

# DAWN



## *Editorials for the Month of December 2016*

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## Table of Contents

Police reform.....	7
Online abuse hotline.....	8
HIV testing.....	9
Civil-military ties .....	10
Companies Ordinance.....	11
Karachi clean-up drive .....	12
Government’s wrong focus.....	13
State of universities .....	14
Reopening Gadani.....	15
Commission of Inquiry bill .....	15
Fourth Schedule farce.....	16
Climate impact .....	17
Stunting challenge.....	18
Pak-Turk imbroglio.....	19
Heart of Asia.....	20
Pak-Afghan ties .....	21
Karachi hotel fire.....	22
KP’s health law .....	23
Wahid Baloch’s release .....	23
Dr Salam honoured.....	25
Contaminated food.....	26
Amnesty or retreat?.....	27
Fewer women voters .....	28
CSS exam results .....	29
Crash of PK661 .....	30
Panama commission .....	31
Transport for women.....	32
Human rights charter.....	32
Khyber’s ancient treasures .....	33
Beyond CPEC.....	34
Panama probe.....	35
Coverage of air crash .....	36

Gwadar water supply .....	37
Seoul impeachment .....	38
Fruits of auto policy .....	39
Institutional reform.....	39
New army postings .....	40
Iranian suggestion.....	41
KP's houbara ban .....	42
Chakwal coverage .....	43
Substandard drugs .....	44
PTI's return to parliament.....	45
Risk to Indus treaty .....	46
Contaminated food chain .....	47
Aleppo devastated .....	47
Quetta inquiry report.....	48
UAE tax demands .....	50
Orange Line secrecy.....	51
The sun must set on military courts .....	51
Karachi operation.....	52
Political prisoners.....	53
Review of bill on forced conversions .....	54
Census decision, again .....	55
Excesses in IHK .....	56
Return of Zardari.....	57
Indian films are back .....	58
Goat to the rescue .....	59
Regulatory capture?.....	60
Trauma of loss.....	61
Musharraf's remarks.....	62
NAB's plea bargain.....	62
PM's militancy denial.....	63
Mystery virus .....	64
Palestine resolution .....	65
Baldia fire confession.....	66

Punjab LG polls..... 67

Madressah reform ..... 68

Stock exchange sale ..... 69

Xmas peace train..... 70

Protection against libel and slander ..... 70

Trump’s nuclear tweets ..... 72

Parental abduction..... 73

Judiciary’s challenge ..... 73

NFC: one step back ..... 74

Fishermen’s plight..... 75

More of the same in Balochistan? ..... 76

Blight of extremism..... 77

Education in Fata ..... 78

Zardari’s NA hopes..... 79

Sailors’ fate ..... 80

Neglected animals..... 81

Afghan peace ..... 82

Politicising power ..... 83

Poisoned sea ..... 84



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## Police reform

POLICE brutality and abuse of authority are problems law-enforcement agencies worldwide have to contend with. However, in Pakistan, it appears that black sheep in uniform can make a mockery of the law with impunity. As documented in this paper's Tuesday edition, a number of police officers in Karachi have been involved in kidnappings for ransom in the chaotic metropolis. These include policemen of the rank of SHO and inspector. These crooked cops have kidnapped traders and businessmen, barged into homes and demanded millions of rupees in ransom. In fact, their behaviour has been that of gangland thugs, not officers of the law. One individual even had the gall to use an official police van to collect ransom.

Karachi is certainly not alone when it comes to policemen committing crimes. Despite the sacrifices and efforts of honest officers to fight crime, the image that prevails in Pakistan is of a corrupt, inefficient force that preys on the citizenry and is beholden to its political masters. For many years, officialdom has been talking of police reform, yet few visible changes have been observed in the workings of police departments countrywide. Perhaps the main problem is that the legislative and administrative framework that governs policing here is outdated. Apart from KP, where a new police law was introduced earlier this year, the other provinces and regions of Pakistan either function under the Police Act of 1861, or under a hybrid of this law and the Police Order, 2002. Aping the colonial model has produced dismal results, as today's challenges are entirely different. Today, rather than worrying about controlling rowdiness or nabbing pickpockets, police officers have to deal with sophisticated and ruthless militants and criminal syndicates. Unless the legal and administrative structure is changed to respond to the needs of the day, criminality within the force will be difficult to eliminate.

Experts have stressed the need for community policing; instead of the image of the police officer as an 'outsider', what is needed is the recruitment of bright and service-oriented men and women who are known in their communities and neighbourhoods and are able to build bridges with citizens. Moreover, officers of repute must be given security of tenure and not transferred due to political whims. An independent system of lodging and investigating claims of police abuse must also be instituted. Police officers need to be given competitive service structures, with good pay and benefits; if individuals resort to corrupt practices thereafter, they must be shown the door. The federal, provincial and local governments, and civil society representatives, must all give their input on how to reform the police. Specifically, there are many serving and retired officers of impeccable repute that should be consulted on how to fix the rot. Above all, those who break the law while in uniform must be brought to justice.

## Online abuse hotline

AS many women already know, the online space is not a level playing field — and violence is not always physical. The freedom that the internet affords can, in the hands of depraved and unscrupulous individuals, lead to consequences that can take a serious toll on women's emotional well-being as well as their personal and work relationships. From trolling to blackmailing with images of an intimate nature posted on social media forums, women are subjected to a gamut of online abuse. The launch of Pakistan's first cyber harassment hotline today by the advocacy group Digital Rights Foundation is thus a timely and much-needed initiative. It will provide legal advice, digital security support, psychological counselling and a referral system for those that call in for help.

Online abuse directed at women is a global problem. However, it takes on a particularly dark edge in societies such as Pakistan. Here, traditional notions of honour, shame and social acceptance come into violent conflict with modern, digital means of communication and information-sharing. Spurned suitors, former partners and even complete strangers can use social media or their smartphones as a means of shaming their target through explicit images, fake or otherwise. Those working to promote a safe digital environment describe online abuse as a 'silent epidemic', with many at the receiving end unwilling to speak to family members about it in order to avoid further humiliation and/or for fear that the hard-won freedom to study or work will be lost. Some have even committed suicide, unable to deal with the relentless harassment. Conservative norms, as with other crimes against women, thus end up shielding perpetrators from the consequences of their actions. It takes a brave woman such as the teacher in Lahore, whose story appeared in this paper yesterday, to stand her ground against family elders urging her to reach an out-of-court settlement with her harasser, and instead see to it that he was punished under the law. The man, who had hacked into her Facebook account and uploaded doctored images of her on it, was sentenced to two years in prison. It is, therefore, important to have a hotline where victims of harassment can seek assistance and informed advice; the media too should take up the issue. While the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, tends to excessively limit personal freedoms, a judicious use of this law can deter people from committing the crime of cyber harassment.



## HIV testing

WORLD AIDS Day — that is being observed today — reminds us that governments need to address gaps in HIV prevention, testing and treatment services. Even with the widespread availability of drug treatment, a latest UN report points to the spread of new infections among adults because millions miss out on life-saving treatment. The reasons for this include the low rates of testing and adherence to treatment — this is partly a result of the stigma attached to HIV infection. In Pakistan, the absence of preventive strategies and low antiretroviral therapy coverage thanks to flawed policies has increased infection rates. Factors for HIV transmission include poverty, low literacy and gender-related discrimination, ignorance about the disease and societal stigma that prevents victims from seeking a diagnosis. With high HIV rates prevailing in traditional risk groups — injecting drug users and transgender sex workers — proper treatment and monitoring through basic health systems, safe blood transfusions, and preventing mother-to-child transmission are part of the solution.

From 2005 to 2015, HIV infections increased from 8,360 to 45,990. Situated along the busiest drug-trafficking corridors, Pakistan has increased drug usage involving the utilisation of infected, shared syringes. Priority must be given to detoxification and rehabilitation services alongside HIV testing and treatment. Sustained public-awareness drives against drugs and advocating safe sex are part of the fight. Because devolution has reversed many gains made by the National AIDS Control Programme, multi-sector coordination at the federal and provincial levels should be prioritised. In KP, the jail population, which includes many drug users, remains at high risk. Unfortunately, the provincial AIDS Control Programme has received zero finances for two years and social taboos are attached to distributing condoms among vulnerable groups. Given that the Pakistan AIDS Strategy (2015-2020) aims to curb new infections and improve the health of those living with HIV, disease-control plans must be shared. To add, community home-based healthcare that also focuses on HIV prevention could help raise awareness.

## Civil-military ties

A new army chief does not automatically suggest a reset in institutional relations, but it is an opportunity for all sides to re-evaluate their approaches to a central and common challenge: civil-military relations.

In the days-old tenure of army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa, so far there has been no indication of how his approach differs, if at all, from that of his predecessor, retired Gen Raheel Sharif. However, there are obvious areas in which improvement can and should be sought.

To begin with, a historical perspective, a problem far older than simply the former army chief's tenure, in the military needs adjustment. The perspective is that the military has both the right and a need to steer national security and foreign policies — a belief rooted in historical anomalies and that is very much separated from the constitutionally mandated institutional scheme of things.

Unhappily, in recent years, the encroachment has gone beyond narrow, older confines and spilled over into a bewildering array of civilian priorities. Therefore, from the Karachi operation, conceived of and initiated by the federal government, to the contours of CPEC, and from essentially treating Balochistan as a national security issue to suggesting economic priorities, the military's policy imperatives and fingerprints are unmistakable.

It may not be a priority for Gen Bajwa to undertake a review of the vast encroachments in the civilian domain, but it should be — as several military leaders before him have discovered, the greater the incursions, the more likely the civilian leadership is to fixate on them at the cost of focusing on genuine democratic and governance deficits.

Perhaps a starting point could be for the military to discard the implicit destabilising option — that in times of crisis and civil-military tensions, a military takeover remains the ultimate option. A clear statement in this regard, like retired Gen Sharif's public statement 10 months in advance that he would quit office on schedule, could go some way in setting the right tone in the latest era of inter-institutional ties.

Yet, the problem is clearly not of the military's making alone. Military encroachment has been cheered, encouraged and even demanded by civilian leaders in recent years and over the decades. Be it the latter-day obsession with a so-called third umpire or previous-era exhortations to Article 58(2b)-empowered presidents and all-powerful army

chiefs, civilian opposition parties of all stripes have at some point or the other been guilty of themselves undermining democratic precepts.

It remains the case that the surest path to strengthening the democratic process is when democrats put the system ahead of personal political ambitions.

Finally, democratic progress is not and should not be seen as a zero-sum game. Since the transition to democracy started anew in 2008, both the military and civilians have benefited from democratic continuity.

