produced by any journalist that has had even a remotely comparable global impact. The leak was not a minor one. It involved 11.5m documents from one of the world's most opaque corners — an offshore haven used by criminals, billionaires and politicians to hold, launder and transact in a murky sphere beyond the reach of any state regulatory authority. All manner of ill-gotten gains and dirty money swirls around in this world, and the trail of ownership that came out of the Panamanian firm whose documents were leaked went from the presidents of Russia and Ukraine, to the prime minister of Iceland and the son of Egypt's former strongman Hosni Mubarak, amongst many others. Most significantly for Pakistan, there appeared to be a direct link to the daughter of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, as well as assorted billionaires and the family of the man referred to as the father of the country's nuclear programme.

Here is proof that in an age of fake news and 'alternative facts' unleashed by the spread of social media, journalism still had relevance and the capacity to make an impact that would be felt in the most recessed power corridors of the world. More than 300 journalists belonging to over 100 news organisations spread across six continents worked together for a year, poring over the troves of data contained in the files to cast a light on one of the world's darkest spots. The scale of the collaboration is unprecedented. To enable it, the ICIJ built a platform to facilitate interaction of those on the global team in real time across many time zones. In the end, though, the impact of journalism is measured in the real-world effects it produces, and the Panama Papers triggered the most intense scrutiny of tax codes around the world; not surprisingly, it caused several heads to roll. In Pakistan, a court case holds the fate of the prime minister in the balance. Journalists around the world should take heart from this work and the award of the Pulitzer Prize, because it proves that the tools of their craft, and the spirit of collaboration can yet help make the world a more transparent place.

## Security for churches

IN the current milieu where extremist militants have struck in locations across the globe, governments must be on their toes to ward off terrorist attacks on 'soft targets'. Amongst these targets, of course, are places of worship and public areas where people congregate. Just the other day, on Palm Sunday, at least 45 Egyptian Christians were massacred in two separate attacks, one in the coastal city of Alexandria, the other in Tanta near Cairo. The IS has claimed responsibility for the atrocities. This is the latest in a series of attacks on minority Christians in Egypt as extremists had also bombed a church in Cairo in December 2016. Moreover, extremist militants allied with IS have established a toehold in the Sinai. Of course, Pakistan too has witnessed a recent upsurge in acts of terrorism, with extremists striking in different cities and towns. The Christian community in particular was also targeted in this country on Easter last year in Lahore's devastating Gulshan-i-Iqbal park bombing. All these facts require the government to take stringent security measures to prevent the shedding of innocent blood, especially in and around Christian places of worship.

The government has of late taken steps to allay the concerns of minorities in Pakistan. For example, the prime minister's address during a Holi function in Karachi was considered bold and inclusive. Moreover, the Pakistan embassy in Washington held an event at the mission to build bridges with Pakistani-American Christians on the occasion of Easter. These are all welcome and much-needed steps. However, the state must realise that there are far too many militants still working to sow discord in Pakistan, with their sights particularly set on this country's vulnerable minorities. That is why in the run-up to Easter, and on Easter Sunday itself, it is imperative that proper security is provided both to churches and areas where the Christian community is likely to hold large public events to celebrate the occasion.

## Reducing Pak-India tensions

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and National Security Adviser (retd) Gen Nasser Janjua have struck a sensible note on India in their separate remarks on Tuesday.

Addressing an air force passing out parade, the prime minister said: "Cooperation rather than conflict and shared prosperity instead of suspicion are the hallmarks of our policy." India was not directly mentioned, but the thrust of Mr Sharif's remarks made clear which country he was addressing. Meanwhile, Mr Janjua has said that India and Pakistan cannot be enemies forever and must engage in dialogue to resolve disputes.

The comments come at a time when Pakistan-India relations have plunged to a new low. The conviction for spying and sabotage of Indian national Kulbhushan Jadhav has the potential to inflict lasting harm on bilateral relations if not handled sensibly. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif has done the right thing by publicly clarifying that the death sentence against Jadhav will not and cannot be carried out quickly.

Already, however, there are indications that the decision to put Jadhav on trial may have elicited a response by India. The recent disappearance of a retired Pakistani military officer in Nepal in murky circumstances suggests that the spy wars between India and Pakistan are spiralling in unpredictable directions.

The fear is that the leaderships of the two countries are locking themselves in an action-reaction cycle that may eventually turn into open conflict. From there, ratcheting down tension and pulling back from the brink would be far more difficult. So now is the time for cooler heads to prevail on both sides.

Perhaps a series of questions need to be asked of policymakers in both countries. What is the policy outcome that is being pursued by engaging in spy wars? Has a cost-benefit analysis been done, ie is the damage to the overall relationship worth narrower intelligence wars? And how do spy wars affect the wider internal security challenges that both countries face?

If Prime Minister Sharif's approach is right — and this paper wholeheartedly supports dialogue and peaceful solutions — what appears to be missing is a strategy to implement it.

For four years now, Mr Sharif has preached the same message of regional integration, trade and prosperity, but he has been unable to convince either the Indian government or, seemingly, hawks in the security establishment here. The NSA too has been ineffective, notwithstanding the occasional willingness to speak candidly.

Meanwhile, the country still does not have a foreign minister and the defence minister is effectively irrelevant given that he has to contend with a major electricity crisis, the power sector being his principal portfolio.

National security and foreign policy are the two domains in which even the team advising the prime minister is ad hoc. From that self-created position of weakness, it is unlikely Mr Sharif will have much success in implementing the vision he so often articulates.



## **Destruction of heritage**

FOR good reason has there been outcry over the demolition of a portion of the historical Jufelhurst School in Karachi's Soldier Bazaar area. The school and its buildings were important parts of the city's heritage, a reminder of a past graceful to a degree that today feels impossible. The school dated back to 1931 but the principal's residence that stood on the premises was about a century old; the establishment was declared a heritage site some time ago, which means that it should have been protected under the relevant laws — indeed, if portions of it were dangerous, as was declared last year, preservation and renovation work ought to have been made a priority by the provincial government. But laws in Pakistan are often meaningless pieces of paper, as those who held the school dear found out. In the dark of night on Sunday, the principal's residence, some rooms, and a good portion of the boundary wall were razed to the ground — despite the presence on the site of school authorities and resistance put up by them. On Monday, IGP Sindh A.D. Khowaja launched an inquiry, and the SHO of the area's police station was suspended. Meanwhile, the Sindh education minister has alleged that the police played a “negative role” in the debacle. It is unlikely, though, that anything much will happen beyond this.

The more serious reality that puts Pakistan's heritage into jeopardy is the nation and its bureaucracies' attitude towards it — myopic and tied to pecuniary or political interests. In Lahore, heritage sites that stand being adversely affected by the Orange Line mass transit system continue to cause concern, with city authorities having gone to the Supreme Court in their effort to overturn the stay imposed by the Lahore High Court. In the balance lies the fate of sites of immense importance, including Shalamar Gardens and the Chauburji. There is no contesting the need for Lahore to have a mass transit system, but certainly this should not be at the cost of its history. Examples of such lack of concern abound, but there is space here to name just two more: the use of the ancient site of Moenjodaro for a festival organised by Sindh's political authorities, and the permission granted to use the premises of the Lahore Fort for private/commercial functions. Until those at the helm of Pakistan's affairs learn to cherish the country's history and heritage, this sad trajectory of destruction will not be deflected.

## Pakistan ODI win

TUESDAY'S win over the West Indies in Guyana has brought Pakistan a much-awaited ODI series triumph that could be instrumental in earning it a direct berth to the 2019 World Cup. Though an early collapse caused some consternation, credit is due to the seasoned duo of Shoaib Malik and Mohammad Hafeez whose belligerent hitting gave Pakistan a 2-1 win in the three-match contest. Having said that, it would be inaccurate to suggest Pakistan was entirely convincing in the series. Up against a beleaguered home side that had lost its top six players either to wrangling with the cricket board or to lucrative contracts with the Indian Premier League, Pakistan often looked vulnerable with prolific Baber Azam and young pacer Hassan Ali being two exceptions. The shock defeat in the opening game, where Pakistan failed to defend a formidable 308, sent alarm bells ringing; it proved to be a much-needed wake-up call for the visitors. Its unpredictable traits notwithstanding, Pakistan for long has been unable to put its act together as a one-day side, even against struggling teams such as Sri Lanka and the West Indies. It lacks the strategic brilliance and consistency of teams such as South Africa, Australia and India, which is why critics often point out that winning is not a habit with Pakistan.

Openers Kamran Akmal and Ahmed Shehzad were far from reliable in the series which put extra burden on young Baber. It was, however, heartening to see veterans Shoaib Malik and Mohammad Hafeez chipping in with good scores though they continue to remain under the scanner. And the less said the better about pacers Mohammad Amir and Wahab Riaz who are a shadow of what they were in 2010. The matches were also a test of nerves for Sarfaraz Ahmed, who made his debut as ODI skipper in the series. He looked nervous and preoccupied and must work on his captaincy to make an impact in the Champions Trophy to be played in England this June.

## Resistance in IHK

THE valley of Kashmir is a symbol of human resistance that goes far beyond the decades-old Pakistan-India dispute over a stretch of territory. It is a land of people who want choices in life and who are brave and desperate enough to lay down their lives in pursuance of their dreams of liberty. Tragically, circumstances continue to tax them, asking for ever more sacrifices — yet more evidence of their resistance came a few days ago, when a number of people were killed during by-polls there. Considering the angry protests that have erupted in the India-held valley since the killing of Burhan Wani last year, bloodletting at the hands of the Indian security forces was not unexpected.

The poor turnout at polling stations itself showed the level of the people's anger: only 7pc of the electorate came out to vote, with the result that a re-poll was ordered. This illustrates overwhelmingly the people's rejection of the BJP strategy to 'fix' matters behind closed doors.

In fact, matters as they stand now are hardly encouraging for those who had wanted to impose some kind of solution on Kashmir. "Terrorism or tourism" Prime Minister Narendra Modi had roared, his words as hollow as the earlier slogans promising development and aimed at 'compensating' Kashmiris for stifling their demand for freedom. The Kashmiris are hardly convinced by the sops on offer through Mehbooba Mufti's government, or the pledge of a stable future under a BJP vision that lays stress on Hindutva. In fact, many Kashmiris have been emboldened in their acts of defiance as the BJP endeavours to establish a Hindu nationalist order. This sentiment is not just voiced by Kashmiri liberation groups and their sympathisers but also by Kashmiri leaders who have in the past worked with New Delhi to try and 'tame' the ungovernable valley. Among these leaders is former Kashmir chief minister Farooq Abdullah, who in his evaluation of the situation since the killing of Burhan Wani, has warned India that Kashmir was slipping away from its grip. He has made it absolutely clear to the BJP government that it is digging a deep ditch for India in held Kashmir and insists that there can be no dialogue without the inclusion of Pakistan. This pretty much sums it up for everyone. The sooner the talks begin the better it would be for all concerned.

But will they? There are many elements in the Pakistan-India relationship that need to be discussed by the two nuclear rivals — from terrorism, to trade to visa regimes. So far, all these elements have moved about within the parameters of a circular storyline. And almost at every juncture, the issue of Kashmir has cropped up. A solution is urgently required and that can only come about through sincere talks between Pakistan and India and not without the representation of the Kashmiri people.

## Gangster turned spy?

The extraordinary life story of Uzair Baloch, soaked in blood, crime and, seemingly, political ambition, has taken another extraordinary turn.

In a typically curt notification from the ISPR that has raised more questions than it has answered, the country has been informed that Baloch has been transferred from police custody to the military and is to be put on trial for espionage.

The move, announced days after the conviction of the Indian Kulbhushan Jadhav, suggests an escalating war by the security establishment against alleged foreign

interference in Pakistan. But there are at least two puzzling aspects to the allegations against Uzair Baloch.

First, how did a well-known gangster from Karachi's Lyari area make the transition to espionage for a foreign state? And second, given the selective leaks to the media, what does the suggestion of his acting on behalf of Iran say about the state of relations with a friendly neighbour? Both questions are important because they hint at the state's evolving approach to the citizenry and a foreign policy realignment that can have generational consequences for Pakistan.

Uzair Baloch is not a convicted criminal and is entitled to the presumption of innocence until a court of law says otherwise. He is, though, an individual against whom there are very credible and profoundly troubling allegations of extreme violence.

The state must find a way to punish him for crimes — but the crimes he is accused of must be credibly established. The charge of espionage has the obvious effect of taking Baloch out of the civilian criminal justice system, where a conviction could be more difficult, and placing him in the military system, which has a far higher rate of conviction. But efficiency must not come at the cost of a militarisation of justice against non-military citizens.

Therefore, it is crucial that the full extent of charges against him be made public instead of selective media leaks of investigation reports and videotaped confessions. If he has acted on behalf of a foreign state, his actions should be clearly, credibly and fully explained to the public. There must also be an explanation of Pakistan's relations with Iran by the government.

Following the decision to become a member of the Saudi-led military alliance against terrorism, there has been confusion about the status of our ties with Iran. Iran is not India; it is a friendly country with which ties should be managed carefully.

## Plight of street children

THEY constitute, perhaps, the most abused section of society — certainly the most vulnerable. To most they are an ubiquitous yet invisible part of the urban landscape. Their suffering is writ large on their faces, until brutish experience hardens their features into a carapace. This is the fate of the uncounted thousands of children living and working on streets across the country. Some have been abandoned by their families because of abject poverty. Others are runaways, escaping violence and abuse. Many are still connected with persons they call family, but must help in eking out a living

through begging, manual labour or selling flummeries. Once on the street, they are almost certain to be subjected to further abuse, driven by virtue of their young age to the very bottom of the pyramid of power.

As the International Day for Street Children was marked on April 12, these grim realities barely stirred Pakistan out of its stupor. The only rally of any note was held in Hyderabad, where members of the Child Rights Movement and the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child brought out scores of these unfortunate youngsters. The effort of these organisations is even more worthy of appreciation when contrasted with the government's apathy. In a country where children's right to education is constitutionally protected, the federal and provincial bureaucracies have consistently failed this segment of society. From the inability to check population growth to the failure to address poverty, from the inadequacy of educational and vocational facilities to offering scant protection, it is the state that must be blamed for the grim circumstances these children face. It is no surprise, then, that many fall into the habit of substance abuse, or turn to crime, or, as adults, abuse others. The numbers and state of our street children is a blot on the nation's conscience. But it is near impossible to make the state see that and take action.

## The darkness within

A medieval brutality, a very cancer of the soul, has permeated this society. Not only has it pervaded the hinterland, it has also spread to places where minds are supposed to be enlightened by knowledge and learning.

Each ghastly detail of Mashal Khan's murder on Thursday illustrates this chilling fact. The 23-year-old student at the Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan was lynched on campus by a mob of fellow students over allegations of blasphemy.

Video footage of the savagery unleashed upon the young man shows an enraged crowd beating his naked body with sticks, kicking and stoning him while raising religious slogans. Another student was also attacked for the same reason and badly injured; his whereabouts are unknown.

But why should we be surprised at this display of bestiality masquerading as virtue? After all, the road to Mashal Khan's murder is punctuated with many a landmark pointing to where we are headed: eight people, including a child, burned alive in Gojra in 2009 on allegations of blasphemy; governor Punjab Salmaan Taseer, gunned down by his security guard in 2011 for coming to the defence of a blasphemy accused; lawyer Rashid Rehman, shot dead in May 2014 for defending a blasphemy suspect; brick kiln

workers Shama and Shahzad, burned alive by a mob in November 2014 on allegations of blasphemy. And this is but a partial list, even in terms of the lives lost.

For the ruin of many a life has played out in the crucible of blasphemy: people driven out of their homes, deprived of their livelihoods, sometimes even languishing in jail for years because few lawyers now have the courage to defend them.

The culpability of the state — particularly some elements of it — in bringing matters to such a pass is undeniable. For even while spewing platitudes in the name of anti-extremism, it has fed the fires of intolerance and unreason, deliberately creating an environment where mere allegations of blasphemy trigger vigilante ‘justice’ and where appeals to moderation are conflated with defending blasphemy itself.

This is a Damocles’ sword that can conveniently be used to silence anyone professing views that question or contradict the state-approved narrative. And if innocents must die in the process, then so be it.

However, while the law should take its course in punishing those guilty of Mashal Khan’s murder, voices of sanity must speak up in the face of such cynical manipulation of religious sentiment.

Imran Khan, whose party heads the KP government, has rightly condemned Mashal Khan’s lynching, vowing to resist “the law of the jungle”. He is, shamefully enough, so far among the few politicians to have taken such an unequivocal stance.

Even most of the electronic media, otherwise so loquacious, has only covered Mashal Khan’s murder in a superficial manner, carefully avoiding the real issues that underpin the tragedy. Until these are debated, and the contradictions in society acknowledged, our descent into a dystopian nightmare will continue.

## ‘Mother of all bombs’

Nicknamed the ‘mother of all bombs’, could it also have been the mother of all mistakes?

Having vowed to militarily crush the militant Islamic State group, stocked his administration with retired military leaders and seemingly in thrall to the unrivalled US war machine, President Donald Trump has delivered another military spectacle that is high on theatre and low on strategic planning or intent.

The fight against IS along the Pak-Afghan border is important. The group must not be allowed to find a long-term foothold in the region. By all accounts, military operations by the Afghan forces aided by US firepower and a small military presence on the ground has eroded IS's strength from a high of several thousand fighters to under 1,000.

The Achin district in Nangarhar province, where the devastating bomb was dropped on Thursday, has seen an intense campaign by Afghan and US forces for several weeks, resulting in the first US casualty of the year in Afghanistan recently.

So why was a bomb with political, diplomatic and international repercussions dropped? It has immediately alarmed some sections of the Afghan state and possibly alienated a fresh swathe of the population; what the US president believes is marvellous, many consider terrifying.

As cheering sections of the media and Trump supporters in the US suggest, the Achin bombing is supposedly meant to signal to the wider world that Mr Trump means business. From North Korea to IS in the Middle East, enemies of the US have supposedly been put on notice.

But what does it mean for Afghanistan? Does it presage an announcement of more US troops to Afghanistan, as the generals have demanded and National Security Adviser Gen H.R. McMaster's trip to the region is scheduled to determine? If so, where does that leave a stalled reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban?

The American bombing has occurred as representatives from many countries, but not the US, gather in Moscow for a summit on peace and reconciliation. And while the Afghan Taliban were not the target of Thursday's bombing, the perception that the US is willing to use Afghanistan as a testing ground for its more powerful and destructive conventional weapons cannot bode well for peace in the country.

The longest war in US history has gone from the forgotten war under Bush to the reluctant war under Obama to what under Trump? Strategic clarity in Afghanistan is needed.

## Day care in parliament

IN this conflicted world, becoming a ‘first’ in anything can be equally negative or positive. Pakistan has several entries on both sides of the column, yet the subject here, happily, falls into the latter category. It seems that Pakistan’s parliament has become the first in South Asia to open a day care centre on its premises to allow female parliamentarians to continue with their work while having access to facilities where their infants can be looked after. Set up in Parliament House in collaboration with Unicef, the centre has been allotted two rooms on the third floor of the building. It was inaugurated by the speaker of the National Assembly, Ayaz Sadiq, on Thursday, and meets a long-standing, legitimate demand put forth by women members of the National Assembly and the Senate.

There can be no argument that this is a step in the right direction, with the highest house of legislation setting an example that desperately requires emulation at all tiers. It is by no means unprecedented — for years, such facilities have been available at several large corporate entities, though it is debatable whether the motivation stems from concern for the mothers and children, or the hard-nosed business acumen that deplores the loss of workers in whom the company has invested. Either way, the result is laudable. Where day care is available, it has made a substantive difference to the lives of those members — predominantly women but also a few men — of the workforce who otherwise find themselves stymied when trying to juggle small children with work responsibilities. Parliament House needs to follow up by running a strong advocacy campaign that filters down to the lowest levels of employment operations, for that is where such intervention is needed most. It is the working class that has the least options regarding childcare, and also the most to lose by sacrificing a job. Further, providing such options would ultimately see men taking ownership of their children’s needs as well.

## Protesting utilities

WHAT does it say for the state of our utilities and our politics when one political party carries out a long series of rolling street protests against a power utility for overbilling, while the chief minister of the province threatens to “storm the offices” of the gas utility for its reluctance to provide fuel for a new power plant set up by the provincial government? Of late, the streets of Karachi have been plagued by a series of protests led by the Jamaat-i-Islami against overbilling of consumers by K-Electric. The issue is a real one, even if the tactics of the party can be seen as trying to gain political mileage



out of the situation. And since at least 2014, the Sindh government has been trying to set up a gas-fired power plant using the Sindh Nooriabad Power Company Ltd, only to face delays and obstacles. Even Nepra, the power sector regulator, said the objections raised by these federal bodies were “irrational” during the hearings for the grant of a generation licence for SNPCL.

Most recently, the project has met with opposition from the top, with the railways minister, Saad Rafique, indicating that it is owned by Asif Ali Zardari. If these are grounds for denying the project a licence, then the matter of ownership should have been raised when the company applied for a generation licence. That was the moment to raise objections such as these, but the ministry gave its approval. Now that the project is ready to commence operations, suddenly they find that the fuel supplier, the Sui Southern Gas Company, is demanding Rs1bn as security deposit before allowing the 10mmcfcd of gas the plant requires. No wonder the chief minister has resorted to such thundering rhetoric.

But the protests and rhetoric are not likely to sway any minds in the utilities. Power and fuel decisions lie largely in the domain of the federal government, and it is there that the problem is located. In both cases, that of alleged overbilling by K-Electric, and the obstructions that the Sindh government has had to face in setting up a power project that has all the approvals it needs from the regulator and the power ministry, the critical role of the federal government is missing. The obstacles faced by SNPCL are all creations of entities reporting directly to the centre, whereas other projects that are viewed more favourably find their path smoother. Likewise, in the matter of overbilling, Nepra has an important role to play in oversight, but the reason why there are street protests is because this role has not been discharged properly. The highly disaggregated and diffuse responsibilities across the power sector have created the conditions that give us protests on the streets and threats in the provincial assembly.

## **N. Korea-US tensions**

WHILE the world’s attention is mostly glued to hot spots such as the Middle East and South Asia, trouble is brewing in another, equally combustible region: the Korean Peninsula. Of recent, there has been a disturbing exchange of rhetoric between the opaque regime in Pyongyang, and the Trump administration in Washington D.C. To put it cautiously, neither government is a stranger to provocation: the former is a strange autocracy known for taking bizarre decisions, while the latter is known to make boorish foreign policy decisions in a unilateral fashion. On Saturday, as North Korea marked the birthday of its founding father Kim Il-sung amidst a display of military might, Kim’s

grandson and current strongman Kim Jong-un warned the US to be prepared for a “nuclear attack”. Considering the North’s nuclear arsenal and its eccentric nature, this rhetoric should not be taken lightly. The US, on its part, has threatened to “take care” of Pyongyang’s nukes as an American naval strike force has moved towards the Korean Peninsula. Further evidence that things are heating up to an uncomfortable level came in the shape of a warning on Friday from Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi that war could break out “at any moment” in the peninsula. The Chinese are known not to exaggerate, which is why the warning must be taken very seriously by the global community.

Relations between North Korea and the US have been bitter ever since the Korean War, when the peninsula was bifurcated into the communist North and the capitalist South. In fact, this bitterness has survived the end of the Cold War, and today may trigger a new conflagration if the global community does not act in a timely manner to douse the flames of aggression. Pyongyang’s rhetoric for long has been troubling, as the one-party state has threatened to nuke the South and the US. However, the Trump administration has also made little effort to engage North Korea, indeed adopting a tone of bellicosity and arrogance. Some have said the recent rain of Tomahawks over a Syrian airbase and the dropping of the ‘mother of all bombs’ on suspected militants in Afghanistan was a message to Pyongyang. The thought of a nuclear war in any part of the world is horrific. That is why in this situation China — which is one of North Korea’s few friends — must play a role to end the madness and prevent the escalation of hostilities.

## Cigarette sale to minors

IT is not at all unexpected for a survey to find shops selling cigarettes to minors in Pakistan. If anything the uninterrupted supply of cigarettes to or via the underaged public is yet more proof of how freely vendors can distribute their dangerous merchandise amongst those who are most likely to succumb to temptation. But this is not all that a report by a coalition of those who want to curb the use of tobacco has come up with. There is more information. The report says that over half the violations occur in Punjab which could actually be on account of the size of the province in comparison with the other units. The differences in numbers apart, what is truly surprising is that there are big gaps, between the provincial governments, in tolerance levels in certain aspects of cigarette selling, as in the case of tobacco advertising. It is not easy to understand, for instance, why Sindh is the only province where the billboards hailing and wooing cigarette smokers are no more in the picture. Punjab, again true to its size, maintains the usual 50pc share of these billboards whereas

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which actually needed to lag behind the other provinces in this race, account for the other 50pc.

The same report was not simply content with giving out estimated figures about cigarette smoking; it ventured into the most difficult territory where an attempt was made to gauge the changes in the behaviour of the people in the context of tobacco addiction. A change towards the positive was noted where the smokers now at least appeared to find it tougher than before to argue their case. It is clear that the government has also been forced to adopt a similarly defensive approach in the face of aggressive campaigning by the anti-tobacco camp. This has so far failed to translate into the will to implement the existing laws, let alone come up with any other strategy to curb the rampant use of tobacco.