## Companies Ordinance

THERE is little doubt that the Companies Ordinance of 1984 was in dire need of an overhaul. The main corporate regulator, the Securities and Exchange Commission, needed to be strengthened significantly to be able to tackle the growing power of private capital in the economy, and disclosure requirements also had to be updated in a world where ownership patterns of companies can be concealed easily using offshore jurisdictions. The government appears to have made an attempt to do something along these lines with the new Companies Ordinance, but in bypassing parliament it has made a tactical error. Legislation of such importance, with many detailed clauses that have great impact on the conduct of business in the country, ought to have clearly been presented before parliament and debated in detail, with comments and feedback from the corporate sector, before being passed into law. Parliamentarians who are objecting to the ordinance have a point, and the government should find a way to work with them to navigate this legislation further.

A closer examination of the legislation also shows some troubling signs. The devil, it would appear, is in the details. For example, whereas the powers of the SECP are being augmented, as well as its autonomy, the discretion to exercise these powers will lie with the “minister in charge”, according to the legislation. This means the government will in effect exercise these powers as per its own discretion. As a rule, regulators can only be expected to discharge their obligations properly if they are empowered to act independently of the government, and their staff is protected from government interference through fixed terms of service. The legislation appears to be carrying out a bit of a sleight of hand on this important issue, by first empowering the SECP, and then making the augmented powers subordinate to the government itself. This is a risky configuration of power since it can potentially politicise the regulator, and open its actions up to allegations of being politically motivated. There are other examples of clauses that leave one wondering as to their intent. For this reason, considering how

ambitious the scope of the legislation is, and the immense impact it can have on investment in the country, it should have been debated in parliament in close detail and scrutinised carefully before being allowed to become a law. The government should move to build a larger consensus.

## Karachi clean-up drive

KARACHI'S citizens will no doubt welcome the 100-day cleanliness campaign launched on Thursday by the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation. The drive — initiated by Mayor Waseem Akhtar — intends to focus on the key areas of sanitation and road repairs. Anyone who lives in Karachi will testify that the metropolis is suffering from an advanced stage of urban decay. Despite being Pakistan's largest city and commerce hub, Karachi currently resembles a large garbage dump, with crumbling infrastructure and potholed roads. In fact, in the World Bank's Karachi City Diagnostic Report, the bank says that the metropolis confronts "severe environmental challenges" which include "a high incidence of air, land and water, including marine, pollution". Much of this, as the report says, is caused by inadequate waste management. The report observes that less than 60pc of Karachi's people have access to sewerage facilities, while the same percentage of solid waste is not collected and transferred to dump sites. In fact, much of the waste is either left rotting in neighbourhoods, or is burnt, which creates a choking miasma that envelops localities. Keeping these grim details in mind, the mayor's effort is much needed, if much delayed, though it is also a fact that Karachi only received an elected city administration earlier this year after an eight-year gap.

The mayor says he is doing what he can with limited resources. What the city needs is a permanent waste-management system. However, the fact is that the Sindh government controls two key areas that should be under municipal control: waste management and sewerage facilities. The city's problems are complex and deep-rooted, and nothing short of a sustainable master plan can address its woes. But as an initial step, all civic functions, along with financial control, must be under the mayor's jurisdiction. Waseem Akhtar says the Sindh chief minister has assured him of support; the best way the provincial government can show its support is by transferring all municipal functions to the elected local bodies across Sindh.

## Government's wrong focus

AS the Panama Papers saga winds on, a familiar and regrettable pattern is asserting itself: the government appears to be using its legal and political worries as an excuse to not focus on governance issues. Once again, the country has a government that is sidestepping its responsibilities and implicitly claiming political persecution. To be sure, even at its highest point politically, the present PML-N government has not had structural reforms as a priority, nor a particularly strong legislative agenda. Macroeconomic stabilisation, an avowed goal, has been pursued according to the seemingly whimsical priorities of Finance Minister Ishaq Dar and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. So, while there have been some successes, a persistent critique of the PML-N government has been that it has neglected systemic reforms in favour of potentially unsustainable gains.

Be that as it may, the PML-N has found a way to distract itself even from its own narrow goals. The usual foil has been the PTI and its endless campaign to unsettle or de-seat the government. Occasionally, the problem has been a military establishment that the government has perceived as encroaching on civilian domain. Always, however, there has been a ready excuse, as is there again — external forces are preventing the government from focusing wholly on its priorities. Ministers including Khurram Dastgir and Muhammad Zubair have complained about the politics of agitation; government advisers and public relations figures have lamented the allegations against the first family; and seemingly the whole government machinery is distracted by the need to deny any wrongdoing by the Sharifs and to denounce opposition figures. Cabinet meetings, already rare, seem to have become a non-priority. Inter-provincial forums, already moribund, have been virtually forgotten. Events critical to future planning, such as the census, are debated in a desultory manner. The only matter that appears to animate the government is the Panama Papers and the negative light the revelations contained therein have cast on the first family.

To be sure, few, if any, in the political opposition are interested in anything other than the Panama Papers, the ongoing Supreme Court hearings and the colourful media trials staged in the electronic media on a daily basis. Gone, at least in recent weeks, has been any opposition interest in electoral reforms. Next month, the sunset clause in the 21st Amendment will trigger itself and military courts will stand disbanded — but there is no parliamentary interest in judicial reforms evident. Yet, the greater burden is necessarily on the elected government, not the political opposition. As the chief custodian of the democratic project, the government has a responsibility to not only govern, but to demonstrate that governance is the primary priority no matter the temporary distractions. The government needs to do much better.

## State of universities

DESPITE efforts by the state to create a world-class higher education system, Pakistani universities — especially in the public sector — have largely not been successful in promoting outstanding scholarship. Perhaps the prime reason for this is the ad hocism that prevails in the higher education sector, indeed, as it does in other vital areas of national life. As reported in this paper on Friday, the Lahore High Court ordered the Punjab government to hire permanent vice chancellors in four public-sector varsities in the province. The court felt there was no room in the law for appointing acting vice chancellors for an indefinite period. When it comes to management of tertiary institutions in Pakistan, there is much that needs improvement. Suffice it to say, those in senior administrative posts at universities must be selected on merit, should be free to run their institutions as per the law without political or bureaucratic meddling, and have stellar academic records. Unfortunately, in some major public higher educational institutions, individuals have been appointed whose credentials have been questioned; some have been accused of plagiarism. Perhaps these incidents should initiate soul-searching among federal and provincial authorities on how to better manage universities in this country.

One major area of concern is the power struggle between the centre and the provinces over devolution of higher education in the aftermath of the 18th Amendment. While this amendment was passed in 2010, today, only Sindh and Punjab have their own provincial higher education commissions. Whether it is the centre that is reluctant to devolve power to the federating units, or the provinces which lack capacity, the stakeholders must seriously discuss the issues standing in the way of better management and improvement of tertiary education in Pakistan. The provinces should take the initiative to reform the tertiary sector, while the federal HEC can play a supervisory and complementary role. Both sides must work in a cooperative spirit and eschew combative postures. The focus should be on hiring university managers on merit, with freedom to operate their institutions, while the zero-tolerance policy concerning academic crimes such as plagiarism must be enforced across the board. Unless this critical management issue is resolved, our public universities will continue to churn out below par graduates, unable to compete globally. With dedicated educators, an environment of academic freedom and inquiry, and a strong adherence to ethical principles, our varsities can hopefully turn the corner.



## Reopening Gadani

THE ship-breakers association is calling on the government to allow for a reopening of their business in Gadani after last month's massive tragedy that resulted in the death of at least 26 workers and left scores injured. Yes, work has to resume at the site as an indefinite closure would affect business and livelihoods, but the government must first ask the association what sort of safety measures have been installed to avoid future accidents — and ensure that these meet international standards. On top of that, the business owners should be asked about compensation to the families of the deceased and injured. Gadani has become notorious as a hazardous place of work, where, to save a little money, the owners of shipyard businesses refuse to invest in workers' safety. A detailed report of the myriad failures that led to the tragedy ought to be drawn up, with recommendations on what steps the owners have to take before being allowed to resume operations. It would be a travesty if operations were resumed without any lessons being learnt.

The business owners should also be asked what penalties should apply to them in any future accident. How much responsibility are they willing to take for the well-being of their workers, in the name of whose livelihoods they have issued their call for resumption of work? Their argument that somehow work on CPEC projects is being impacted by the closure of their businesses is disingenuous at best. How much of the steel being used in CPEC projects is sourced from their work? The owners must understand that it cannot be business as usual after such a horrific tragedy. They are entrusted with the lives of the labourers in their factories and yards, and if any harm comes to them during their work, the owners must own their share of responsibility. Are the owners prepared to prioritise the well-being and safety of the workers? The yard must not be allowed to open until the answer to this question is in the affirmative.

## Commission of Inquiry bill

THE Pakistan Commission of Inquiry Bill, 2016, was passed by the National Assembly this week — on the fourth attempt by the PML-N government. It was a master class in how not to legislate. First, the PML-N is unable to get its own house in order. The passage of the bill was stymied time and again because the PML-N, which has a majority in the National Assembly, could not persuade enough of its members to be in attendance to pass the quorum threshold. That itself is a remarkable indictment of the PML-N's general approach to democratic institutions and parliament in particular. To blame rank and filers and backbenchers alone for their absence would be wrong. When

the prime minister himself rarely visits parliament and cabinet ministers routinely skip Assembly proceedings, it is unlikely in the extreme that MNAs with no specific parliamentary duties will be interested in attending the sessions.

Second, the government has been unable to adequately rebut the opposition's claim that the bill is intended to somehow try and shield Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and members of his family from a thorough and independent inquiry into their wealth and assets. To be sure, the opposition is indulging in a great deal of politics and theatrics with their allegations and the government does appear to have presented a bill that strengthens the present commission of inquiry system. However, the dispute between the opposition and the government since the Panama Papers were revealed to the world in April has principally been about the order in which an inquiry should proceed. The opposition has rightly insisted that the prime minister be investigated first, a demand that the government has fiercely resisted. The bill passed by the National Assembly this week may allow for the government's preference for a simultaneous and expansive inquiry into all manner of individuals, public and private, to prevail.

Third, the government's willingness to bypass the ordinary systems and norms of parliament may be tested again. While there is a hostile legislative atmosphere over the bill, it is the PML-N that has helped create it with its tendency to work unilaterally and without taking other parties along. Consider that a bill passed by the National Assembly solely by the PML-N has no chance of passage in the Senate, where it is short of a majority. The government does have the option to attempt to get a bill approved in a joint sitting of parliament, but that is a roughshod approach that tends to have negative consequences for parliament's smooth functioning. Moreover, what does the government hope to achieve by creating the space for an empowered inquiry commission that the combined opposition will in any case not be willing to accept? A commission will only be credible if it is accepted by both sides of the parliamentary aisle.

## Fourth Schedule farce

THE Fourth Schedule is a piece of legislation that no one in authority seems to quite know what to do with. That certainly ought not to be the case in a country engaged in an extended, multi-tiered battle against extremism. According to Section 11EE of the ATA, the Fourth Schedule is to include "any person who is an activist, office-bearer or an associate of an organisation kept under observation ... or proscribed ... or ... affiliated with any group or organisation suspected to be involved in terrorism or sectarianism". To prevent them from propagating their noxious views, the law — with certain caveats



— does not allow these individuals to visit institutions of learning, training or residence where persons under 21 years of age are found. Similarly, public places such as restaurants, television and radio stations or airports are out of bounds for them. They are also forbidden from taking part in public meetings or processions, or from being present at an enclosed location in connection with any public event.

That is exactly what is needed to address the problem of extremist narratives continuing to be perpetuated because the leaders of many ultra-right groups that have been banned remain in contact with the public. However, by applying this law in fits and starts, the government defeats its objectives. For example, in the wake of the Lahore park bombing in March, it decided to arrest all 2,000-plus individuals included in the Fourth Schedule, but that did not materialise. Recently, the Lahore High Court allowed ASWJ chief Ahmed Ludhianvi, also listed in the Fourth Schedule, to contest the Jhang by-election — although he subsequently decided to withdraw in favour of another candidate. While the court may have had its reasons for its decision, the wide-ranging restrictions listed under the Fourth Schedule should preclude anyone included in it from doing so. The lackadaisical manner in which the list is maintained is also a matter of concern. As reported some months ago, of some 8,000 names on a consolidated list provided to Nacta by the provinces, GB, AJK and Islamabad, 20pc may be deceased and 5pc have either left the country or are too old and infirm to pose any threat. Such a cavalier attitude makes the state appear weak, that too at a time when it is doubly important that it should be asserting its authority.

## Climate impact

THERE is growing evidence, gathered informally by journalists, that the impact of climate change on Pakistan goes far beyond the abnormal rain pattern we have seen in the monsoon season. The erratic nature of the rains, as well as temperature changes during the onset and end of winter also appear to be impacting the sowing season. When the rains fail, or come in thunderous showers that sweep away crops, the impact is visible. But the more subtle result shows up in the disruption of sowing patterns, evidence of which is piling up through numerous reports citing farmers as their source. The agriculture sector has been in a sustained slump for many years now, usually attributed to the collapse of commodity prices. But perhaps we should ask how much of the situation results from the disruptive impact of climate change. There is no way to be certain of this yet, but the piling up of anecdotal evidence merits a detailed study of sowing patterns and yields and their relationship to winter temperature changes.

There is now a clear case to be made for such a study. It would require close coordination among various government departments — the ministries of agriculture and climate change, the Met department and provincial revenue authorities. It would also require expertise that may not be available locally to determine the extent of the impact and if it can be mitigated. The effects are felt widely, from lowered yields to elevated vulnerability to pest attacks. A detailed survey of agriculture yields, temperature anomalies, seasonal changes, water flows and availability during critical times, covering a period of at least 10 years, is now necessary. If an adverse impact is confirmed, then a second study is needed to develop mitigation strategies. Agriculture is the backbone of our economy. If it is being swept by a powerful adverse force such as climate change, then the government must determine what can be done to help. It's high time the government made efforts to mitigate its impact.

## Stunting challenge

WITH nearly 44pc of children in Pakistan stunted, a sustained approach to ending malnutrition, as opposed to applying quick-fix solutions, has become critical. Indeed, the global sustainable development agenda has plugged stunting as a 'new' health threat, a catastrophe calling for humanitarian action targeted at poor communities. It would be an achievement if malnutrition were to be reduced by donor aid, but as the chasm of health inequality between the rich and poor widens such an intervention by itself is not sufficient. The perception of donor-driven solutions working miracles is problematic given that malnutrition is linked with the related determinants of maternal health, social status, child marriage, educational access, gender empowerment, etc. A recent report in this paper recommended support for long-term health and education programmes — incorporated within current social protection programmes — in order to improve human capital. Only when provincial governments adopt nutrition as a political priority, thereby linking health and food programmes with poverty alleviation, will the incidence of stunting come down. Consider how the Peruvian model decreased stunting by targeting families through the provision of conditional cash transfers to pregnant women, food distribution and educating mothers to stimulate their children mentally. It didn't matter who was in power because nutrition as a political priority was overseen by the office of the prime minister.

With widespread poverty, health-sector programmes depend on international agencies that usually disburse aid with strings attached, limiting the scope and benefit of such assistance. Interim, simplistic solutions will not end malnutrition unless resilient systems are built within vulnerable communities to mitigate the effects of inequality and poverty — and equitable policies and related infrastructure are instituted. The government

should realise that shifting global politics drives donors to prioritise agendas. So it is best to manage existing funds effectively to bridge health gaps rather than allow them to lapse. Meanwhile, with international donors driving the discourse on stunting while working with provincial governments as best as is possible, there is scant evidence of intra-governmental coordination in the health sector or of implementation of any multisectoral plans. Moreover, it appears that the government has no plans to redress stunting rates that could result in substantial losses to the economy. In the long term, it is only cost-effective solutions and proper budgeting with monitoring and accountability factored into national programmes that will reduce malnutrition in the country.

## Pak-Turk imbroglio

WHILE the current controversy surrounding the Pak-Turk schools is indeed a delicate matter, involving bilateral relations with a friendly country, the fate of the Pakistani schoolchildren studying in these institutions should be the primary concern of the authorities. The interior ministry issued marching orders on Nov 14 to the Turkish staff of the schools — said to be linked to self-exiled preacher Fethullah Gulen — ahead of Turkish President Erdogan's visit to this country last month. Once an ally of Mr Gulen, the Turkish president now blames the US-based cleric for masterminding the July coup, a charge Mr Gulen denies. Caught in the middle of this high political drama are the Pak-Turk schools; the Turkish foreign minister asked Pakistan to close the institutions in August. However, on Friday the Sindh High Court suspended the deportation of the schools' Turkish staff; the high courts of KP and Punjab have similarly stayed the deportation of Turkish faculty. It is hoped the case of the affected staff is considered sympathetically and that there is least disruption in the students' academic activities.

While it is inadvisable for Pakistan to get involved in Turkey's internal politics, and while we value the warm relationship between Ankara and Islamabad, clearly, the matter of the Pak-Turk schools has been mishandled by the government. Ordering Turkish staff out of the country simply to please the Turkish leadership was not right. Surely, if any institution is believed to be involved in illegality, the state has a right to investigate. But there is no evidence the schools were involved in subversive activities; if anything, they had earned a reputation for commitment to educational excellence. The government displayed similar haste in the past when cracking down on international NGOs. If officialdom continues to treat foreign organisations working in the social sector so shabbily, few will want to function in such an environment. The government should work with the Turkish leadership to reach an acceptable solution that would allow the Turkish teachers to continue with their good work.

## Heart of Asia

THE Heart of Asia conference was not expected to yield any significant bilateral or multilateral breakthroughs. Among India, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the former two countries have diplomatically and verbally attacked the latter a great deal in recent months — driving a stake through the heart of the conference. Regional stability, let alone cooperation to counter common security threats, will remain an illusion unless the major regional powers embrace dialogue. In sending foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz to Amritsar, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif made the right decision; it was a clear signal that Pakistan seeks to address all regional problems through dialogue. Mr Aziz and the Pakistani High Commissioner to India Abdul Basit both repeatedly emphasised a message of peace and dialogue in the region.

Unhappily, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had something else in mind; both bluntly attacked Pakistan. Mr Modi seemed to go out of his way to slight Pakistan, with Mr Aziz mostly kept at arm's length and relegated to a separate table at a dinner hosted by the Indian prime minister. Meanwhile, President Ghani, a central figure at a conference held essentially to find ways to assist Afghanistan, seemed more interested in venting his frustrations on Pakistan and pulling other rivals of this country closer in an ad hoc alliance against it. It made for riveting headlines, but in truth may have only set back further the cause of stability and peace in the region. The good faith in which Mr Aziz went to Amritsar was not reciprocated.

Now the challenge for the government here will be to determine how to proceed in a hostile regional environment. While the PML-N government has had a coherent message on both Afghanistan and India, it has not had much by way of strategy. It has neither been able to build bridges with the two countries nor persuade hawks at home, including in the military establishment, to adopt a more sensible approach. While dialogue is and should be the only path, there must be an understanding here of how to further discussions in an atmosphere where the Afghan and Indian leaderships are explicitly rejecting this path. What reciprocal gestures can Pakistan suggest, or which other regional and international powers can it turn to for a fairer reading of the situation in this part of the world? The PML-N brain trust must start thinking in more creative ways.

## Pak-Afghan ties

AFGHAN President Ashraf Ghani has become a harsh critic of Pakistan — harsh to the point of outdoing Indian hawks and, seemingly, undermining his own country's interests. At the Heart of Asia conference in Amritsar, where the theme was cooperation against security threats, Mr Ghani's rhetoric was aggressive, almost as if Kabul desired a rupture in Pak-Afghan ties. This is not the right attitude and it is hoped that better sense will prevail. Certainly, there is some history here. When Mr Ghani assumed office more than two years ago, he made it a priority to reach out to Pakistan through some bold verbal statements and diplomatic gestures towards Islamabad and Rawalpindi; it indicated that resetting ties with Pakistan were a core part of his agenda. The outreach was received warmly by both the political government and the military leadership here, but Mr Ghani soon became impatient with what was perceived in Afghanistan as Pakistan's slow pace in addressing his country's concerns.

Yet, Pakistan, too, has had genuine concerns vis-à-vis Afghanistan. As Mr Ghani and the National Unity Government he heads became increasingly hawkish on Pakistan, they deliberately steered closer to India — a growing closeness that the security establishment here saw as one of the reasons behind the renewed security troubles in Balochistan. Moreover, with counter-insurgency operations in North Waziristan and other parts of Fata nearing their final stages, the problem of sanctuaries for anti-Pakistan militants in Afghanistan, particularly in the eastern region, has become a thorny issue. The combination of Afghan and Pakistani grievances against one another has led to a relationship that is now in a shockingly poor state. Still, there are compelling reasons for both sides to move the bilateral relationship back towards cooperation, and Mr Ghani surely knows this, even if he prefers to give voice to a one-sided interpretation of events at the moment.

There are at least three areas in which cooperation is merited — and can be achieved, if both sides are willing to accept the principle of reciprocity. First, the problem of cross-border militancy is a regional one, as the joint statement at the Amritsar conference indicated. In the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan, border management and interdicting cross-border militant movement can be a joint priority. Second, the goal of a political reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban is one shared by all sides. Pakistan can continue to use its influence in a way that nudges the Taliban towards reconciliation, while Afghanistan can tamp down its hostile rhetoric towards Pakistan as it explores further ways to move dialogue ahead. Third, trade and commerce between Pakistan and Afghanistan can and should be expanded — Pakistan remains a vital trading partner for Afghanistan and the old business links, formal and informal, are an important platform. Cooperation needs to be the guiding principle of Pak-Afghan relations.