## Absent legislators

THE government has extended assurances to a rightly angered and frustrated Senate chairman Raza Rabbani, but it does appear that the democratic process has reached a crisis point. In abruptly cancelling an ongoing Senate session on Friday, Mr Rabbani's reaction may have been extreme and perhaps could have been expressed in another way; however, there has been undeniably a great deal of provocation and a record stretching back through the term of this government of ministers disregarding parliament. It is, in fact, a domino effect starting at the very top. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif appears to disdain parliament, his appearances in the National Assembly being so few as to have become national events when he does deign to go to parliament. That is all the more perplexing given that his official residence is, quite literally, a stone's throw from parliament.

Mr Sharif's apparent dislike for parliament filters down to ministers, many of whom regularly skip its sessions. And the absence of ministers leaves backbenchers with little incentive to appear in parliament, meaning that quorum is often not achieved. Senators may be a bit more conscientious about ensuring their presence, but the same overall dynamic in the National Assembly applies in the Senate. Meanwhile, senior opposition figures, especially Imran Khan, also routinely skip parliament — an arrogant rejection of the people's house that he competed so fiercely to be a part of during elections. What is particularly disheartening is that each and every one of the parliamentary scofflaws has time for all manner of activities outside parliament. Prime Minister Sharif tours the country giving political speeches and inaugurating projects big and small. Ministers make daily appearances on talk shows, sometimes making multiple appearances across TV channels and mostly seated alongside journalists and pundits. The TV

cameras outside parliament draw more parliamentarians than the microphones inside the parliamentary halls.

The effects of the downgrading of the importance of parliament by the legislators themselves are pernicious. Not only are institutions being weakened, but the public's trust in the democratic process may be eroding. In a country where only roughly half the electorate casts a vote, there is obviously a great deal of disinterest in the democratic process. The clamour across great swathes of the public that politicians are selfish, corrupt and anti-people cannot be ignored. Merely ensuring more regular attendance in parliament will not salvage matters. The breaking point for Mr Rabbani came when an important question about the post-retirement perks of bureaucrats went unanswered again; an important question that goes to the heart of parliament's responsibility for executive oversight. Perhaps, taking a cue from the parliamentarians' media savviness, all sessions should be broadcast to the public, creating an incentive for the legislators and allowing the public to see what their government is hiding from them. This crisis could be an opportunity for change.

## Human development

OVER the last two decades most of South Asia has witnessed progress in human development. More children are in school, people are living longer, and there is greater access to basic social services. That said, countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan rank low on human development indicators because of severe neglect of public health and education, according to *Health in South Asia*, a collection of analyses launched recently in Delhi. Examining rising infant mortality, vulnerability to infectious diseases and the poor capacity to respond to outbreaks, this research finds that the level of preparedness is inadequate to protect public health in South Asia — home to a quarter of the world's population. The findings are no secret especially in countries where extreme poverty, child deaths, stunted development and limited future productivity have hampered progress. Noting that Afghanistan has the highest fertility rate followed by Pakistan, the work underscores the need for governments to invest in early childhood years through quality schooling, nutrition and healthcare. In Pakistan alone, 800,000 children die annually, more than 35pc from malnutrition. Regrettably, even such grim statistics fail to jolt our government's conscience. For starters, with the population growing at the annual rate of almost 2pc, the government must campaign for smaller families with greater vigour across the country, and invest in accelerated family planning and female literacy to lower the fertility rate. With its pulse on economic development policies, the PML-N surely realises that investment and sound policies in health, education and good governance are the only way to create a quality workforce.

It is unacceptable that, regionally, Pakistan has the highest rate of infant mortality when the government is obligated to implement policy changes having signed up to the SDGs. Moreover, the World Bank has said it will name and shame countries before potential investors for failing to tackle stunting. When children die of hunger the lack of government action and outrage is a stain on our collective conscience. What are the authorities doing to alleviate the suffering of 400,000 starving children in Thar as reported in this paper? Even with international food fortification assistance to the tune of over \$1m, malnutrition has unforgivably burgeoned. Our government should heed Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's theory: investing in people and in the grey matter of our children is the way to growth.

## Illegal brokerages

THE corporate regulator is doing the right thing by cracking down on unregistered brokerage houses, and its efforts need to be expanded to include unlicensed currency dealers as well. Unlicensed operators are the bane of the financial services industry, flouting regulations designed to protect the consumers' interest, engaging in practices that destabilise the markets, such as manipulative trades or hawala money transfers. The greatest damage, of course, is done to the interests of the retail consumer, who relies on the trust that underlies all financial markets, and often finds that either a broker or currency dealer has made off with his clients' funds. These practices must be halted, and the start to that process is cracking down on those known to be operating in the shadows. Eventually, the SECP will need to buttress its efforts through stronger surveillance and pre-emptive action.

Unlicensed brokers and currency dealers also facilitate the crime of money laundering that is endangering the financial system's ability to interact with the outside world, adding to the processing burden for the State Bank, and most importantly, providing a channel for ill-gotten gains to enter and leave the country. In the past, the SECP has tried to move against these practices — more than a decade ago, it was fortunate enough to have a strong and independent-minded chairman, but that individual did not last long. The roots of the rackets that the SECP is moving against run very deep, and through benami transactions, as well as other ghost accounts, underground brokers provide the services that are used by large players to game particular stocks. The nexus runs from small to large, and soon enough, once the effects of the crackdown begin to be felt by the larger players who use these benami and ghost accounts, there will inevitably come a strong pushback. That is the moment when we will know whether or not the government is serious about cleaning up the financial system.

# Turkish president's triumph

TURKEY's elected strongman has finally got what he wanted — victory in a referendum that will give him sweeping powers to not only consolidate his rule but also follow policies that could alter the very character of Ataturk's Turkey. As results of Sunday's referendum started pouring in, the opposition cried foul, alleged that the election commission had “changed the rules in the middle of the game” and demanded a recount of at least 37pc of the votes, the European Union claiming that the plebiscite was held in “an unfair environment”. The results showed a nation divided — 51.4pc voting ‘yes’ — with most evet votes coming from the rural areas. Even in Istanbul, the birthplace of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the majority voted against the 18-point package that will arm President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with powers to radically transform the parliamentary constitution and go presidential. Euphoric after the win, Mr Erdogan asked the opposition not to challenge the veracity of his victory, and threatened to reintroduce the death penalty — a move that could rule out Turkey's EU membership. The big issue is: what next? Will the AKP's victory heal the wounds inflicted by the July 2016 coup attempt and its aftermath, or will Mr Erdogan continue with his petulant behaviour?

The attempt was a foolhardy gamble and was crushed — by Turkish citizens, no matter on which side of the political divide they were. Millions the world over saw men and women hurl themselves on tanks to proclaim their attachment to democracy and abhorrence of military rule. Yet Mr Erodgan's own reaction stunned even his most ardent admirers as he launched what looked like a crackdown on his people, and began a frenzied purge that saw nearly 100,000 people jailed, including generals, teachers and newspersons, with thousands sacked; his ire focused on US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen. In fact, the very purpose of the three-month emergency in Mr Erdogan's words was to “remove swiftly all the elements of the terrorist organisation” — a reference to the vast social network founded in Turkey by Mr Gulen.

Since he came to power in 2002, Mr Erdogan has some achievements to his credit, including the consolidation of civilian supremacy and a robust economic growth. But over the one and a half decades of his rule, he has gradually moved away from some fundamentals of Ataturk's policies. His criticism of the Treaty of Lausanne — a superb diplomatic achievement by Ismet Inonu — had the ghost of an Ottoman redux about it, and the rhetoric by him and his ministers over the coup attempt annoyed both Europe and America. Now armed with a fresh mandate, Mr Erdogan should shun vindictiveness, show magnanimity, unite a divided nation, use his new powers to end Turkey's ‘deep state’ image and revitalise the economy.

## JuA militant in custody

IN the long fight against militancy, among the many counter-insurgency and counterterrorism gains Pakistan has made, there has been one area in which results have long been uneven: the capture of senior leaders of the banned TTP. From Fata to Swat, militant leaders have taken advantage of the porous border with Afghanistan and the difficulty in sealing off areas where military operations are being conducted to escape capture or elimination in battle. The most notorious militant leader who has long avoided capture or death is of course TTP leader Mullah Fazlullah. Unlike his two immediate predecessors, Hakeemullah Mehsud and Baitullah Mehsud, the current chief has even managed to avoid US drones. His presumed hideout in Afghanistan is either out of reach for Afghan forces or shielded for political reasons. Now, however, with DG ISPR Maj-Gen Asif Ghafoor having announced that another high-value target, Jamaatul Ahrar spokesperson Ehsanullah Ehsan, is in military custody, perhaps a new, more successful phase in the capture of Taliban leaders is opening. The DG ISPR did not share the circumstances of Ehsan's capture or surrender, but given that the Jamaatul Ahrar is known to have found sanctuary in Afghanistan, his detention suggests that some new cross-border cooperation has taken place.

While Afghanistan and Pakistan have in recent times engaged in more verbal sparring publicly than demonstrated a resolve to find solutions to mutual problems of cross-border militancy, it has long been clear that the two need to work together if militancy is to be defeated. Army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa has made a welcome effort to change the tone of bilateral ties in his recent comments comparing the suffering of Afghanistan from terrorism with that of Pakistan. If that effort has been complemented by fresh behind-the-scenes attempts to address the problem of Afghanistan-based TTP sanctuaries, then it can be hoped that more high-value targets hiding along the Pak-Afghan border will be captured soon. While the militants' capacity to regenerate and replace senior leaders is well known, there is little doubt that capture or elimination of senior leaders is significantly disruptive to militant groups. Moreover, capture can provide vital information that may not otherwise be available. Ehsanullah Ehsan has claimed some of the most violent attacks inside Pakistan; Maulana Fazlullah is a long-surviving militant leader; and many more such names continue to elude justice. It is time for their freedom to end.

## HIV cases on the rise

WHILE the number of new HIV infections has declined globally over the past decade, Pakistan remains one of the few regional countries to witness an increasing number of cases. Identified by UNAIDS as one of 35 fast-track countries needing intensified efforts to fight HIV/AIDS, the government must roll out plans to close gaps in prevention, testing and treatment services. With over 130,000 persons suffering from this deadly virus, the Ministry of National Health Services has confirmed the increasing incidence of HIV. The warning about an epidemic warrants urgent action. Moreover, flawed health policies and the lack of funds for government-run HIV centres are at the crux of this crisis. Although HIV has been difficult to cure, global availability of antiretroviral treatment has proven successful in the fight against it. In Pakistan, most HIV patients have minimal access to such life-saving therapies because of the low rates of testing, treatment and adherence to treatment. Recently, the Sindh AIDS Control Programme cited lack of funding for treatment for 42,000 HIV patients in Karachi — the highest number reported in 20 years. Because battling HIV is more than confronting a deadly virus and also involves fighting a social stigma, it is imperative to use media campaigning to educate people about the illness.

With Pakistan committed to ending AIDS by 2030 in line with the UN SDGs, it must create conditions to achieve the UNAIDS 90-90-90 treatment target — impossible without political will and resource investment. This ambitious target calls for 90pc of people living with HIV to know their status, 90pc to access antiretroviral treatment and 90pc on treatment to have suppressed viral loads. Having received assistance from the Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, the government must disburse these funds for instituting preventive measures, especially targeting high-risk groups such as sex workers and drug users. In conclusion, testing and treatment should be made fully available countrywide beyond tokenistic handouts.

## Wise words of a bereaved father

“THERE is a Mashal in every home. We have to protect them,” said the father of Mashal Khan. How often does one find such dignity in the face of an unspeakable tragedy as that which has befallen Iqbal Jan’s family? His stoicism is not only deeply moving; it is also inspiring. For the rest of his days, Mr Jan must live with the knowledge that his 23-year-old son, accused of having committed blasphemy, met a terrible, premature end at the hands of a rabid mob, beaten mercilessly and then shot. Only police intervention reportedly prevented his body from being set on fire. It is a calamity that is personal to



him and his family in a way that it cannot be for anyone else, however affected by this ghastly murder. Yet Iqbal Jan has chosen not to make it only about his personal loss. He has asked that his son's killers be punished, not to bring closure to his family but so that no other family experiences the grief they have to endure.

More people must heed the call that Mashal's father has given, his plea for peace and tolerance against what he described as forces of darkness that drown out the light. While Imran Khan spoke out promptly to condemn the murder, others were slow off the mark, apparently waiting for the blasphemy allegation to be refuted by authorities before they committed themselves. They betrayed their narrow thinking, not to mention their cowardice, by their silence. This lynching, and those that have come before, are about much more than blasphemy. They are about the utter absence of the rule of law and the conviction among certain segments of society that acts of extreme violence can be committed with impunity as long as the tag of blasphemer is attached to the target. More evidence, some of it on video, has emerged about the motive behind the murderous attack on Mashal and the threats — what else but of being accused of blasphemy? — given to those on the scene not to reveal the identity of the person who shot him.