## Karachi hotel fire

THE deadly inferno that broke out in Karachi's Regent Plaza hotel early on Monday has once again exposed the frail state of fire and rescue services in the metropolis. Victims had to jump out of windows to save their lives, while some of the affected people say they were left helpless for hours. What is particularly disturbing is the city mayor's claim that the multistorey hotel lacked fire exits and alarms. This claim needs further investigation and if it is proved true, those responsible for such negligence must face the law. A large number of fires — both minor and major — are reported in Karachi annually. On Friday, a blaze broke out in a plastic warehouse in the congested old city area, while the fire at the Keamari oil terminal late last month took over 30 hours to control. Other large cities, particularly Lahore and Rawalpindi, have also experienced deadly fire incidents in markets and other buildings.

There are two major areas which need focus where fire prevention is concerned. Firstly, the landscape of urban Pakistan — particularly Karachi — has changed rapidly over the past few years, with a growing number of high-rises and multistorey constructions. As regulation in Pakistan is notoriously lax, it would be fair to ask if the state has ensured that under-construction and finished projects have incorporated basic fire-safety requirements, such as well-lit exits, smoke alarms and fire extinguishers, on all floors. There is also the issue of storing inflammable and highly dangerous materials in warehouses located in congested areas. Usually located in quarters with narrow lanes, difficult approaches and dense construction, these buildings can turn into death traps should a fire occur. Secondly, the health of the Karachi fire department does not inspire confidence. Water has been known to run out while fighting blazes; equipment is short or out of order; many inductions have been made on political grounds, resulting in ill-trained and ill-motivated personnel; and fire stations are far too few to cover the urban sprawl of the vast city. Karachi's deputy mayor has recently said that the fire brigade will be developed along 'modern lines'. We hope — for the safety of millions of Karachi's citizens — this is not mere rhetoric and that there is a definite modernisation plan in the works. Additionally, criminal charges should be pressed against building owners if it is established that they have flouted safety rules in structures where fire has broken out.



## KP's health law

A LAW, however sound and well framed, can only be as good as its implementation. KP's Preventive Health Act is one such example. This crucial piece of legislation was enacted by the provincial assembly of KP — then known as NWFP — in 2009, with the objective of requiring compulsory thalassaemia and hepatitis C tests for people planning to marry. However, seven years down the road, the KP government has yet to frame the rules for the implementation of the law, which means the legislation has in effect been languishing on the statute books while the problem it was meant to address continues unchecked.

Diseases such as thalassaemia and hepatitis C impose a formidable burden on the country's already creaky health infrastructure. The first is an inherited blood disorder that can manifest itself either as thalassaemia major or thalassaemia minor, with the more severe form requiring regular blood transfusions and accompanied by a number of serious side effects such as enlargement of the liver and spleen. Genetic screening is particularly important because every child born to a couple with thalassaemia minor — which may be present with no symptoms or only very slight anaemia — has a 25pc chance of having thalassaemia major. There are around 4,000 cases of thalassaemia major in KP alone. The tradition of inter-family marriage in this country makes it imperative that couples enter their union having made an informed decision. After all, forewarned is forearmed. As for hepatitis C, the risk associated with this viral disease for a couple is that it can be passed from one to the other while sharing items of personal hygiene and from mother to child at birth. Pakistan has the second highest incidence of hepatitis C in the world after Egypt. The Preventive Health Act is thus a pragmatic attempt to deal with a very real problem. However, it has come up against another reality of Pakistan: the penchant for delay and lack of follow-up that renders good intentions, and good laws, futile.

## Wahid Baloch's release

FOUR months after he 'disappeared', Wahid Baloch has been reunited with his family. The social activist, writer and small-scale publisher is believed to have been detained by unidentified security officials on July 26 on the outskirts of Karachi, setting off a frightening, though wearingly familiar, process of recovery for his shocked family.

Local police initially refused to register an FIR, government agencies expressed an inability or unwillingness to help trace Mr Baloch, rights groups took up his case — and

through it all, the only thing that was known with some certainty was that Mr Baloch had become a missing person because he was an advocate for the Baloch people.

Yet, no charges were framed against Mr Baloch and indeed there was no official acknowledgement that he was in the custody of the security apparatus. Now, with his release on Monday, Mr Baloch is once again a free man — and the number of missing persons in the country has been reduced by one.

It is too early to know if the release of Mr Baloch has anything to do with the change in command in the military and a possible rethink of some security policies.

What is evident though is that a rethink is needed. The extrajudicial handling of those suspected of being involved in militancy or supporting militant causes is not only unconstitutional, it is a system prone to abuse, and that creates further problems from a security perspective.

When it comes to Balochistan-related missing persons, the numbers themselves are in dispute.

Baloch activists claim thousands have gone missing; rights groups suggest a lower but still considerable number; and the state unofficially acknowledges a small number of detained individuals.

The figures, however, belie an intractable problem: the missing persons issue has fuelled, rightly, a sense of Baloch grievance — a narrative that has helped sustain the low-level Baloch insurgency.

Rooted in political disaffection, the Baloch insurgency cannot have a purely military solution. But because Balochistan abuts the Taliban heartland in Afghanistan and the province has geostrategic importance — now wrapped in the language and projects of CPEC — the military establishment views Balochistan through a security prism.

The militarised approach to security and state-driven development was once again on display yesterday as army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa travelled to Quetta.

In his choice of words and the thrust of his comments, Gen Bajwa was almost indistinguishable from the last three army chiefs.

Yet, Mr Baloch is with his family once again, so perhaps the softest of rethinks is being effected.



Political governments, both at the centre and in Balochistan, should also consider their own role in the marginalisation of civilians in Balochistan and try and work with the new military leadership to formulate a more effective, humane and people-driven policy for the province.

## Dr Salam honoured

It took 37 long years, but a historic wrong is finally on course to being set right. On Monday, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced he had given his approval to rename the National Centre for Physics at Islamabad's Quaid-e-Azam University after Dr Abdus Salam, who in 1979 became Pakistan's first ever Nobel laureate by winning the prestigious international award in the physics category.

The premier also approved a grant of five annual fellowships in Dr Salam's name at overseas universities for Pakistani doctoral candidates in physics.

That it has taken nearly four decades for this country to honour a globally renowned scientist who was one of its own, is a sad reflection of the priorities that hold sway here, and that have diminished our standing in the world.

For Dr Salam was an Ahmadi, a persecuted minority in Pakistan, and his faith rather than his towering achievements was the yardstick by which he was judged.

His desire to use his fame to drive the engine of scientific research in his native country was spurned; the self-appointed defenders of the faith in Pakistan were determined not to let this land be 'sullied' by the priceless gift of knowledge that Dr Salam wanted to bring to it.

In countries less blinded by prejudice and bigotry, Dr Salam's would have been an inspirational story, a staple of school textbooks, and a name displayed on many a scientific institute of learning — but that would have been a Pakistan we have not known for decades now.

Born into a family of modest financial means in Jhang, Punjab, Dr Salam's academic brilliance took him all the way to Cambridge where he won the Adams Prize for distinguished research in mathematics.

To put that in perspective, the celebrated physicist Stephen Hawking is another recipient. Despite his pioneering work during the course of a career that contributed to the theoretical framework of even recent scientific discoveries, Dr Salam remained 'tainted' by his religious affiliation in his homeland.

While the state's move to give Dr Salam his due is very welcome, despite coming 20 years after his death, it is worth pointing out that we treat our only other Nobel laureate, Malala Yousafzai, in a similarly dismissive manner and for equally perverse, though different, reasons.

Perhaps Pakistanis should ask themselves, why do we manifest such unthinking hostility towards fellow citizens when their achievements are feted by the rest of the world?

## Contaminated food

IN Pakistan, while lack of access to food and the resultant malnutrition pose a grave threat to public health, the fact that a part of what we consume is contaminated adds to the dilemma. According to a study conducted by Aga Khan University and a Japanese institution, reported in Tuesday's paper, samples of chicken sold in Karachi were found to have high levels of arsenic. Moreover, the effects of leaded petrol — phased out in the country 15 years ago — were still evident in the food chain. Both chemical elements are, of course, toxic for humans and can cause neurological problems. The research suggested that arsenic, found in groundwater, finds its way into chicken feed and poultry vaccines. These could be a source of the deadly chemical entering the food chain.

While the results of this study are indeed disturbing, as experts have rightly pointed out there is no cause for undue panic and for people to stop consuming foods such as chicken altogether. For example, handwashing can limit exposure to lead, while focusing on more rigorous food safety standards and ensuring water is safe can address the problem of arsenic in food. However, on a larger scale, interventions by the state are needed to ensure increased monitoring of food processes in order to prevent contaminants from entering the food chain. More research is required to determine the exact situation. Efforts must be made to cleanse the country's water supply of arsenic and other harmful substances; Unicef has initiated arsenic mitigation projects in different parts of the country. The federal and provincial governments need to investigate how these interventions can be replicated on a larger scale. Also, the poultry feed and vaccines that result in arsenic contamination must be banned. In short, the state must

make a much more robust effort to, in the words of the World Health Organisation, ensure that the food chain is free from contaminants “from farm to plate”.

## Amnesty or retreat?

IT is becoming a pattern with this government to first announce a sweeping ‘documentation’ measure that sounds novel and innovative, then negotiate with the stakeholders at whom the measure is aimed, and finally settle, in return for some revenue, on an amnesty scheme of some sort. It happened with the retailers, and now it has happened again with the property market. To be sure, there was a great deal of scepticism when the finance minister first announced in the budget that he wanted to abolish the practice of undervaluing property transactions and bring this sector under the tax net. When we heard that an independent panel of valuers was going to conduct the valuation of each property transaction, it appeared that he might be serious, although it strained credulity even at the time to think that institutions such as the State Bank, SECP and FBR could take on a monster as large and powerful as the property market.

But then, the wheels of the property market jammed up in July, and remained stuck ever since. Property dealers were unwilling to submit their true valuations before the state, arguing that independent panels have in the past been associated with massive corruption. Attempts by the government to negotiate new ‘valuation tables’ for every property in the country were the first sign that its will was cracking. The exercise was absurd to begin with. How can one have a table listing the “true value” of every property in the country? And how often would these tables be updated, given the volatilities of the market?

Once its will cracked, it was a slippery slope towards the same exit option that the government has taken in every similar exercise ie an amnesty scheme. And now we have one, in the form of an amendment to the Income Tax Ordinance, 2001, that grants amnesty from investigation into the source of wealth with which the property was originally purchased against a payment of 3pc tax on the difference between the DC and FBR rates. The technicalities blur the truth here. The government has essentially proved once again that under the garb of a novel ‘documentation scheme’, it was, in fact, pursuing nothing other than a few morsels of revenue. Why did the government allow itself to feel so pressured by the property speculators? How does a prolonged slump in this sector affect the smooth functioning of the economy? It had no disruptive impact other than pricking the property bubble for a few months. With the latest climbdown, it has now been established that a revenue-hungry government has run out

of ideas on tax reform, and is pursuing every bit of incremental revenue by cutting deals with holders of black money.