Sometimes out of tragedy, a chance at redemption presents itself. This is that moment. It is an opportunity for this country's leadership to rein in what has become an out-of-control epidemic of 'vigilante justice', an aberration of the very concept of justice, driven as it is by raw emotion — often manipulated by vested interests — rather than based on evidence and administered by a court of law. There has been talk now and then of enacting legislation to make false allegation of blasphemy a punishable offence. Several senators on Monday once again called for such an amendment to the blasphemy law. The state must rise to the occasion. The least we can do is ensure that Mashal did not die in vain.

## Risks to growth

THE World Bank has served up another reminder that Pakistan's economy is on a growth path, reserves are high, inflation is "on target", and all other indicators are improving, but risks from the fiscal and external side remain a source of concern. This constant refrain, of a steadily growing economy with strong caveats hanging over it, is now becoming ubiquitous. Almost every entity other than the government itself, is qualifying its assessment of the growing economy with the observation that the risks are growing alongside as well. The World Bank has presented its assessment in a report titled South Asia Economic Focus, which takes a close look at the impact that a growing

protectionist backlash in the advanced industrial democracies could have on South Asian economies, which have registered the highest growth rates in the world in recent years.

Pakistan tracks the rest of the region in its developments, but the risks it faces are unique to it. The report notes South Asia may even stand to benefit from the backlash, due to fortuitous circumstances, but in the case of Pakistan, the approach of elections could cause the leadership to take its eye off the ball, resulting in the growth process losing momentum and any reforms fizzling out. Aside from this, the additional risks pointed out by the World Bank emanate from the same areas identified by others: rising trade deficit and falling remittances. “Therefore, the current account is experiencing some pressure”, state the authors, going one step beyond the State Bank which pointed to the external account as a source of worry in its last report, but stopped short of saying it was coming under pressure. Likewise, the fiscal framework is also taking some pressure, with the deficit widening by 0.7 percentage points in the first half of the fiscal year compared to the same period last year. With headwinds expected from the global economy depending on how Brexit works out, and how US economic policy shapes up under the new administration, the World Bank says the risks facing the economy are significant. It is worth noting that by now almost all institutional assessments of the economy, and its seemingly comfortable position, are in agreement on this point. With high reserves and growth ramping up, perhaps the greatest risk facing the economy is complacency at the top. With the approach of elections, the risks are solidified further.

## Militants’ profiles

WHILE Pakistan has been ravaged by militancy for many years, there have not been enough efforts, neither at the state level nor within academia, to discover what makes a militant. While blanket terms such as ‘extremism’, ‘fundamentalism’, etc have been employed to explain the triggers that drive people to commit violence against others, a more scientific approach is required to find out the causative factors behind militancy, and develop measures to address these. To this end, the Sindh Police’s Counter-Terrorism Department has made a small effort in a recent survey that discusses the profiles of some 500 militants lodged in the province’s jails. Some interesting facts have emerged: for example, the survey says that most militants suffered from psychological problems, while economic hardship drove over 40pc to take up the gun. Most incarcerated fighters belonged to the low-income group; moreover, while nearly 200 said they were motivated to join banned groups due to a “hatred of the West and India”, 125 militants said they signed up in order to take advantage of the opportunity to collect extortion money.

While the sample is quite small, the CTD survey does offer a peek into the murky world of militancy. Indeed, what is needed are bigger studies across the country to determine the profiles of militants, and formulate workable counter-extremism policies. Nacta, which is underutilised at the moment, is ideally placed to carry out such research. A one-size-fits-all approach to counterterrorism is not likely to stem the tide of militancy in Pakistan due to a variety of factors that drive people towards militancy. Perhaps greater research will reveal clearer links between militants operating in different parts of the country, and how to counter them. While some hard-core fighters are unlikely to want to join the mainstream, others could be prevented from walking down the path of militancy if the state makes a greater effort to address the factors contributing to it.

## American NSA's tactlessness

ONCE inside Pakistan, the message was more positive and one that focused, at least publicly, on “strengthening bilateral relations” and “working with Pakistan to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan” and with India. But the damage had already been done outside Pakistan. US National Security Adviser retired Lt-Gen H.R. McMaster appears to have committed a classic beginner’s error when it comes to addressing the region. Or perhaps the administration of President Donald Trump, keen to sound tough, has made an early mistake. Either way, giving a media interview in Kabul and using that platform to, effectively, verbally attack Pakistan was an unnecessary move by Mr McMaster. It is worth recalling the crux of what he said: “We have hoped that Pakistani leaders will understand that it is in their interest to go after these [militant] groups less selectively ... and the best way to pursue their interest in Afghanistan and elsewhere is ... not through the use of proxies that engage in violence.” Translation: Pakistan is using militant proxies against Afghanistan and India.

Unsurprisingly, the Pakistani state hit back at the allegations and it appears the mood in GHQ is particularly sour after the American lecture. The attempts to speak more positively about Pakistan once inside the country by Mr McMaster amounted to damage control that may not have had much immediate effect. Confusing, contradictory messaging appears to have become an early Trump administration hallmark in a range of areas and, as in those other areas, it is not clear how they help further America’s interest or its relations with allies. To be sure, the Pak-Afghan relationship is a complex one, with both sides having legitimate grievances against the other. To speak of one side’s concerns and not the other’s is remarkable. To pour fuel on fire by alluding, while in Kabul, to alleged Pakistani militant proxies against India is staggering. If Gen McMaster does want to strengthen bilateral ties between Pakistan and the US, he has stumbled into a formula to achieve exactly the opposite.

Consider what the US has done on and in Afghanistan of late. After announcing an early boycott of the Moscow conference, the run-up to the conference was overshadowed by the ‘mother of all bombs’. The bomb may have targeted the militant Islamic State group, but it also opened new fissures in Kabul and split the government on ties with the US. Somehow, when IS is the one problem that unites virtually all national, regional and international powers involved in Afghanistan — from Pakistan to Afghanistan; from the US to the Afghan Taliban themselves; and from Russia to China — the US has found a way to attack IS in a way that has alarmed everyone else. The bomb underlined America’s military strength and major regional role; Mr McMaster’s comments hint at an ongoing, and worrying, lack of clarity in Washington.

## Rangers’ powers

EVERY 90 days, the same ritual plays out in Sindh. The policing powers of the paramilitary Rangers come up for renewal, the provincial authorities delay the notification extending the powers of the force, a flurry of negotiations takes place and the notification is eventually issued. The policing powers of the Rangers, which allow them to carry out raids, detain and arrest people, as well as conduct prosecution, expired on April 15, and since then the force has withdrawn its personnel from deployments from a wide range of facilities including checkpoints. It has retreated to its headquarters as it awaits a new notification that would grant it policing powers. In the flurry of negotiations and headlines that each such episode creates, one central fact gets obscured: the Rangers cannot be expected to police Karachi forever. The big question, therefore, is, what has the Sindh government done to prepare itself and the city’s police force for an eventual withdrawal of the paramilitary force? The strenuous efforts to remove the current IG of Sindh Police do not inspire confidence that the ruling party in the province sees the policing of the country’s largest metropolis as an important duty that should be free of all politics.

The provincial authorities have a point when they say the Rangers have overstepped their mandate on a number of occasions, either by using their powers for the apprehension of terrorists to pursue political figures instead, or by failing to notify provincial authorities prior to carrying out raids. But the Rangers have also played a crucial role in restoring peace to the city, and should continue to operate until the police force has been sufficiently revived to take up its job, which is not the case at the moment. It seems that the Sindh government is negotiating on a very narrow agenda in return for extending the policing powers of the paramilitary for another 90 days, something we have seen each time the Rangers’ powers are up for renewal. By its actions, the government has undermined its own case against the grant of an extension.

It would be easier to understand its point of view, and endorse a call for highly abridged powers, as in the case of the Rangers deployed in Punjab, if one could see strenuous efforts to turn Sindh's police into an effective, depoliticised force. Until that happens, Karachi will continue to need the Rangers.

## Sargodha porn scandal

CHILD sexual abuse is a crime with damaging and life-ruining repercussions. In recent years, the enormity of child pornography scandals — in Kasur and Swat — involving scores of victims suffering at the hands of abusers have revealed our nation's dirty little secret. Recently, the Sargodha pornography case, made public by a cybercrime investigation following a tip-off by the Norwegian embassy, exposed the alarming scale of internet child sexual exploitation in the country. Unfortunately, even though fully aware of its existence, the state's disinterest in preventing child abuse has allowed internet pornography to thrive. The Sargodha case is the monstrous handiwork of an engineer, Saadat Amin, who made 65,000 pornographic video clips of children for European clients, earning around \$38,000 for the footage. Since the racket began in 2007, children aged between eight and 14 were lured with the promise of receiving computer training. Paid monthly stipends, they became part of a steady flow of pornographic content. So lucrative was this 'business' that Amin planned to travel to Norway with his child victims to produce more films. It is important now to establish the truth of what went on. But a thorough investigation has been challenging. With the social taboo attached to porn, victims and their parents are refusing to testify, with some parents claiming the 'shameful' photographs are fake.

In a world where pedophilia is rampant, it is irresponsible of the state not to educate children, parents and schools on the risks of abuse. Doing so will encourage disclosures — the first step towards deterring the perpetrators of this crime. Public campaigns to spot and report abuse will give courage to victims to name the predators. A national hotline could help families report without fear. Outrage and disgust are no longer enough. The state must start by strengthening legislation on child abuse and child pornography and award exemplary punishment to those found guilty of taking such despicable advantage of our most vulnerable segment of society.

## Panama Papers verdict

It had all the makings of a landmark judicial case: a serving prime minister and his family accused of corruption; the petitioners representing an array of political opposition; the hearings initiated by a chief justice of Pakistan, who intervened to prevent a potentially catastrophic political confrontation in Islamabad; and an evidentiary trail rooted in the explosive Panama Papers, which caused ripples across the globe.

In the end, and in a split decision, the court has found that it does not have enough evidence to give the opposition what it wants, but it does have enough doubts to demand a joint investigation team probe Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family.

The verdict was immediately hailed by the government as a victory; and, perhaps half-heartedly, used by the PTI to demand yet again that the prime minister temporarily step aside. Both reactions were predictable.

In the hours after a lengthy judgement is delivered, a full examination of its contents is unlikely; the days ahead will yield more details and informed opinion, supportive and critical of the judgement. Yet, there is an anomaly that can be immediately identified and that perhaps the court has not thought through the implications of.

The JIT itself is effectively a dead end. The record of JITs in other politically charged matters make it clear that no great surprises ought to be expected. But the inclusion of military-run intelligence agencies in a probe against a serving prime minister in matters of finance and the law is remarkable — and a precedent that should not be established.

It is not a question of who the prime minister is or civilians being above the law. There is absolutely no doubt that as prime minister, Mr Sharif must be held to a greater level of scrutiny than the average citizen. What is concerning about the composition of the JIT, especially with the inclusion of a Military Intelligence representative, is the signal it sends about the lack of institutional trust.

Civilian matters should be probed, adjudicated and resolved in the civilian domain. And if the court has little faith in civilian institutions, as it indicated in its verdict, it could have put its trust in a judicial commission.

At the heart of the Panama Papers petitions lay a simple idea — that long-standing political families in the country use the system to enhance their personal wealth. Credit for pushing that simple idea — both intuitive and with decades of circumstantial evidence to support it — all the way to the Supreme Court and against a serving prime minister must go to Imran Khan and his PTI.

Mr Khan's tactics, especially a threatened lockdown of Islamabad, were often unwarranted and occasionally indefensible, but corruption is an undeniable facet of political life in Pakistan and must be seriously addressed.

Mr Sharif may still have his job and his family has not been convicted of any wrongdoing as yet, but it is troubling that the family appears to regard financial probity as a matter of politics — that somehow continuing political support and the backing of the electorate in the last general election means that it has nothing to answer for. At best, Mr Sharif will emerge from this episode with a tainted legacy.

If change — institution-strengthening, transparency-building, probity-enhancing change — is to come, all sides must consider their role in the present state of affairs.

The Supreme Court was unable to quell the political shenanigans the hearings attracted and mishandled public expectations with unnecessary statements from the bench. The PML-N has behaved like corruption is a figment of the public and the opposition's imagination instead of a governance-sapping national malaise, which it is.

The opposition has peddled rumour and allegation as fact and, in the case of the PTI, is yet to develop a political vision that goes beyond the prime minister's ouster. Meanwhile, institutions have continued to wither and parliament is in the doldrums, a neglected body from where great democratic ideas and institutional changes ought to spring.

Perhaps in the glare of the verdict, the country's institutions and leadership will find a way to address the public's very real and urgent demand for a cleaner political process.

Mr Sharif is a legitimately elected prime minister; what he and his family have failed to prove so far is that their wealth has been legitimately acquired.

## Load-shedding burden

WITH the return of load-shedding around the country, especially in the PML-N heartland of Punjab, memories of the last election have been stirred. Chronic power shortages, and frequent blackouts have played a pivotal role in the last two elections that were held in 2008 and 2013. And although the incumbent party in both instances was facing serious issues of credibility — as well as violent resistance to any public appearances in the case of the PPP in 2013 — the fact that the electorate went to the polls amidst crushing outages was a visible sign of the government's failure to govern. It is, therefore, for good reason that the present government appears to be more nervous about load-shedding than any other issue, and the assurances offered by Khawaja Asif,

the minister for water and power, in the National Assembly on Wednesday held a note of panic. The minister made a list of all the power projects that are scheduled to come online by the end of the year, and told the Assembly members that they should feel free to “grab me by the collar” if load-shedding continued to persist till then.

It is unfortunate though that the present peaks of load-shedding have little to do with power-generation capacity, and even less with the minister’s collar. Fact of the matter is that each time the power system has failed in such large measure, it has been due to financial constraints, which in turn grow out of an outmoded governance regime. It was this governance regime that the minister’s party had promised to fix by undertaking deep-seated reforms. The power sector is woven into so many other aspects of government operations that it is virtually impossible for one ministry or department to give an assurance that it will operate smoothly. Lack of liquidity, failure of tax refunds for private power producers, or the lack of ability to import fuel in time have all played a role in crippling the sector in the past. For this reason, a proposal was developed in the middle of the PPP government’s tenure to perhaps merge the petroleum ministry with the water and power ministry, to perhaps create one large ministry of energy, but that proposal never went beyond the discussion stage.

There was another proposal to allow market forces to play a greater role in power pricing, which could have helped mitigate the constant liquidity shortage that the sector suffers from, thereby easing the accumulation of circular debt and smoothing out arrangements for fuel supply. That proposal also went nowhere. The only proposal that achieved something under the present government was the Chinese one — of massive new investments in the power sector using Chinese project financing. And it is these investments alone that the minister today points to when asked about load-shedding. These megawatts are what the government has pegged its future on, and if load-shedding is to rear its head when the campaign rallies get under way, and the electorate gears up to vote, the minister might yet rue his offer to be grabbed by the collar.

## What next for Nawaz?

The historic Panama Papers verdict may have been short on immediate impact and pounced on by both sides to claim vindication, but it is relatively clear that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will still have to contend with an elevated degree of scrutiny.

That is only right. Through the agonising series of explanations offered by the Sharif family in court, it often appeared that more questions were being raised about the first family’s financial history than were being answered. Three out of five Supreme Court



judges did not have enough evidence before them to oust Mr Sharif, but all the justices appear to have been troubled by the evasiveness or lack of clarity by a serving prime minister and his family. That creates a very real problem at the intersection of law and politics: Mr Sharif is legally entitled to continue in office, but arguably his mandate and political legitimacy have been significantly dented. The prime minister ought to give serious consideration to at least two options.

The first option: step aside temporarily while the investigation ordered by the SC is conducted. The PML-N automatically resists most demands of the PTI, but Imran Khan's umpteenth demand for Mr Sharif to step aside has been buttressed by an SC judgement this time. When the Panama Papers first shook the political landscape in Pakistan last April, it was clear that a high-powered investigation was needed and that the first family would have to submit itself to scrutiny ahead of all others implicated in the leaked documents. The very credibility of the democratic project was on the line. Now, a year later, two things have been established: neither has a credible investigation been conducted nor has the SC been able to penetrate the murkiness of the Sharif business empire. The former appears to have been stymied by political interference and the latter by the inherent limitations of a court as a financial investigatory body. If the prime minister temporarily steps aside, the likelihood of a fair and impartial investigation will surely increase significantly.

In the brutal world of politics, a damaged Prime Minister Sharif may be loath to give his arch rival, Imran Khan, anything resembling a victory, especially now that the SC itself has declined to act immediately against Mr Sharif. In that case, the prime minister has a second option: dissolve parliament, hand over power to a caretaker government and have the ECP hold a general election at the earliest. A fresh mandate from the people may be the only way for Mr Sharif to claim that he still has both political and legal legitimacy — a dual legitimacy that all elected representatives must seek. And if the PML-N loses, the people will have spoken, withdrawing the mandate they gave Mr Sharif and his party four years ago. The time for courageous decision-making is now.

## Hunting money trails

LAW enforcement agencies in Pakistan have always had a difficult time when it comes to white-collar crimes, and amongst the most difficult of these to investigate is money laundering. Very few prosecutions are ever mounted for this crime, and even fewer convictions obtained. There are various reasons for this deficiency, but the biggest one is the fact that law enforcement agencies frequently come up against powerful and connected people when they start moving on a money laundering investigation. This

makes it difficult for them to muster the will to carry on with the focus and vigour that such investigations require. As a result, the main government agencies in whose domains money laundering can potentially fall — FIA, NAB, SECP, FBR and the State Bank — have an elaborate set of excuses ready to explain their lack of action, or their failure when they do act. It is important to understand that these are just excuses: the powers to investigate and prosecute money laundering exist. It is equally important to understand that the failure to act grows out of a deeper sense of caution that these departments have developed over a period of time when dealing with this offence.

This lack of resolve has resulted in stunting the capacities of law enforcement. Even in those rare cases when an investigation is launched, the better lawyers are usually found defending the accused since the remuneration on that side is far better than what the government can pay its special public prosecutors. The FBR also finds itself arrayed against the sharpest chartered accountants, as well as the wiliest lawyers, when moving against individuals who have siphoned money abroad without paying taxes. Across the board, the will and capacity to pursue money launderers is withered and wilted, making it difficult for the state to mount an effective response when challenged to do so, as it has in the SC judgement. In the weeks to come, as the JIT is constituted and begins its job, it will have to trace a two and a half decade old money trail through multiple jurisdictions. The old problems of will and capacity will hamper its job, quite possibly setting the stage for yet another indeterminate outcome. If we are to break out of this impasse, we will have to start taking the crime of money laundering more seriously so wrongdoing can be apprehended long before it evolves into a crippling political controversy.

## Karachi cash van heist

WHILE muggings and armed hold-ups have become an unfortunate part of life in Karachi, the frenetic metropolis is also not immune to more high-profile crimes. On Thursday evening, two security guards robbed the cash van of a money exchange company in the Clifton area, decamping with over Rs12m. It has been described as one of the biggest robberies in the city in recent years while it is the third major robbery of 2017. As reported in this paper, police say one of the suspects had been hired by the security company without completing a thorough background check. While the number of bank robberies has come down in the city since the Rangers-led operation was launched in 2013 — 12 robberies were reported in 2016 compared to 28 in 2013 — there is clearly much more to do. Earlier this week, a bank branch in Karachi's Gulshan-i-Iqbal area was robbed of just over a million rupees by half a dozen suspects who took

only around five minutes to finish the job. Meanwhile police say bank managements and security companies are known for their laxity where safety measures are concerned.

In such a scenario, hiring security staff without thorough background screening is unforgivable and asking for trouble. Militants are known to rob banks to fund their activities, while criminal gangs are also involved in the racket. While SOPs for financial institutions and security companies exist, they are often overlooked to cut corners. However, banks and other financial institutions should realise that by working with security companies of unknown repute just to save a buck, they are inviting trouble. Similarly, the state needs to clamp down on security companies that hire individuals without thorough checks. Guards need to be well-trained, well-paid and well-equipped to deter criminals. Moreover, it is the police which ultimately holds the key to cracking down on high-profile crime by busting the gangs involved. Banks and security companies must answer for their carelessness, but law and order is solely the police's concern.

## Brutal repression in Kashmir

KASHMIR is seething and close enough to breaking point that sensible, right-minded Indians are speaking out in alarm against the militarised approach of the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi towards India-held Kashmir. From newspapers of record such as The Hindu and The Indian Express to widely respected retired military officers, independent media outlets and some of India's most fearless and respected journalists, the criticism of the Indian government is powerful, unequivocal and growing. The harsh tactics of the Indian state have caused unacceptable human rights violations in the disputed territory and may have already triggered a humanitarian crisis. It is particularly telling that even Indian observers who are otherwise reluctant to acknowledge the disputed territory status of Kashmir are uniting in their condemnation of Prime Minister Modi and the Indian security forces.

What is particularly troubling is that at every stage of the year-old protests by the Kashmiri people, the state of India has responded in a manner almost deliberately designed to draw more protests and cause more unrest. The killing of Burhan Wani itself was an alarming military provocation nearly 10 months ago and, now, with the widely condemned use of Farooq Ahmad Dar as a human shield against unarmed protesters, the Indian security forces appear to be emulating Israeli tactics against the Palestinians. Disturbingly, senior government and military officials have defended the shocking treatment of Mr Dar, who was returning from voting in the widely boycotted by-election. It is almost as if the state of India wants the people of Kashmir to turn to full-

scale rebellion in order to justify more violence and possibly even ethnic cleansing. That is a frightening possibility, one that the outside world simply cannot afford to ignore. If South Asia is a geopolitical tinderbox, the disputed Kashmir region is the match that can cause a regional conflagration.

Sensibly, and in a policy that must continue to hold, Pakistan has not tried to intervene inside IHK on behalf of the distressed people there. Not even the most ardent of critics of Pakistan in India have suggested that the current unacceptable state of affairs in IHK has been instigated or sustained by Pakistan. Rightly, Pakistan has adhered to a policy of drawing international attention to the repression in IHK and speaking up on behalf of the people of Kashmir. It is the right thing to do from a people-centric perspective too: even the possibility of direct Pakistani involvement in IHK would be pounced on by the state of India to justify its brutal tactics and, perhaps, turn to even greater violence. There is no guarantee that conscientious voices in India will prevail soon over a hard-line government. But Prime Minister Modi and his civilian and military advisers must surely recognise that the future of IHK will not be settled through the barrel of a gun.

## Evening courts

AN intriguing proposal is working its way through the legislative process. A bill to introduce evening courts in Islamabad has been drafted, and will be ready for presentation soon, according to the law ministry. If it is implemented, provincial assemblies will be invited to consider proposing similar moves in their respective jurisdictions. Considering that the judiciary is burdened with a backlog of almost 2,600 cases per judge by some calculations — with the problem being particularly serious in the lower courts — any suggestion to improve access to justice afforded to litigants should be given serious attention. Proposals to introduce round-the-clock courts have been around for a while now without getting anywhere, but this is the first time we see serious attention being given to establishing evening courts. The longer hours of operation for judicial officers might help in reducing the caseload, but ultimately the objective of streamlining access to justice without compromising quality will only be achieved if two conditions are present. First, the judiciary itself needs to be on board, and devote serious attention to judicial reforms. Second, outmoded civil and criminal procedures, which were written more than 100 years ago, need to be updated and brought into the 21st century.

In the voluminous amount of work written on judicial reforms, a few key issues are repeatedly mentioned. One is the attitude of judges and lawyers towards adjournments, which are generously granted because the daily caseload is usually too heavy and

incentivises repeated postponement of hearings. Another is the integration of technology into the judicial process, which would enable better monitoring of the progress of individual cases. Technology can play a vital role, not only in the scheduling of hearings or in making the record of other relevant cases readily available, but also in helping locate bottlenecks in the existing system. Evening courts can certainly help in addressing the problem of a massive backlog, but simply increasing the number of judges, or the amount of hours that courts operate, will not be enough. The streamlining of civil and criminal procedures needs to be undertaken; the higher judiciary needs to own the process of reform and utilise its enhanced independence to lift its own game, and both bench and bar must be more open to automating as much of the judicial procedure as possible. Until then, however, evening courts should be welcomed as a step in the right direction.

## Branchless banking

LATEST data released by the State Bank shows that branchless banking is growing at a gathering pace, with the volume and number of transactions both increasing at a healthy clip. For the last period under review, the quarter ending December 2016, the volume of transactions through branchless banking has increased 21 per cent from last year, while the number of transactions has risen by 31pc. This is a good development and shows that the platform for digital payments is striking roots. Not only that, some growth is also being seen in far-flung areas of the country that are currently underserved by conventional banks, showing higher penetration. All these are very positive developments and the Financial Inclusion Strategy developed by the State Bank, which aims to bring 50pc of the country's adult population into branchless banking by 2020, appears to be bearing fruit.

There is a need to ramp up the speed though. At the current rate of increase, the ambitious targets set by the State Bank might be missed. Branchless banking holds immense promise for the economy and the more it moves towards the mainstream, the better the quality of the information it generates about the small transactions that are the bedrock of the country's economy. Greater effort to promote branchless banking will not come about simply through exhortations from the central bank. Top managements of commercial banks and telecoms need to show more enthusiasm for it, and be more sensitive to the enormous commercial promise of the enterprise. The government can be encouraged to play a more aggressive role in pushing the idea by moving more and more government dealings with the citizenry onto branchless platforms. Eventually corporate Pakistan also needs to be gently nudged in the same direction, by encouraging it to use branchless platforms to make small-ticket payments to vendors or

labour through it. Financial inclusion deserves wider ownership, and creating more incentives to broaden the base of participation in it should be a priority.