## Fewer women voters

WITH a general election coming up in 2018, it is troubling to learn that the gap between registered male and female voters has increased to 12.7m out of a total of 97.01m voters, with men comprising 56.26pc and women 43.74pc of the electorate. In other words, of the overall number of registered voters in the country today, 54.59m are men and 42.42m are women. Ahead of the local government polls in 2015, the difference between registered voters of both genders was 11.65m. Before that, at the time of the 2013 general election, there were 11.04m more male registered voters than female. The latest figures, which were shared by the secretary of the Election Commission of Pakistan on Tuesday, came to light as a result of an exercise to revise electoral rolls.

The fact that men are being included on voters' lists at a faster rate than women, whose numbers already lag behind that of men, is a matter of concern. It means that a steadily declining ratio of women can participate in what is an essential feature of a democracy — the process of selecting their representatives at various tiers of government. Of course, another aspect of female disenfranchisement is manifested at the other end of the electoral exercise where, in some of the country's more conservative areas, even women who are registered are not allowed to cast their ballot. However, while this violation of women' right to vote — in which reactionary local chapters of political parties collude — must be addressed, registration is the first step towards electoral empowerment. It is worth determining whether the women 'missing' from the lists are in possession of CNICs, without which they cannot be included on the rolls. This should be remedied without delay so that the gender gap can be bridged in time for the next election. Both the ECP and the political parties must make every effort to ensure that the democratic process does not leave the women of this country behind.

## CSS exam results

THE 'education emergency' that many experts have been warning about for a number of years has been manifesting itself in various important areas of national life. One of these is the Central Superior Services exam, the qualification through which inductions into the bureaucracy are made. However, as the National Assembly Standing Committee on Cabinet Secretariat was informed recently, just 202 out of over 9,600 candidates, or 2.09pc, managed to pass the CSS papers; 92pc of the candidates failed in English. Depressing as these figures may be, they are by no means shocking. While the selection process for the bureaucracy must be rigorous, with the best of the best inducted, it is clear that these results point to a major crisis in the Pakistani education system. As a representative of the Federal Public Service Commission, which oversees the CSS exams, told the NA committee, these abysmal results reflect deteriorating educational standards in this country.

CSS reform should be amongst the state's priorities, as it has a direct impact on the quality of governance. Over the decades, several attempts have been made to reform the bureaucracy — 38, according to a recent UNDP study, since independence. The current administration has also called for a "complete overhaul" of the civil service under Vision 2025. However, it should be understood that the recruitment process for the bureaucracy does not exist in a vacuum; if the education system is producing subpar graduates, then this low level of human capital does not offer a very capable talent pool for CSS administrators to choose from. Whether it is government service or the private sector, the vast majority of our educational institutions — from the primary level to the tertiary — are just not producing enough men and women qualified to meet the challenges of the times. Some short-term interventions can be made to improve human resources in the civil service. For example, in-service training of government servants should be geared towards imparting the latest skills in the given field and allowing bureaucrats to brush up their knowledge of their respective services. Moreover, promotions and progress on the job should be linked to merit and ability, with no scope whatsoever for political meddling. But taking the long view, whether it is the civil service or any other sector, without massive, visionary and long-term reform of Pakistan's education system, improvement in the quality of human capital in this country will be very difficult.

## Crash of PK661

THERE is something about an air crash that evokes a visceral horror. Even more so when it is close to home, when the back stories of the victims have a familiar ring, their lives having followed trajectories that we can identify with before they met their terrible, tragic end. So it has been since Wednesday when news broke that PIA's PK661 had crashed on its way from Chitral to Islamabad, killing all 47 people on board. Among the passengers — who included three foreigners — was Junaid Jamshed, erstwhile pop icon turned evangelist who had been visiting Chitral on a preaching mission. The young DC Chitral, Osama Warraich, who during the one year since his posting had earned much goodwill on account of his energetic work for the betterment of the area, was also on that ill-fated flight. Indeed, every one of those who perished was important in their own way to their family and friends.

It is, of course, too early to say what caused the crash, although that has not stopped all manner of speculation from finding its way into the public domain. What we do know so far with some certainty is the following: the ATR, a twin-engine turboprop, is considered a robust aircraft and this particular specimen was 10 years old, far below the age such aircraft are retired. It had also recently undergone the routine check due on these planes after every 500 flying hours. Unravelling the cause behind the crash would have to begin with the readout of the flight data recorder. That should help determine whether a sudden, catastrophic failure of some kind developed during the flight or whether the problem was one that had been overlooked during maintenance. Another point to consider is why the pilots were unable to fly on one engine, a manoeuvre they are routinely trained to perform, and land safely.

The national flag carrier has once again come under the spotlight. PIA has been struggling for some time with massive financial and technical problems, and this air crash is bound to raise questions about the quality of the fleet, although efforts are being made to change things around. It must be pointed out that there has been in recent years a disturbing rise in aircraft accidents/incidents involving not only PIA, but also Pakistan's private airlines. Here the oversight role of the Civil Aviation Authority, which works under the cabinet secretariat's aviation division, is very pertinent. While PIA is responsible for training the cockpit crew flying its aircraft, the CAA, as the aviation regulator in Pakistan, carries out flight checks and issues licences to pilots employed with all local airlines. That said, whatever the findings of the investigation team, they must be made public, and measures taken to ensure that such a ghastly misfortune does not again befall any Pakistani airline.

## Panama commission

IN trying to break a political impasse over a legal dispute between the PML-N and, essentially, the PTI, the Supreme Court waded into the Panama Papers issue seemingly with purpose and resolve. Yet, as several hearings so far have demonstrated, neither the PTI nor the PML-N seem willing to help the court settle some key questions regarding the assets and income of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family. Certainly, in the PML-N's case there is an incentive to be as minimally helpful as possible — the ever-changing statements of the Sharif family when it comes to the use and ownership of the infamous London flats means that establishing the indisputable truth may expose earlier evasiveness. More remarkable is that the PTI has proved to be a damp squib. After the early debacle surrounding its initial choice for chief counsel, a new team was drafted in and the party leadership promised a much better showing. Instead, the same pattern of claims, big on political allegations and small on legally relevant evidence, has made itself evident. In this environment, it is perhaps a sensible course of action for the Supreme Court to turn towards an inquiry commission for a thorough, independent probe of the opposition allegations, the government claims and, most of all, the documentary evidence brought to light by the Panama Papers.

Yet, even before the court can make known its preference, PTI supremo Imran Khan has rejected the formation of a judicial commission and demanded that the Supreme Court directly and itself settle the matter. The PTI's volte-face — the party has long demanded a judicial commission to probe the Panama Papers and related revelations — has been made possible by the court itself, which on Wednesday suggested that the parties involved in the hearings inform the court of their preference, or otherwise, for a commission. Before matters head towards another round of controversy and political acrimony, perhaps the court will consider giving a clear set of orders, which could entail the formation of a commission with Supreme Court-mandated terms of reference — based on the court's understanding of the issues so far and that will help settle the matter once and for all. Seven months since the Panama Papers rocked the political landscape, it seems that an empowered and authoritative judicial inquiry alone will be able to put the matter to rest.



## Transport for women

THE public space is hardly a safe place for women in Pakistan. Whether it is markets, workplaces or similar venues, women face harassment on a daily basis, which can range from unwanted stares and lewd comments to much worse. The public transport sphere is not immune to this disturbing reality. Countless women in urban Pakistan travelling to work, school or for any other purpose have to put up with crude and disturbing behaviour everyday. One attempt to address this dilemma has been the introduction of women-only transport options in some places. As reported in this paper on Thursday, the KP transport department, with support from the UN and the Japanese government, plans to introduce a women's bus service in Peshawar, Mardan and Abbottabad. Moreover, a foreign taxi service has recently launched women drivers in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. In 2012, Lahore had introduced women-only 'pink buses'.

If women are to work, study and participate in all areas of national life, it is essential that they have access to a safe and harassment-free transportation system. While it is true that segregation of the sexes is no solution to the problem, until public spaces in Pakistan are deemed safe for women, efforts need to be made to provide secure transport options. Lahore's pink buses were reportedly not popular with women and therefore faced financial problems. Perhaps a greater effort needs to be made to publicise women-only transport options so that women commuters know there are alternatives. But the ultimate solution is, of course, making public space safe for women. This is, arguably, a long-term project that would require many male Pakistanis to shed their regressive attitudes towards women. Men need to be told in clear terms that women have an equal right to public space, including transportation, and that harassment will result in legal consequences. While women-only transport options should be tried, more effort needs to be made by the state to ensure women commuters have a hassle-free experience on existing transport.

## Human rights charter

WHILE fundamental rights may be protected by the Constitution, it is undeniable that these are violated on a daily basis in Pakistan. What is particularly disturbing is that often different arms of the state violate human rights. Hence it is important that those in the corridors of power — and those waiting to enter them — display an unflinching commitment to the protection of basic rights. In this regard, PPP Senator Farhatullah Babar made some noteworthy suggestions at an event in Islamabad recently. The



veteran politician said that political parties should formulate a minimum charter of human rights along the lines of the Charter of Democracy. Mr Babar said that along with the right to life, liberty and security, freedom of information, freedom of expression, right to assembly, and right to association must be the main components of this charter. The senator also called for the death penalty to be reconsidered, and if this were not possible, the number of capital offences to be reduced. In addition, a call was made to not extend the life of the military courts beyond January 2017.

While some of the mainstream parties have been discussing human rights publicly, and have lobbied for the protection of these freedoms, in the rough and tumble of Pakistani politics the focus on preserving basic rights is often lost. In this sense, creating a charter of human rights — to which all mainstream political parties can pledge their commitment — would be a progressive and much-needed step. By promising to protect human rights and including these goals in their respective manifestos, parties will be seen to be walking the walk and can be held to account by the people if rights are violated under their watch. Moreover, to promote respect for and awareness of human rights, lessons on fundamental freedoms can be included in the syllabus. This would inculcate respect for human rights in young minds and hopefully be a step towards creating a better and more humane society. As for the call to review the death penalty, this paper has always argued for its abolition. And in recent days, when incidents of innocent men being executed have emerged, the case against the death penalty has been strengthened further. Military courts should also be wound up by the due date, and the state should invest its energies in improving Pakistan's decrepit justice system.

## **Khyber's ancient treasures**

AS militancy in Pakistan's tribal areas is reined in, a cornucopia of archaeological treasures scattered in the region is coming to light. A report in this paper yesterday detailed the first-ever survey in Khyber Agency — carried out by a team of archaeologists from KP — that has discovered around 110 archaeological sites in Jamrud tehsil. The two-month pilot project resulted in the unearthing of remains and structures, as well as rock carvings and paintings, some of which date back to the Buddhist period and others even earlier to prehistoric times. The credit for the initiative goes to the Khyber Agency's political agent, Khalid Mehmood, who engaged Dr Abdul Samad, the head of KP's Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, to conduct the survey.

Given that the area used to be a gateway to Central Asia and a cultural crossroads for many centuries, it stood to reason that evidence of this ancient past was in existence.

However, historical exigencies and, more recently, the militancy that has ravaged parts of northern Pakistan, had rendered it almost inconceivable that finds of this magnitude would actually come to light. And more such discoveries are certain to be made when the survey is extended, as planned, to other parts of the agency, including Landi Kotal, Bara and Tirah valley. In fact, the potential for developing Khyber Agency — and in time, the other tribal agencies — as a tourist destination significant for its archaeological heritage is truly exciting. But there are many practical considerations, aside from a sustainable peace, that must be factored in before that objective can be achieved. For one, the sites must be studied, catalogued and preserved in a scientific manner, and opened up for international research as well. To do so, as suggested by Dr Samad, Fata should have its own directorate of archaeology. This will go some way to ensure that the tribal agencies' multicultural heritage, rather than falling prey to antique smugglers, remains intact to be savoured by generations to come.

## Beyond CPEC

TWO initiatives currently under way provide an example of how Pakistan's regional integration potential goes far beyond CPEC and needs to be pursued on multiple fronts simultaneously. One includes the talks centring on the renewal of the free trade agreement signed with China in 2007. The other is the move within the government about restarting talks with Iran on the import of natural gas through the pipeline project by seeking a renegotiation of the power purchase agreement (PPA). Both initiatives pull regional integration efforts in different directions, yet both remind us that there are multiple roads to integration, and placing all the emphasis on CPEC alone risks putting too many eggs in one basket.

The FTA with China is in bad need of overhaul. The original agreement of 2007 has had a severely negative impact on domestic industry and flooded the country with Chinese imports, even in agricultural produce. The trade deficit with China reached almost \$4bn in 2013, and two years later, in 2015 it jumped to \$9.1bn. Now both countries are negotiating the second round of trade liberalisation as envisioned in the original agreement, and whereas the Pakistani side has carried the views of domestic industry to the talks, reports indicate they are having a difficult time getting the Chinese to accept the reservations. The second round envisions the trade liberalisation level to reach 90pc, in terms of tariff reductions, but it is crucial that Pakistan keep the interests of domestic industry in mind when moving forward towards the third round of talks scheduled for March next year. It is important to keep in mind that this is a completely separate issue from CPEC, and the two should not be allowed to mix.

While applying the brakes on the runaway trade liberalisation with China, the government can do more to accelerate similar initiatives with Iran. Trade can begin with natural gas, especially by proceeding in earnest with the construction of the portion of the pipeline that lies within Pakistan. Renegotiating the PPA is fair given the changes in oil pricing, but such talks will appear to be stalling tactics if the hardware to purchase the gas is not being built. In time, the trade relationship with Iran can be expanded considerably to include other hydrocarbon resources as well, and regularise the imports of LPG. It is crucial to keep our focus when talking about regional integration, and not allow the entire project to be boxed under the CPEC label. Pakistan's potential for regional integration is huge, and there are plenty of neighbours with whom there should be talks. If the present climate makes dialogue with India and Afghanistan difficult, then this is a moment to pursue talks with China and Iran with a view to meeting the needs of domestic industry.

## Panama probe

WHAT could — should — have been a decisive legal settlement of a political dispute that has dominated the calendar has taken a rather shambolic turn. All three of the protagonists in the Panama Papers dispute — the Supreme Court, the PTI and the PML-N — must bear some responsibility for a delay in the hearings that will now stretch until January and possibly beyond, with no clarity about which forum will conduct the full inquiry— the Supreme Court itself or a court-appointed judicial commission? When the outgoing Chief Justice Anwar Jamali took up the Panama Papers matter a day before the PTI's threatened lockdown of Islamabad, it appeared that a grave political crisis had been averted. Moreover, by deciding to hold hearings in an expeditious manner, the possibility of an authoritative decision by the Supreme Court became real and imminent. Yet, despite all sides submitting to the will of the court, the latter was unable to decide the issue during the term of the incumbent chief justice.

Always apparent was the imminent retirement of the chief justice himself, something that the court itself should have paid heed to when deciding to intervene and raising the expectations of the nation. In hindsight, weeklong adjournments — despite the parties to the dispute urging the court to hold daily hearings where possible — did not augur well for the controversy's timely resolution. It is a painful question to ask given the esteem that the court is held in, but is there a possibility that it waded into a political dispute with no clear idea about what it could achieve or how to proceed? The disappointment nationally is palpable and it is something the court should address when it takes up the matter next in January. If the court has somewhat disappointed, the PTI and PML-N have thoroughly embarrassed themselves. The PTI, which arguably single-

handedly has kept the Panama Papers issue alive, seemed unprepared to address the matter in a legal forum. After two different lead counsels presented arguments and documents that did not satisfy the court, the PTI performed yet another astonishing U-turn in belatedly rejecting a judicial commission and demanding that the judges directly settle the matter. Quite what has changed other than the PTI's private political calculations is not clear even now, but the party remains blithely unconcerned with consistency or acceptable political strategy.

Yet, the PML-N's role has been nothing short of shameful too. At every stage that it has tried to introduce new evidence or provide a fresh explanation for the wealth and finances of Sharif family members, the party has only succeeded in creating more controversy and raising fresh questions in the minds of critics and supporters alike. The transition to democracy demands a progressively better calling to account of all individuals and institutions, but the opposite appears to be occurring at the moment.

## Coverage of air crash

LEAVE it to the electronic media to take the low road when it comes to covering a national tragedy. As soon as news of the crash of PK661 broke, the TV channels went into overdrive, vying with each other to provide the most 'exclusive' reporting possible. In the process, they jettisoned not only journalistic ethics, but compassion and common sense as well. Even before any significant details had emerged, speculation about that particular plane's history and the pilots' experience was being bandied about with no attempt at ascertaining the facts or seeking answers from informed sources. The victims' relatives were not allowed to grieve in private, their pain and anguish a voyeuristic feast for the nation as media persons posed cringe-makingly crass and insensitive questions to them. Some reports even disclosed, in painstaking detail, the residential address of one of the victims. Then there were the various animated iterations of aircraft flying across television screens and crashing in flames that several news channels found appropriate to air. In short, it was depressing to see the media repeating most, if not all, the egregious errors of judgement it had displayed in its coverage of the Air Blue crash in 2010.

Pakistani electronic media's penchant for histrionics, fuelled by cut-throat competition for ratings, is by now well established. That is not only in the case of disasters such as the recent plane crash. The coverage of politics too is prey to sensationalism and hyperbole. Moreover, as the media's influence has grown, some of the channels, instead of being impartial observers of events, have on occasion become active

participants, thereby compromising their duty to disseminate information in a fair, balanced manner. For instance, during the court proceedings — since adjourned — over the Panama Papers, the evidence presented was not merely reported on in the news channels, but analysed and dissected threadbare despite the matter being sub judice. The coverage of the issue was in effect a media trial in which judgement was passed even before the apex court could do so. It is also worth questioning what the electronic media decides is worthy of coverage, especially on its ubiquitous talk shows. While politics gets a disproportionate airing, the practical consequences of those politics as they play out in society rarely find space. Raucous talk shows with belligerent guests and a combative ambience may make for ‘good’ TV but they are not necessarily good journalism.

## Gwadar water supply

FOR a port city whose future is being sold in glittering terms, it is sad that Gwadar is severely lacking in the most essential component of life: water. There is one dam that provides water to Gwadar and its surrounding habitations — Ankara Kaur — but, according to the DC Gwadar, only two weeks of supply remains in the dam. Those who have visited Gwadar, provided they have not stayed in the only luxury hotel there, will testify that acute water shortage is an endemic problem. Gwadar’s residents must be puzzled by the glowing pictures of the city that make it look like Dubai and that appear on posters put up by real-estate agencies and builders who have acquired large speculative stakes in the area. In reality, Gwadar is barren and dry and it is difficult to see how it will be in a position to support thriving commerce anytime soon.

In response to the situation, the chief secretary Balochistan visited Gwadar and was given a detailed briefing by various officials there. For now, the provincial government is putting together plans to bring water to the parched town using tankers. The residents of Gwadar may be used to such hardship, but one wonders how the government intends to permanently overcome this problem in order to fulfil its dreams of turning the place into a thriving global port city. We hear about plans to build a desalination plant, but that requires vast amounts of energy, which in turn requires vast amounts of fuel, which in turn requires a vast infrastructure for storage and handling. Taken together, these need large amounts of financial resources to create and operate. It is not known when all this will happen, but what is clear is that the city cannot live up to the promises being made on its shoulders if water remains such a scarce commodity. The provincial authorities should do more to highlight the high levels of water shortage in the city.

## Seoul impeachment

GOVERNMENTS the world over face frequent allegations of inappropriate behaviour, and more seriously, corruption, from opponents. If the charges are grave enough, momentum can build up and a protest movement take shape. In underdeveloped political systems, such protest movements can take a violent turn or lead to intervention by extra-constitutional actors. But in more mature democracies, a combination of people power and parliamentary procedure can help bring about change that does not violate democratic norms. On Friday, South Korean lawmakers impeached President Park Geun-hye after weeks of massive, but peaceful, street protests calling for her ouster. The leader has been accused of corruption and abuse of power. While opposition and independent lawmakers united for the move, some members of Ms Park's own party also supported the impeachment, helping secure the two-thirds majority needed for the process. Allegations of corruption have also cost other leaders their jobs this year. For example, in April, Iceland's prime minister stepped down after allegations emerged — from the Panama Papers — that he had questionable offshore wealth, while Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff was impeached in August after she faced accusations of corruption.

Both critics and supporters of street protests in Pakistan should look at South Korea and realise that demonstrations — which are the citizenry's democratic right — need not be violent. While Pakistan's situation is unique and the political process in this country admittedly fragile, the Korean developments show that parliament should be the ultimate forum for political change. Unfortunately, it is also a fact that previously numerous protests in this country have either been held at the behest of extra-constitutional forces, or have tried to suck the military into the political vortex. That is why all parties should keep their movements within democratic bounds. And while there is no place for horse-trading and other such shenanigans in a democratic system, lawmakers in Pakistan face a dilemma: should they stick to the party line, or should they vote as per their conscience against the party leadership if significant evidence of corruption emerges? In an ideal world, there should be room for dissent within parties so that a unified line can be presented in parliament after thorough internal deliberations. But the sad fact is that those disagreeing with the party hierarchy in Pakistan are put to pasture. In such a situation, perhaps parliament should discuss ways in which such dissenters can express their views without violating floor-crossing restrictions.



## Fruits of auto policy

THE new auto policy announced by the government is finally beginning to bear fruit. Two global automakers have announced plans to enter the Pakistan market and compete with the big three that are already operating here. The auto sector has enjoyed a protected space within which to operate for too long now, only finding competition from the import of used cars; so a new set of auto assemblers is a welcome development. The entry plans, in conjunction with local partners, also are a testament to the success of the policy which sought to encourage new entrants first, revive dormant players already within the market second, and then turn its attention to existing players.