## Budgeting amidst chaos

IN a recent talk with Dawn, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar said that the government is gearing up to announce the budget by the end of May, and took some pride in pointing out that no government in the recent past had managed to make such an early announcement in order to give time to parliament to deliberate on the details. But given the political situation shaping up in the aftermath of the Supreme Court verdict, it is worth thinking about the impact that the government's embattled position will have on the priorities around which the budget will be built. Even before the verdict, the government had increasingly swiveled towards a populist line in its economic policy through a series of steps, from lifting the moratorium on new gas connections to announcing a generous new Haj policy. As a consequence, the fiscal deficit target for the current year has already been blown. At a time when the fiscal balance is already under stress, coming in 0.8 per cent of the GDP higher in the first half of the fiscal year compared to the last year, the risk of the political uncertainty spilling over into economic policy is now magnified.

In the last year of the previous government, a strikingly similar situation was created. An isolated and embattled government struggled to manage a deteriorating economic situation, leading to plummeting reserves and rising fiscal deficit, which eventually led to a spike in the circular debt and large-scale, prolonged power outages. The risks to the economy are considerable, since an embattled government is less likely to maintain the discipline that is needed at a crucial juncture as the country approaches a general election. Going forward, as uncertainty tightens its grip on the government, the temptation to use populist measures to regain some support, as well as the crippling of strategic decision-making capability, can exact a terrible cost and possibly unravel the moment of hard-earned macroeconomic stability that has been achieved over the past three years.

It is impossible to see how a disciplined budget can be drawn up in the environment that is being created. The previous two governments, that of the PPP and the Musharraf regime, both presented their last budgets amid thunderous opposition and in a cacophonous assembly. Now it looks like the PML-N, which had prided itself on its economic achievements, is set to repeat that history. Even after the budget has been drawn up and announced, the task of implementing its provisions and keeping a focus on the targets contained in it will be a serious challenge, unless the ruling party can by

some miracle claw back some of its credibility. Surviving the political headwinds is not its only task from here on. Keeping the ship of state on an even keel through it all will be the real challenge.

## Chitral mob attack

THE past couple of weeks have seen a series of chilling events related to blasphemy — or rather accusations of it — unfold in the country. On April 13, Mashal Khan was brutally lynched at his university in Mardan. This was followed by a similarly gruesome incident in Sialkot on Wednesday when three sisters murdered a man, Fazal Abbas, accused of blasphemy. Just as the nation was reeling from these bloody incidents, news emerged from Chitral on Friday regarding another blasphemy accusation. As reported in this paper, a mentally disturbed man created a ruckus during Friday prayers in a local mosque. His remarks worked up the crowd, which tried to get hold of him. However, the local preacher was quick enough to hand him over to the police, which surely saved his life. Yet the mob was not satisfied and stormed the police station to punish the ‘blasphemer’. Footage from the scene is horrifying: while security and administration officials try to calm them down, the assembled mob of thousands bays for the man’s blood. Security forces had to resort to tear gas shelling to disperse the mob.

Indeed, it appears that all sense of reason, logic and rationality is fast disappearing from this country, and even the flimsiest of accusations seems to be enough to set a mob upon an individual. Few are concerned with the facts of the case — with details such as whether the offence even took place, what was the mental condition of the suspected offender, whether any personal enmity was involved, etc falling by the wayside. There is an instant demand for ‘justice’, as the mob plays judge, jury and executioner. While Mashal Khan and Fazal Abbas’ lives were lost to this madness, there was a silver lining to the Chitral case: the cleric played a commendable role by handing over the seemingly deranged individual to the police. The law enforcers, too, did the right thing by sending him for a medical examination. As is more often seen in such circumstances, clerics are the ones working up the mob into a murderous frenzy. But in Chitral, the preacher’s quick action helped save a life. Indeed, in order to help prevent further such incidents, the state should work with religious parties to help calm down mobs whenever blasphemy accusations spring up. Changing society’s mindset may take decades; using clerics to control mobs may be an essential first step.

## Ephedrine scandal

SIX years later, some progress appears finally to have been made on the ephedrine scandal. On Friday, the Special Court for the Control of Narcotic Substances in Islamabad charged nine men accused of using influence to allow two Multan-based pharmaceutical companies to exceed the permitted allocations. To recall, in March 2011, then federal minister Makhdoom Shahabuddin told the National Assembly that the government intended to investigate the alleged allocation of 9,000kg of ephedrine to two pharmaceutical companies (which, it was subsequently found, had not kept a record of the consumption of the substance), against rules capping the permitted quantity at 500kg. Given that amongst those charged are high-profile personalities such as Mr Shahabuddin himself, and Ali Musa Gilani who is the son of former prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, the authorities deserve commendation for having continued to pursue the case.

Guilt or innocence will be decided by the court system. For the state, though, alarm bells ought to be ringing. Ephedrine is a routine pharmaceutical ingredient, but is also on the list of internationally controlled substances because it is key to the production of methamphetamine, commonly abused across the world as a recreational drug. This is not the only time that allocations of substances have been played with, or chemicals misused. In earlier decades, it was found that the textiles sector was becoming a source for the black market for acetic anhydride — a common chemical that is key to the conversion of opium into heroin. That led to tight controls and book-keeping requirements being imposed on the industry. But as recently as 2014, the Anti-Narcotics Force seized substantial hauls of the chemical, some of it reportedly en route to Afghanistan. Two consignments of ephedrine were also seized by the ANF's Lahore Directorate the same year. Beyond the ephedrine case, Pakistan needs to wake up to the fact that it is in danger of becoming a significant source of trafficked substances — a status that it must take urgent measures to avoid.

## Younis Khan's achievement

CRICKETER Younis Khan has kept a low profile ever since he made his international debut for Pakistan in 2000. He has neither been hailed as a prodigy, nor seen as a naturally gifted player such as Javed Miandad or Zaheer Abbas. But there's everything high-profile about what Younis has achieved in his magnificent career, not least the 10,000-run mark as he played the West Indies on Sunday — a feat none of his illustrious predecessors in the country could accomplish. A shy, affable man off the field,



Younis has dealt with international bowlers in the strongest manner possible on the ground. His 34 hundreds, also the highest for the country in Test matches, is a testament to his prolific form, as are his six double hundreds that include a monumental 313 against Sri Lanka in Karachi. However, it is not only success that has defined his experience. In fact, to grasp why Younis has surged ahead, he must be assessed on the basis of the hurdles he has encountered. Right from his migration days to a turbulent Karachi in 1998 to take up the game, to his unceremonious ouster from captaincy in 2009 after winning the World T20 title in England, and from the controversial ODI exit two years back to his frequent bust-ups with the obdurate authorities, Younis has emerged as a resilient, creative batsman.

Following in the footsteps of his able skipper Misbah-ul-Haq, Younis has now decided to retire after the series against the West Indies. The two stalwarts leaving the game together is nothing short of a catastrophe for Pakistan cricket. And yet, they have taken a wise personal decision by quitting while still in demand; it is befitting of the reputation and respect they have earned. Despite the accolades coming his way, Younis has stayed away from showmanship, rarely mingling with the media or talking about his colleagues. Post-retirement, however, he could still top the charts with a tell-all autobiography for his fans to learn what really went through his head all these years.

## Challenge for Afghan forces

A WAR of attrition punctuated by significant attacks, the conflict in Afghanistan has claimed a staggering number of lives in the latest assault by the Afghan Taliban. Its sheer scale has caused a wave of shock and revulsion in the country. Afghans are angry and rightly so. Following the rapid dismissal of a dozen officers, including two generals, for negligence at the Mazar-i-Sharif military base, the defence minister and the army chief resigned under pressure yesterday. Even in Afghanistan, there are some crimes and failures that simply cannot be tolerated — a sign of hope perhaps that the government understands the need for accountability and is attuned to the public sentiment. Yet, the biggest challenge remains the same: finding a way to fight more effectively against the Taliban while also seeking urgent political reconciliation.

The already daunting challenge to create an effective Afghan fighting force — a military that can hold its own against the Taliban — is being further complicated by increasing indiscipline and possibly even collusion with the insurgents in the lower ranks of the security forces. For a decade-old military in a country with no recent history of a standing army, the Afghan security forces have made some important strides. The special forces in particular are battle-hardened and respected. Under American military

guidance, other sections of the Afghan military have managed to battle the Taliban in many parts of the country. But outside core districts and provinces, the military is under a great deal of Taliban pressure, and nationally, the police are in dismal shape. Neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan, which has long been cool about the creation of a large, organised fighting force on the country's western border, have discussed the possibility in a serious manner before, but perhaps circumstances offer a new avenue for military cooperation. Pakistan, after all, has accumulated vast counter-insurgency and counterterrorism experience in the past decade. The politics of such a move would be gravely complex and Pakistan must be careful to avoid bringing the Afghan war into this country. However, a training programme and enhanced military cooperation between the two states could have a number of positive effects. The difficulties should not be underestimated, but in the common suffering of the two countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan could forge cooperative, terrorism-fighting solutions.

Clearly, even if the Afghan forces are able to improve their performance and reduce battlefield losses, the overall war only has a political solution in the long term. Worryingly, the Afghan government, or at least influential sections within it, appears to have shelved a peace outreach to the Taliban. With the current US administration yet to decide on its own strategy, the relatively quiet winter spell has given way to the heat of the summer battle. Greater clarity and more urgent action are needed.

## Lawyers' warning

LAWYERS' groups have come up with varied responses to the recent Panama Papers ruling by the Supreme Court. On Saturday, the Lahore High Court Bar Association threatened to organise an immediate nationwide 'long march' against the government, bluntly asking Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to step down. The Pakistan Bar Council has shown a more nuanced, rational approach and has termed the LHCBA's sudden call for action for the removal of Mr Sharif premature. This disagreement has led to speculation about the intention of the lawyers, especially given the recent evidence of political polarisation within the bar. Pakistan's lawyers today may be more partisan than they have ever been in the past, their penchant for dabbling in politics at all times in the country's history notwithstanding. There is no doubt that the bar cuts across party lines, and partisan attitudes are quite often blamed for the thwarting of efforts towards a continuous, inherent reform process and a code that is essential for all professions. In this particular case, discipline was deemed all the more necessary after the success of the movement for the restoration of Iftikhar Chaudhry as chief justice of Pakistan. It was pointed out — and the assertion was backed by a series of events — that this particular

victory had emboldened elements amongst the lawyers to an extent where they were in danger of losing the fine balance that had distinguished the community.

The argument that many lawyers in the country are tempted to be indiscreet has re-emerged in the wake of the LHCBA's warning of a 'long march' for the removal of Mr Sharif. But while the PBC rap on the knuckles of the aspiring marchers would appear to second that impression, insiders volunteer quieter, more subtle explanations. Tellingly, the PBC has not ruled out a protest — a big protest — across the country. What it has admonished the LHCBA for is a decision taken in haste — without taking on board other lawyers organisations. Disapproved clearly is the solo flight of the Lahore lawyers who seem to be seeking to take all the credit for challenging the government. What the government must note is that the idea of the protest has not been rejected. The lawyers' protest is still looming, and given its objective — the resignation of an elected prime minister — it is likely to deepen the political divide within the bar.

## Perils for census workers

THE ongoing population census, which entered its final phase yesterday, has claimed the lives of several members of the census teams. Yesterday, two enumerators were killed when the passenger van in which they were travelling in Kurram Agency was hit by a landmine explosion. A total of 10 people were killed in the blast. On Monday, in Balochistan's Gwadar district, one uniformed personnel lost his life and another was injured in an attack while they were on their way to discharge their duty to provide security for a census team. Earlier this month, a suicide bomber in Lahore targeted a hired van carrying security personnel who were going to join a census team. Four soldiers on census duty lost their lives. The incidents are reminiscent of the many militant attacks that polio vaccination teams have been subjected to in the recent past.

The census exercise is a mammoth undertaking with numerous security concerns. One of them is on account of the militant elements still remaining in the country and who are, for obvious reasons, violently opposed to security personnel. The other aspect of security is linked with the political ramifications of the findings of the census. In a country where identity politics based on ethnicity has become particularly strong over the years, there are quarters who suspect that the exercise is a political tool whereby their place in the federation, and their claim on resources, will be diminished. While it is difficult to conclusively determine who were the targets in these attacks, whether the security personnel or the enumerators themselves — indeed the Kurram Agency deaths are possibly the result of the overall fragile security situation in the area, rather than a targeted attack — they do reinforce the perils involved in carrying out the census. As in

the case of the polio vaccination teams, security protocols must be ramped up: for instance, they must be provided dedicated transport, and vehicles collecting them for duty should not take the same route day after day.

## In election mode

HISTORICALLY, election campaign seasons in Pakistan have been short and intense. But this time around, with more than a year left in the parliamentary term, which expires in June 2018, the PPP and PTI appear to be swinging into full campaign mode — and perhaps could be altering the very dynamics of electioneering in the country. To the extent that political parties have a right to choose their own electoral strategies and the PPP and PTI may be hedging their bets against an early election, there is no harm in the opposition's approach at the moment. However, if the PPP and PTI are simply trying to exploit the political situation in the wake of the Supreme Court decision in the Panama Papers hearings, the aggressive speechmaking and rallies by the main opposition parties could have the effect of drawing the country into a long, unnecessary and unwanted campaign season, rendering the fifth year of parliament irrelevant and possibly undermining the democratic project itself.