But some work remains to be done. First, it is to be hoped that the new entrants will not follow the path laid down by existing players of catering to elite demand only. Cars in the 1300cc or above range have seen a number of new models over the past five years, and top-of-the-line models are now priced only slightly below the cost of luxury cars imported from Europe. Meanwhile, the range of options at 1000cc or below has been neglected severely, with hardly any new models being introduced in the past decade. Those that are in play have been degraded due to cost cutting. Second, the motorbike range is also subjected to an invasion of Chinese-assembled models, which are just a notch above junk quality. The lower segments of the market have suffered over the past few years because the way the policy is structured the incentives are skewed towards serving elite demand and monetizing luxury gimmicks. Having kick-started a new round of investment and renewed competition in the auto sector, the government should now work towards ensuring that the benefits of this development help vitalize the sector to serve the numerically greater lower segments of the market so that the middle classes can also see benefits accruing to them.

## Institutional reform

THE Panama Papers hearings in the Supreme Court have dominated the headlines and the national discourse in recent weeks, but elsewhere too cracks in the judicial system are being papered over. As reported in this newspaper last week, following the lapse of the Protection of Pakistan Act, 2014, in July, terrorism-related cases under the lapsed law have been shifted to anti-terrorism courts. Not a single trial was concluded under PoPA, an ad hoc system suffering from institutional neglect from the very outset. Now, the already cumbersome ATC process has been laden with yet more cases — and there is no clear indication of when and how the transferred cases will be concluded. Meanwhile, the military courts constituted under the 21st Amendment are also set to

expire in early January and it appears that unless an aggressive push is made by the military leadership to extend the life of those courts, parliament will allow them to lapse too.

Special courts are an institutionally poor idea. Ad hoc solutions to chronic and structural judicial weaknesses do little more than add further layers to an already complex and rickety system. This paper has opposed military courts, draconian powers and ad hoc judicial measures. What is truly needed are institutional reforms — for parliament, the superior judiciary and the legal community to draw up and implement a range of criminal justice reforms that make the system more responsive to the legitimate needs of state and society. As the experience with PoPA has proved yet again, the problems in the criminal justice system are both mundane and predictable, and complex and hard to solve. From a lack of resources, in terms of salaries and adequate living arrangements to attract competent prosecutors, for example, to being unable to provide long-term protection to those involved in handling the most dangerous of terrorists, the criminal justice system is still far from being adequately equipped to professionally deal with the scale of the militancy threat in the country.

Unhappily, collectively among parliament, the government, the superior judiciary and the wider legal community, there is virtually no appetite for judicial reform. It is telling that PoPA and the 21st Amendment only became a reality because the military leadership demanded special powers to detain and try terrorist suspects. The central lesson, however, still does not appear to have been absorbed by the civilians: a delay in reforms only invites other institutions to encroach on civilian domain.

## New army postings

ARMY chief Gen Qamar Bajwa has installed a team of his choosing in senior military posts; now, the country must wait to see the priorities of the new-look military leadership. Certainly, there is an obvious, consensus area of focus: working with the civilian leadership to take the fight against militancy, terrorism and extremism to the next stage via the National Action Plan. While NAP has been criticised both for being too general in its goals and too weak in its implementation, it remains an important document for the long-term stability and security of the country. If the civilian leadership, at both the national and provincial level, is willing to rededicate itself to NAP, the new military leadership should be in a position to deliver maximal results in the next phase of the long war.



There are several reasons for cautious optimism. First, Gen Bajwa appears to have given preference to officers with counterterrorism experience fighting internal militancy and criminal threats in his selections for important military posts. The choice of Karachi corps commander Gen Naveed Mukhtar for DG ISI and DG Rangers Maj Gen Bilal Akbar for Chief of General Staff suggests where Gen Bajwa's priorities lie — the two Karachi-based generals have accumulated extensive counterterrorism experience. Second, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, in personally selecting Gen Bajwa from among the available choices, has an obvious incentive to work with the new military leadership to find a way to not only stabilise civil-military ties, but to also make a fresh attempt at policy convergence between the civilians and military in the national security and foreign policy domains. Mr Sharif and his government have lagged in their commitment to the fight against militancy and now have an opportunity to make amends.

Third, as the disturbing events in Chakwal on Monday, have shown yet again, the problem of violent extremism in Punjab has grown manifold. While Punjab is far from the only province in which extremism and militancy have proliferated, it is in some ways the final frontier: most indigenous militancy and extremism networks either have a presence in the province or are headquartered there. Where the now retired Gen Raheel Sharif had rightly focused his tenure on counter-insurgency operations in Fata, Gen Bajwa will likely find that consolidation of those gains will require sustained efforts to dismantle the urban- and Punjab-based militancy and extremism networks. For too long, the problem of extremism has been regarded as a separate and later battle. Certainly, the methods of combating extremism will have to be different to those used to attack active militant networks. But there is a continuum between extremism and actual militancy wherein the former creates the conditions for the latter. The war against militancy must be taken to its logical conclusion.

## Iranian suggestion

OTHER than the concept of the ummah, there is very little that binds the world's Muslim-majority states together, especially in the realm of geopolitics. This is particularly true in the Middle East, where regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran have divergent views on nearly all the major questions of the day. Perhaps this lack of unity is best exemplified by the state of the OIC, an organisation that is today known more for its languidness and anodyne statements regarding the state of the Muslim world than for effective cooperation. In such an atmosphere, does the Iranian suggestion calling for Muslim states to form a united bloc against terrorism hold any promise? Speaking at a conference recently, speaker of the Iranian Majlis Ali Larijani called for Muslim states — his own, along with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq and Pakistan — to form a bloc

that would tackle, amongst other things, the threat of terrorism. Considering the fraught relations that Riyadh and Tehran have been experiencing over the past few decades, this suggestion is welcome as Mr Larijani assured the Saudis that Iran was not “their enemy”. These remarks come in the aftermath of recent statements issued by the Gulf Arab states in which they accused Iran of “destabilising” the region, as well as questionable observations by the British prime minister about the need to counter the Iranian “threat”, whilst on a visit to the Gulf.

The biggest difference between Iranian and Saudi regional policy is, of course, over Syria and Yemen, where both states have supported opposing factions in brutal conflicts. Iran’s statement that it is opposed to “warmongering in Syria and Yemen” should be followed up by efforts by Tehran and Riyadh to bring these horrible conflicts to a negotiated close. More than the external powers, if the Saudis and Iranians can decide on a modus vivendi for the region, the current wave of violence and hate engulfing the Middle East can be contained. This may seem like a naive hope at the moment, but both capitals need to show boldness and statesmanship to bring peace. One common enemy both Iran and Saudi Arabia share is the militant Islamic State group; perhaps countering this terrorist outfit can become a point of unity for both. It is high time Muslim states turned noble intentions into achievable goals.

## KP’s houbara ban

It is that time of the year when the houbara bustards and their hunters — the Arab princes who like to spend their winters chasing these migratory birds — descend on Pakistan.

Cleared by a court ruling at the start of 2016, licensed houbara hunting is seen as a lucrative option for Pakistan — one that helps our ruling elite win favours from nations with considerable wealth. But strangely enough, it is considered so crucial that the state here is not at all shy of calling it a foreign policy requirement: according to the government’s submissions, allowing the hunting of the houbara is an actual need.

Indeed, it is senseless that foreign policy should be tied to a significant wildlife concern in the country. No matter what largesse our regional allies might bestow on us in return for hunting permits, it is not likely to make up for the dwindling numbers of a species that is practically being driven to extinction by hunters who have no qualms about exceeding the bag limit.

In these circumstances, it is satisfying to note that at least one province — KP —

has refused a Gulf prince permission to hunt the bird in its jurisdiction.

There is an indication of some consistency in dealing with the issue. Sometime ago, there had been reports that the PTI set-up in the province had dared to fine a royal for hunting without a licence.

There have been suggestions in concerned circles that the same kind of zero tolerance towards houbara hunting has to be extended to all parts of the country where the bird finds a home during the winter months.

Some experts have called for the sustainable hunting of the houbara, where bag limits are firmly adhered to and locals are involved in the conservation of the bird. Unfortunately, there has been little effort towards this aim. The government must consider a total ban on houbara hunting unless the number of birds goes up to sustainable levels through careful conservation measures.

## Chakwal coverage

IN this age of 24/7, wall-to-wall coverage, journalists are confronted with difficult ethical and professional questions when it comes to reporting incidents of a sensitive, communal nature. While censorship is out of the question, some degree of restraint must be exercised to ensure that violent images and footage from one location do not end up inflaming the situation on a larger scale. This dilemma surfaced on Monday during a communal riot in Dulmial, a village near Chakwal city. As reported, a mob descended on an Ahmadi place of worship and proceeded to ransack it. In the melee, two deaths occurred. The attack occurred on 12 Rabiul Awwal, a day when religious fervour is high and mass processions are taken out countrywide. Perhaps this fact — along with the sensitivity of the incident — led the electronic media to downplay its coverage. As mentioned in this paper, the reportage was limited to tickers; media professionals say this was done out of 'self-restraint'. Such restricted coverage has been witnessed before, most notably during the 2013 communal riot in Rawalpindi on Ashura. There is, of course, a thin line between self-restraint and self-censorship. Where attacks on minorities are concerned, there can be no room for self-censorship. Heads of media organisations, rather than any government body, need to formulate standard operating procedures where coverage of communally sensitive incidents is concerned. These guidelines must be adhered to by all channels, and coverage should not be selective regarding different incidents of a communal or sectarian violence.

However, while coverage of the attack may have been subdued, the state should under

no circumstances brush this shameful incident under the carpet. Prima facie, there is evidence that the attack was pre-planned, as clerics had apparently been riling up people along sectarian lines many days before the incident. A full investigation should be conducted and those responsible for instigating the violence, as well as those who participated in the attack, must face justice. In particular, the media needs to expose the culprits behind such communal violence in order to inform the public, as well as to put pressure on the state to take action against hate-mongers. The long-term battle against extremism and militancy will not be won until those involved in hate speech and instigating communal conflict are prosecuted and punished. All communities must be free in this country to follow their religious beliefs without being intimidated.

## Substandard drugs

THE first reaction to the provinces' resolve to take "coordinated steps against manufacturers and traders of spurious, substandard and fake drugs" should be to hail the move, instead of lamenting the long time it has taken for them to come together on this serious issue. Yet there is still some way to go before there is genuine cause for celebration in circles that have been calling for qualitative improvements in what is being provided to Pakistanis in the name of medicine. This is just the start. The provinces have further resolved to move against "those violating the registration process (of drugs) and fleecing the users" — which means, in theory at least, a crackdown on irrationally priced medicines at some point. It has been decided that the provinces will meet every two months to follow up on these decisions as well as to take up other relevant matters; in this connection, they have promised to work closely with the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan.