To be sure, the PML-N has contributed a great deal to the emerging scenario of a lengthy campaign season, especially with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's recent speeches in Sindh. Moreover, the PML-N's unseemly, and certainly premature, public celebrations after the Supreme Court verdict that did little to clear the cloud of suspicion hanging over the Sharif family's business empire were guaranteed to attract a fierce opposition response. In the

hard-fought world of politics, every action has an equal, sometimes greater, reaction. Yet, in the PPP and PTI's responses, there can be traced a great deal of self-interest to the possible detriment of the democratic project. For the PPP — and Asif Zardari in particular — the pressure it is facing in Sindh from the state appears to be the principal motivating factor in the party's aggressive posture in recent days.

That only reinforces suspicions that what Mr Zardari is really after is a deal, a quid pro quo that reduces the pressure on his immediate circle of advisers and, more generally, the PPP government in Sindh. Certainly, such a perception, especially if it becomes widespread in the electorate, cannot be good for the democratic project. Perhaps the PPP's recent angry style of politics would be more believable if the party simultaneously took a greater interest in governance in Sindh. Meanwhile, the PTI appears unwilling to practise anything other than permanent campaign-style politics. While an immediate

change in the approach that has dominated since the PTI's October 2011 Lahore rally is unlikely, what remains a concern is the PTI's disregard for parliament. The same hard-hitting style of politics of the PTI outside parliament could do much to energise the house — if the party can bring itself to take parliament more seriously. It is a sad spectacle when the main opposition parties and the government itself appear to regard parliament as an inconvenience and an afterthought.

## Urban warfare

THE complexity of the war on terrorism was illustrated by a battle in the heart of Karachi on Monday evening. The seven-hour exchange of gunfire began with a raid by the Sindh Rangers on a multi-storey residential building in the city's Urdu Bazaar area and continued into the early hours of Tuesday. By the end of it, four suspected militants, including a couple — and an infant, believed to be the couple's daughter — were dead. The gun battle, described by Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan as a major success for the paramilitary force, was triggered when the suspects — holed up in one of the apartments — hurled hand grenades and started firing on the Rangers while they were taking up positions around the building. Four Rangers personnel and two passers-by were injured in the explosions. A statement by the ISPR listed a number of terrorist acts allegedly carried out by the suspects during the past eight years. If this information is accurate, then the operation in Karachi is indeed extremely significant.

In 2016, when Operation Zarb-i-Azb was in its final stages, the security forces had correctly said that the challenge had shifted from kinetic warfare in Pakistan's northern badlands to combing operations against militant cells that had burrowed themselves in the urban landscape. There have been a number of such intelligence-based operations since then, most recently under the Raddul Fasaad campaign. For instance, less than two weeks ago in Lahore, law-enforcement personnel killed a suspected militant, and arrested two of his accomplices, among them his wife Naureen Leghari who confessed on-camera that she was to be deployed as a suicide bomber against an Easter gathering in church. Successful elimination of such cells in densely populated areas depends a great deal on actionable and accurate intelligence, not only from informants within the security apparatus but also from ordinary citizens. While ethnic profiling should under no circumstances be condoned, people in the neighbourhood must be vigilant; their own security and that of their compatriots depends on it. Property owners are already required by law to provide details about their tenants to the local police station. In both the incidents cited above, the property owners were taken into custody for neglecting to do so. When extremism has been allowed to seep unchecked into a

society's fabric for so long, rooting out its residual elements requires twice the persistence, and involves both civilians and security personnel.

## Caring for the elderly

THANKS to advances in medical science and healthier lifestyles, the elderly population in most countries, including Pakistan, can enjoy longer, more active lives. But with growing numbers of old people requiring care and younger family members struggling to provide support, some serious concerns have emerged as illustrated in a report in this paper recently. The story focuses on a care home for the elderly in Karachi, a project funded entirely by a former physiotherapist whose efforts have given security to 25 men and women, many of them with no family member to visit them in their twilight years. While our collective attitude needs to change, and understanding the travails of the old ought to replace a general lack of compassion, there are other factors that must also be considered as the extended family structure crumbles in the face of new socioeconomic challenges. Women, the traditional caregivers, are entering the workforce, and are no longer able to give much time to older relatives at home. Also, young families immigrating in search of better economic prospects are leaving behind elderly parents with no one to give them emotional, physical or economic support. So care homes are required — however much we may boast of a tradition that values the elderly, the fact remains that our streets remain full of old people with no place to call home.

With the ageing population set to increase to 43m by 2025, it is imperative for the state to strategise social care reform. There may be individual and community-based interventions — Karachi's Parsi General Hospital and its attached infirmary managed by a board of trustees is an example of a subsidised retirement home. But this is not enough. Perhaps a private-public approach could be adopted if the state is incapable of handling this social crisis on its own. No individual should be deprived of dignity and comfort in the last years of his or her life — and it is primarily the duty of the state to ensure this.

## Saving money

A NEW study by Standard Chartered Bank shows that the “emerging affluent” class in Pakistan prefers to keep its savings in cash at home. The reasons given for this preference include wanting quick access to the money and little awareness of investing options. Included in a sample of eight countries where the study was conducted, Pakistanis save 14pc of their monthly income compared to an average of 27pc for the entire sample. This dismally low percentage points to important gaps in the economic landscape as well as cultural traits that value present consumption over long-term management of personal wealth. The gaps in the economic landscape can be identified as a low-interest-rate environment and a dire shortage of vehicles to mobilise long-term savings, coupled with widespread rackets in the property and commodity markets that offer outsize speculative returns, making steady and safe returns appear unattractive by comparison. The cultural traits are slightly more complicated. They include an excessive role of ego in wealth-management decisions, where present-day consumption and the accumulation of flashy goods like expensive mobile phones and cars are valued above the steady building of long-term assets. Besides, there is the government-sponsored culture of portraying returns on savings as something bordering on evil.

This is the legacy of the ‘consumption-led growth’ model that Pakistan seems to be following since 9/11 when massive infusions of foreign aid coupled with the aggressive liberalisation of imports led to a culture of consumption and quick riches. The nouveau riche created in that era, and whom the study euphemistically refers to as the “emerging affluent”, brought with them ways that measured the worth of life in terms of the purchasing power that one could flaunt. Even as Pakistan sank into the deadly quagmire of extremism and faced a rising arc of terrorist violence, society saw the emergence of a culture of consumption that had not been seen in the country before. A dissipative frenzy, that has since become ingrained in this class, ensued. This, sadly enough, has now become the engine of our economic growth.

The noxious side effects of this phenomenon are there for all to see in our trade deficit, driven by frivolous imports as much as by oil prices, and in a low-savings environment. This has starved our industry of investible resources and skewed the banking system away from serving as an intermediary between savers and depositors, and towards sovereign and consumer lending instead. The government has encouraged the trend by telling people, in veiled terms, that expecting returns on savings somehow goes against religious values. So long as our culture and economy are geared towards the gratification of short-term whims, the struggle against growing informality, external deficits and a low rate of investment will be a largely futile affair.

## Antibiotic resistance

PERCEIVED as a cure-all for a variety of illnesses, it is ironic that the very medicines that were once considered miracle drugs should now be losing their potency. As this newspaper pointed out recently in a special report, antibiotics — used in the treatment of bacterial infection — are increasingly failing to kill off germs whose resistance to medication has developed over decades of misuse of antibacterial therapy. The purchase of medicine without a doctor's prescription — especially seen in Pakistan — misdiagnosis, misinformation and incomplete treatment, have all contributed to growing drug resistance which has become difficult to combat. So why do so many medical practitioners in the country — even those working at well-known hospitals — continue to prescribe antibiotics when this therapy is not required? Often, they cede to their patients' demand for antibiotics. In other instances, they are given incentives by pharmaceutical companies for promoting certain medicines. Urgent action is required in both cases. Creating awareness by giving the public more information on antibiotics and the dangers of their misuse is as vital as checking the unholy nexus between pharmaceutical companies and doctors.

Able to find new ways of defying treatment, bacteria can transfer drug-resistant genetic material to other superbugs in the human body. The rise of multidrug resistant bacteria threatens to derail efforts to treat and eradicate diseases such as tuberculosis. According to a report in the Lancet Respiratory Medical Journal, one in five cases globally is resistant to one of the three main TB drugs. In Pakistan — among the six countries that account for 60pc of the total number of global cases — drug-resistant TB is not only prevalent but also easily transmissible and expensive to treat. Unfortunately, pharmaceuticals here refuse to manufacture new antibiotics because these drugs would not be economically viable. With intelligent superbugs battling conventional drug regimes, medical research must work at breakneck speed to find new cures for old infections. In this fight against bacteria, the first step for the health authorities would be to collect official data on drug-resistant cases from public and private hospitals to assess the threat level. Diverse interventions including awareness campaigns and new diagnostic technology should follow. If drugs lose their efficacy, then even key medical procedures — joint replacements, C-sections and organ transplants — would be dangerous to perform. All this means we critically need to regulate the use of antibiotics and have laws in place to curtail malpractices.



## Ehsanullah Ehsan's confession

BEFORE the mysterious circumstances in which Jamaatul Ahrar spokesperson Ehsanullah Ehsan came to be in custody of Pakistan's security forces could be fully explained, a sensational new twist in the story has overtaken the previous unanswered questions. In what has now become a familiar and expertly produced mode of confession, portions of Ehsan's videotaped confession have been made public by the ISPR and broadcast around the country. The self-confessed terrorist, who has claimed responsibility on behalf of the Jamaatul Ahrar for some of the worst militant attacks in Pakistan, has alleged that in recent years Afghan and Indian intelligence agencies have supported and financed the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan and directed attacks inside Pakistan. The claim is neither new nor surprising and no serious observer of the region can believe it is without merit. The degree to which Afghan and Indian intelligence agencies may be supporting anti-Pakistan militants in their war against this country can be debated, but there is far too much circumstantial evidence, even without Ehsan's allegations, to deny the link between Afghanistan, India and anti-Pakistan militants who have found sanctuary in Afghanistan.

What is troubling, however, is the centrality that the so-called foreign hand claims have been given in the portions of the confession that have been broadcast. It has the potential to undermine the hard-won recognition in recent years that the fight against militancy is a local fight against local enemies who subscribe to an ideology that was locally developed. After years of reluctance, the security establishment has been in recent times more willing to acknowledge past mistakes and recognise that the war Pakistan has been plunged in is against militant networks that were once patronised by the state itself. Indeed, in former army chief Gen Raheel Sharif's and current army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa's unequivocal statements that both Pakistan and Afghanistan suffer from terrorism and that Pakistan will not tolerate militancy and terrorism of any stripe or hue, hopes were raised that a regional approach to fighting religiously inspired militancy with common ideological roots would take shape. Pakistan should emphatically press its case with Afghanistan and India that support for anti-Pakistan militancy will not be tolerated. What the country's leadership must not do is create fresh confusion about who the real enemy is and thereby inadvertently create some sympathy for the Pakistani Taliban as misguided and manipulated fighters.

As for Ehsanullah Ehsan, he must face justice. In no circumstances should an individual who brashly and with a great deal of pride claimed responsibility for the slaughter of countless Pakistanis ever be allowed to escape punishment. There are no conceivable circumstances, no tactical gains or operational information that Ehsan can offer to justify ever being a free man again.

# Muzzling Kashmiris

On Wednesday, India aligned itself with the likes of some of the most repressive regimes in the world.

Faced with escalating violence in India-held Kashmir, the local government — a coalition of the PDP and BJP — banned social media networking sites, including Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, for one month “or until further notice” in the valley.

The ‘justification’ given for the move was that the services were “being misused by anti-national and anti-social elements” and that they were being suspended “in the interest of maintenance of public order”.

There is no mystery as to what has triggered this ban: a number of shocking videos and photographs have emerged in recent weeks showing Indian soldiers inflicting brutality and humiliation on the local population.

Young boys armed with nothing more than stones being shot, beaten and kicked, and perhaps the most widely circulated video of all, that of Farooq Dar, a young shawl-weaver tied to the hood of an army jeep as a human shield from stone-pelting locals while it patrolled Kashmiri villages on voting day.

India is using the oldest, and most feeble, pretext in the book — maintenance of public order — to suppress public dissent. This is not how a country that markets itself as “the world’s biggest democracy” behaves. This is how undemocratic states such as Saudi Arabia, China and Egypt wield control over their people.

As is the case in most rebellions, the protests roiling Kashmir are driven largely by the youth, the demographic that is most active on social media. Burhan Wani, the young separatist leader whose assassination last year in July triggered the ongoing wave of unrest in the valley, also used such sites — an effective tool for organising mass uprisings and street agitation — to mobilise his fellow Kashmiris towards joining the resistance.

India has already done its utmost to prevent the issue from being internationalised by refusing the UN access to the area to investigate the excessive use of force by security personnel. The rights violations have become so egregious that respected voices in India itself are speaking out against them.

Instead of trying to address the underlying causes of the turmoil and growing disaffection, the state of India is now trying to further muzzle the people’s narrative, and seal off the valley from the outside world. It will not work.

As many other countries have discovered before, a people's cry for justice cannot be silenced. The Kashmiris' desperation will find a way out.

## The Rs10 billion question

DON'T we all know? It can, indeed, become a little problematic to publicly acknowledge a source — or even provide a perfect trail for a potential transaction.

Even so, there is much curiosity about the mystery messenger who, the well-heeled PTI chief says, brought him an offer of Rs10bn from the prime minister in return for not pursuing the Panama Papers scandal. It is perhaps the most generous — and puzzling — such 'offer' in the history of the country. For while Imran Khan might find himself in an awkward position if the accountability wagon he is so fond of riding were to one day stop at his own doorstep, a weakness for accepting bribes has so far hardly figured in the list of accusations against him. In fact, to his credit, the former skipper has a very reputable hospital run on donations. But what is even more bizarre than the purported offer is the thought that someone could actually be foolish enough to offer such inducements to an opposition leader at the prime of his political career.

Quite a lot of other details are missing from this episode as well, leading to concerns that the PTI might have fumbled yet again. It is known that while Mr Khan may have learnt to be extremely cautious with names and words, he can still be a little rash when it comes to numbers. His party, and his own reputation, suffered after his rather infamous mention of the 35 punctures — he had alleged that no less than 35 electoral seats had been rigged resulting in a victory for the PML-N in the 2013 general election. Unless he can substantiate his latest allegations quickly, the PTI leader is bound to expose himself to much unwanted scrutiny and criticism — as well as a generous dollop of ridicule. The government is no doubt under considerable strain after the Panama verdict. But Mr Khan's risky swipe may end up causing injury to no one but his own standing.

## Reviving Pak-India ties

The perilous state of Pakistan-India relations ought to be a matter of urgent concern for both state and society in the two countries.

Anything done to nudge open a door to dialogue or prevent a further deterioration in relations should be welcomed. Yet, a perplexing and disturbing campaign of suspicion and mistrust has been unleashed against the PML-N government following the revelation that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has met with Indian industrialist Sajjan Jindal, known to be a personal friend and emissary of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Remarkably, the PPP too has added its voice to the chorus of condemnation, the party seemingly willing to cast aside all good sense in a desperate bid to damage the PML-N in any way it can. Some perspective is essential here.

The PML-N has done itself few favours with its inept handling of the backlash in some sections of the media and the public. First daughter Maryam Nawaz's tweet about the meeting between Prime Minister Sharif and Mr Jindal was patronising and tone deaf.

Political ineptness though does not invalidate the likely idea behind the meeting. Every government has come to understand and embrace the benefit of back channels in the Pakistan-India relationship.

Former president and army chief Pervez Musharraf used back-channel negotiations to open a dialogue on a possible permanent settlement of the Kashmir dispute. His foreign minister, Khurshid Kasuri, has publicly reiterated the value of back channels in recent days. In the current scenario, the Indian media itself has speculated that Mr Jindal's visit to Pakistan may be a prelude to a meeting between Mr Sharif and Mr Modi on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Kazakhstan in June.

Mr Jindal as a trusted emissary of the Indian prime minister and, in Maryam Nawaz's own telling, a friend of Mr Sharif is well placed to be an interlocutor. Ought not the elected prime minister of the country have the prerogative to arrange a meeting with the Indian prime minister?

If a meeting does take place in June, what remains to be seen is if the leaders can find a way to not only re-establish dialogue but to put it on a sustainable path.

The flurry of high-level diplomacy in late 2015, with the two prime ministers meeting during the Paris climate summit and Mr Sharif hosting Mr Modi in his Raiwind home during a surprise stopover by the Indian prime minister, produced a decision to restart

talks, rebranded as full-spectrum dialogue. But the Pathankot attack derailed the process.

The so-called terror proofing of dialogue ought to be one of the main planks of any fresh effort to restart talks; a difficult task, but one that is clearly necessary. The two prime ministers must explain to their respective nations why dialogue is the only option.

## External sector woes

FOR many months now, there have been warnings that the health of the country's external sector is deteriorating. These have been met with assurances by the government that overall, as a proportion of GDP, the level of external debt remains manageable and the increasing current account deficit is easily compensated for by other inflows, real and projected. Now the chorus of concerned voices is becoming louder, and a new stream of data is painting an increasingly worrisome picture. Foreign exchange reserves are on an accelerating decline, falling almost \$3bn in the past six months, while the trade deficit has hit a record high in the same period. Some of this, we are told, is due to CPEC-related imports, which once activated will breathe new vitality into the economy. This assurance would be easier to swallow if we had better information about the outflows that will also be activated once these projects are commissioned. But on that front the government is holding its silence, so much so that the State Bank of Pakistan, the custodian of the country's reserves, cannot make adequate projections to determine the quantum of these outflows.

The situation is nowhere near emergency levels yet and talk of an immediate approach to the IMF is hyperbole. But give it another year or two, just past the elections, and there can be little doubt that without taking strong corrective measures, that is where the present trajectory is taking us. If so, it would be a repeat of an old pattern, where an incoming government secures an IMF facility, spends its years in office bringing the broad macroeconomic framework within manageable limits, then sits back to enjoy the ride all the way down to bailout levels. With all the noise of 'game-changing' projects to transform the economy, if the PML-N government ends up repeating this story all over again, it will be the end of whatever scraps of credibility it has left. Mega projects do not equal economic management, and sustainability is not found at the end of repeated trips to China for increased borrowing. The short-term debts being racked up now to keep the reserves from plummeting will become due soon, and a verdict far more severe than any the party has had to face thus far will be served up when those obligations have to be met.

## Women clerics' conference

IT was a fairly unusual, though an entirely welcome, departure from the usual discourse surrounding matters of faith that, across the world, tend to be dominated by men. At the close of a three-day conference of women clerics in Indonesia, the congress issued an unprecedented fatwa against child marriage and urged the government to raise the minimum legal age for women's marriage to 18 years from the current 16. There is no argument that the issue is of vital concern to that Muslim-majority country, which has among the highest number of child brides in the world: according to Unicef estimates, one in four women in Indonesia is married before the age of 18. The edict issued by the women's conference, perhaps the first major gathering of its kind, is bound to be influential even if it is not legally binding. A point of extreme significance for the future of millions of young girls — not just in Indonesia but hopefully in other parts of the world, too, given that the participants included clerics from countries including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia — has already been made, ie child marriage destroys lives. As the conference organiser told sections of the media, "Female clerics know the issue and the obstacles women face — we can take action and not just wait for the government to protect these children". And it was not just child marriage that the gathering dilated upon — other edicts involved issues including sexual abuse and environmental destruction.

Pakistan would do well to take a leaf out of Indonesia's book in this regard. The primary platforms from which religious perspectives are disseminated are the Council of Islamic Ideology, or the pulpits of mosques, both of which are dominated by men and lack any meaningful input by women. The former, in particular, tends to distinguish itself through putting out regressive statements, as was the case in the CII's resistance to using DNA as primary evidence in rape trials. This unfortunate reality needs to be changed soon.

## Train to China

THERE is a fear lurking in the shadows of CPEC that a time will soon come when the Chinese will start dictating terms and priorities rather than negotiating them. As an increasing number of Chinese enterprises acquire stakes in Pakistan's economy, and as the government takes out more and more loans from Chinese state-owned banks for balance of payments support, the space to negotiate and protect our own interests diminishes. Perhaps we have seen a glimpse of what this entails in the recent discussions around the financing arrangements for the \$8bn project for the Peshawar-Karachi railway line, when the Chinese insisted they would not share the project with the Asian Development Bank and wanted to implement it on their own. According to

Ahsan Iqbal, the minister for planning and development, who oversaw the negotiations, the Chinese “strongly argued that two-sourced financing would create problems and the project would suffer”. So the government gave in to the ‘strongly argued’ position.

If the merits of single-source financing for this project had been evident, it would not have been double-sourced to begin with — and would certainly not have to be ‘strongly argued’ by anyone. Whatever the merits of the two options, the fact that the Chinese were able to push for full control of the project, and prevail, shows that the power of the government to stand its own ground in any engagement is weakening. This is worrisome because the long-term plan for CPEC envisages far greater entry of Chinese capital, both private and state-owned, into almost every sector of Pakistan’s economy, than what most people realise. The amount of leverage that the Chinese will acquire over Pakistan in the years to come will grow exponentially, and there will be many more moments when positions that are ‘strongly argued’ will need to be equally strongly negotiated in order to protect our own enterprises and economic priorities.

So, naturally, all eyes are watching carefully to see how the early phase of this massive undertaking rolls out. The government needs to do more to assure nervous minds that Pakistan’s interests will be strongly pursued as well, and where necessary, the engagement can be halted if it is not perceived to be putting Pakistan’s interests first. Thus far, that assurance has been absent, and we are moving forward with little to no public awareness about what exactly we are getting entangled in. One way for the government to reassure the country that the growing engagement will safeguard Pakistan’s interests is to make the long-term plan public, especially now that we are told it has been finalised. Putting public approval behind itself is the best way for the government to strengthen its own negotiating position. Let CPEC be the train to prosperity for both countries, and let them ride it together.

## Immunisation status

IN terms of immunising children against preventable diseases, headlines in Pakistan tend to focus on polio — and for good reason. But beyond the spectre of this dreaded disease, there are a host of other illness that put millions of children at risk in the country. Sadly enough, although the administration of vaccines against a range of diseases, including malaria, tetanus, Hepatitis B and pneumonia, are provided for under the Expanded Programme for Immunisation, the country’s vaccination record after nearly four decades and expenditure in the billions remains dismal. The last seven days of April, World Immunisation Week, has provided ample opportunity to consider the figures regarding routine immunisation. The Islamabad Capital Territory is where the

rates of coverage are the highest — though far from robust — at 74pc. Punjab follows at 66pc and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at 53pc. But as we move down south, the picture becomes more shocking: the rate of routine immunisation under the EPI in Sindh is 29pc, and Balochistan comes in at a mere 16.4pc.

It is not that efforts are not being made to improve the situation. There currently appears to be a push under way to target Balochistan in particular in this regard — the province saw its fiscal allocation under the Public Sector Development Programme raised to Rs772.5m in financial year 2016-2017 from Rs2m in 2012-2013. The EPI centres in the province have procured generators and budgetary allocations to improve vaccine-storage facilities and keep the cold-chain process intact. Other interventions include providing vaccinators with motorcycles to facilitate their penetration into the remote areas that make vaccine coverage in this province a challenge. Yet the fact remains that Balochistan's 688 union councils (30 districts) currently have just 480 EPI centres and 914 vaccinators — though these ranks are in the process of being beefed up. This is laudable, but perhaps what is really needed to turn the tide is a change of approach: a massive public information campaign across television and radio that makes people aware of not just the risks their infants face but also that vaccination under the EPI is free of cost. Ideally, instead of vaccinators having to go door to door to administer vaccines, which is a cumbersome process that interrupts cold-chain requirements and can compromise the quality of the vaccine, parents themselves should be bringing their children to EPI centres — provided, of course, that they are located at convenient, accessible distances.

## Imran Khan's protest

THE past few years have been one long political stretch — hectic, stressful and frustrating for some. The protest of PTI chief Imran Khan has assumed various forms at different times— but, ultimately, all have focused on the ouster of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. With a general election scheduled to take place approximately a year from now, Mr Khan may feel he has reason to keep up the momentum. He is targeting the prime minister with greater vigour than before, visibly encouraged by the split Supreme Court verdict on the Panama case. And while his may be a more vociferous call for Mr Sharif to step down and allow a fair probe in the light of the top court's ruling he certainly enjoys the support of other politicians in his aim. In the search for a resolution to the general political tension, much advice has been offered to both sides over the last few years. Mr Sharif, who has decided to respond aggressively to Mr Khan's new round of public protest, has repeatedly been asked to move towards reforms that are at the centre of the PTI's charter for change. On the other hand, the PTI chief has been



besieged with requests to conduct himself in a way that does not upset the effort to strengthen the country's fledgling democracy.

Given a past where clashes between two political parties have blocked the system and life generally for the people of Pakistan, there is merit in reminding both the government and the opposition party leading the charge of the dangers of taking confrontation beyond a certain point. Once again, the prime responsibility of dealing fairly with protesters rests with the government, but that obviously does not mean that the opposition in demonstration mode can be totally free of all blame in case the life of Pakistanis is paralysed once more. Imran Khan has to maintain that fine balance if he wants to be looked upon as a politician who may be looking to protest but not disrupt come what may.