Such is the situation that the provinces must start delivering soon on their promise to work jointly from now on. The drugs sector is plagued with all kinds of problems. Not least of them is the lack of application of a common set of standards to judge the quality of drugs available on the market. And, the further one is from the privileged urban centres in the country the easier it is for heartless profiteers in the business of selling all kinds of substandard drugs to play with human lives. Ever since the subject of health was devolved to the provinces there has been a constant demand for all the federating units to get together quickly to ensure the provision of good-quality drugs. Credit must be given to those who have brought the provinces together to realise just how crucial the task at hand is. A collective effort must be made to get to the implementing stage to ensure that all standards and rules are strictly adhered to.

## PTI's return to parliament

THE supreme democratic institution is parliament, where the will of the people is manifested through its elected representatives. Whenever that institution is boycotted by a political party, it is not just parliament that is affected, but democracy itself. So the PTI's decision to end its boycott of parliament is a welcome one. As the second-largest vote-getter in the 2013 general election and the third largest party in parliament, the PTI is an essential part of that institution this democratic term. Inside parliament, the issues and agenda that the PTI would like to pursue can be debated democratically, openly and in line with the Constitution. Outside parliament, the spectre of street power and destabilisation of the democratic project looms. The PTI has wavered in the past about its commitment to strengthening institutions from within the system and has often appeared to have preferred a slash-and-burn approach, but any realisation in a democracy-enhancing, institution-strengthening direction should be welcomed.

Yet, when it comes to parliament, there is a frustrating circularity to events rather than genuine progress. Yesterday should have been a moment for the best of parliament to be on display. Instead, a familiar farce played out. First, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif demonstrated yet again his dismissive attitude towards parliament by skipping the start of yet another National Assembly session. One may think that, given the PTI's avowed agenda to discuss the Panama Papers and alleged Sharif family corruption, the prime minister was advised against triggering an unseemly showdown by appearing in the house. However, that is scarcely believable given Mr Sharif's overall abysmal parliamentary track record. Be it a news conference or a speech in parliament, Mr Sharif appears almost allergic to any forum in which he can be called to account or asked a tough question or two. Speeches before friendly audiences or words spoken at a project inauguration matter little; it is to democratic institutions and norms that the prime minister must show greater respect.

Second, parliament is too often treated as an extension of the media circus that dominates the national conversation for the most part. All sides must bear some of the blame for the unhappy state of affairs. Speaker of the National Assembly Ayaz Sadiq seems to create more controversies than he defuses. The Leader of the Opposition Khurshid Shah seems to believe the occasional fiery speech is his principal parliamentary responsibility. The PTI appears more interested in grandstanding and brinkmanship than genuine parliamentary debate. In the end, the first National Assembly session in recent months to have attracted national interest degenerated into a farcical show with nothing of substance achieved. Today, a second attempt will be made to put matters back on the right track. Perhaps wiser counsel will prevail and the National Assembly will be able to resume its work.

## Risk to Indus treaty

IF it appears that the World Bank has just treated India and Pakistan like petulant and entitled children by halting the arbitration in the latest dispute between them under the Indus Water Treaty, it is probably because both countries are behaving in an immature manner. It is worth bearing in mind that the water treaty is a landmark document, whose historical significance puts it in the league of the most enduring bilateral treaties anywhere. It has survived wars and skirmishes between the two countries, has remained intact during periods of massive rupture in ties, and seen many governments — both democratic and military — come and go. In short, it has stood the test of time and its provisions have worked to apportion the waters of the western rivers in a manner that is as close to being consensual as anything can be between the two countries.

For this reason, the treaty and its mechanism for the settlement of water-related disputes should not be turned into a channel through which to pump the angst that both states harbour against one another. The treaty is not a vehicle for resolving the Kashmir dispute, nor should it be used as a signalling device for other foreign policy concerns that have nothing to do with the apportionment and utilisation of the waters in the western rivers. Pakistan built up a track record of invoking the treaty to call for a neutral arbitrator with regard to various projects, from the Baglihar dam to the latest Kishanganga venture. India, for its part, has, in a fit of pique, threatened to withdraw from the treaty altogether, as well as initiate a parallel process of appointing a neutral expert to counter Pakistan's push to set up a court of arbitration. The World Bank is right to feel that the rising temperature of the rhetoric threatens the integrity of the treaty itself, and has offered a mature response to temporarily halt both processes in order to ward off a potentially awkward situation. The interregnum should be used by both countries to calm down passions. There is a long history of water-related engagements between both countries that have continued even through periods of extreme tension. It is the memory of this cooperation that ought to be leveraged now. It would be a calamity for future generations if both countries were to tear up the treaty in a moment of anger, then muddle through the consequences for decades.



## Contaminated food chain

KARACHI, notwithstanding its status as the country's financial capital and largest metropolis with a most diverse population mix, is a city orphaned. Contemplating its infrastructural distress, most would point towards the mounds of garbage, lack of city planning, abysmal traffic conditions and the growing scarcity of water. Yet other grave issues lurk beneath the surface. Consider, for example, a shocking figure revealed during a consultative workshop in the city on Wednesday, the main focus of which centred on urgently needed reforms at the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board. According to the experts that participated, only about 8m residents have access to a proper sewerage system, leaving 60pc of the population uncovered. This bland statement masks yet another grim reality: apart from the inconvenience faced by those left out of the system, and the health and disease burdens that are a consequence, there is the problem of where the sewerage goes. Vast amounts of this raw waste, in addition to untreated industrial effluent, are emptied into the harbour everyday — 350m gallons, as acknowledged some time ago by the Marine Pollution Control Department — which is rapidly destroying the marine environment.

The more cynical may dismiss the health of the oceans as a matter to be shelved for later, but they may want to consider this: there is convincing research warning that much of the vegetable produce being grown around the city, particularly in the agricultural estates towards the northeast, is being fed on untreated sewerage — the toxins thus ending up in the human food chain. But why single out Karachi? The same is true for agricultural areas located near many urban centres, a prime example being the fields that surround and feed the Kasur-Lahore belt. Pakistan has a major sewerage problem, and the inability to manage it is leading to the slow poisoning of an untold number of people. No less than a Herculean effort is required to stop this dangerous contamination of the food chain.

## Aleppo devastated

ONCE a key node on Levantine trade routes, Aleppo, today resembles a graveyard. In many ways, the state of Aleppo reflects the state of much of Syria after nearly six years of a devastating civil war. This is a war that has reverberated across continents, one in which major world powers have been heavily involved, and one that has brought death, disease and displacement to hundreds of thousands of Syrians. This week, after a four-year grinding war of attrition, Bashar al-Assad's forces managed to retake almost all of Aleppo. However, as has been the case throughout the civil war, it is the Syrian people



who have suffered the most. While on Wednesday efforts to evacuate rebel-held areas were thwarted by renewed fighting, yesterday, there were reports that evacuation of both fighters and non-combatants had restarted.

As in all conflicts, the truth in Syria was an early casualty. Much of the coverage of the Syrian war, especially the ongoing events in Aleppo, has been coloured by geopolitical perspectives. Media with a soft spot for Damascus have shown citizens celebrating the 'liberation' of Aleppo, while outlets sympathetic to the rebels have portrayed a wasteland put to fire and the sword by the ruthless legions of Mr Assad. Even the language about the Aleppo operation is partisan: is it 'liberation' or a 'fall'? Perhaps — away from extreme partisan positions — the world needs to look at the conflict from a humanitarian perspective. The fact is that both the Assad regime as well as the rebels — whose ranks are populated by a number extremist factions — have committed atrocities in this conflict. Moreover, those in the international community who are today shedding tears for the people of Aleppo have helped stoke the fires of conflict in Syria by meddling in the civil war, pushing for regime change and using the country as a proxy battlefield to settle geopolitical scores. Whether it is the West, the Arabs, Iran, Turkey or Russia, all players have had a hand in making Syria what it is today. Aside from meddling in the Syrian imbroglio, the international community's efforts to bring the conflict to a negotiated close have been half-hearted.

Is it too late to negotiate? Indeed, Mr Assad will be emboldened by capturing Aleppo. But ploughing on to retake territory in the same brutal fashion will prolong the conflict indefinitely. On the other hand, while the battle for Aleppo was raging, the militant Islamic State group managed to sneak back into Palmyra and take the town from the government. In this complicated war, the threat militant groups pose to global security must not be lost sight of. Negotiating peace will be far from uncomplicated. But should the stakeholders decide that Syria's future will be decided on the battlefield, more bloodshed and suffering await its forsaken people.

## Quetta inquiry report

THE catalogue of errors, mistakes, oversights, criminal wrongdoing, hubris and policy misguidedness is so overwhelming that it is scarcely possible to read the report of the inquiry commission on the Aug 8 Quetta bombing of the legal community. Surely no state apparatus in a country and in a province so wracked by violence for so long can be allowed to be so utterly incompetent in so many ways. Yet, the report of the inquiry commission led by Supreme Court Justice Qazi Faez Isa lays bare such sweeping failures as to call into question the very edifice of the country's counterterrorism and

counter-insurgency strategies. To be sure, there are no easy, readymade solutions to what is destined to be a long war. By its very nature, the fight against militancy is not something a conventionally oriented state security apparatus can do automatically and immediately. But Balochistan has had a militarised security policy for more than a decade, military campaigns have been waged in every one of the seven agencies of Fata and counterterrorism operations have been conducted for years from Karachi to Peshawar. By now, the stunning failures laid bare by Justice Isa should have been addressed to a great extent.

Two things stand out in the panoply of wrongs catalogued in the report. First, a meaningful policy change can only be built on an explicit rejection of past policy. From the Afghan jihad in the 1980s to the state redirecting militant energies towards India-held Kashmir in the 1990s, Pakistan's problem with militancy is rooted in deliberate choices that became self-inflicted wounds, but the state has never acknowledged this. Even today, responsibility for choices made willingly and egregiously is largely deflected towards external factors. The Cold War and Pakistan's alignment with the US is blamed for the original embrace of armed jihad. The proxy wars between oil-rich Saudi Arabia and Iran are blamed for the rise of violent sectarianism in the country. But through it all, it was the state's complicity with militant groups for parochial agendas that allowed the creation of an infrastructure of jihad that the country is now struggling to dismantle. The denial of the past must end.

Second, the state needs a zero-tolerance approach towards militancy. No more prioritisation of the fight against anti-Pakistan militants while tolerating the growth of other groups. No more treating some banned militant groups as more deserving of punitive action than other banned outfits. No more asking the world to be patient while demanding it do more to help Pakistan fight selective battles. Yes, tactics and strategies against different groups will necessarily have to be different, and different regions will need different approaches, but in principle and in philosophy there must be clarity that all militant groups will be dismantled and that Pakistan will be cleansed of militancy, terrorism and extremism. Total clarity, total commitment — there is no other option.

## UAE tax demands

THE UAE is not the only territory that will soon be asking all account holders to submit details about where they file their taxes. Around the world a regime for collection and exchange of tax information is taking shape, and as more and more nations sign on, it should become harder and harder for people to find safe havens to stash their 'black money'. The idea is to first harmonise the tax databases being maintained by country authorities around the world so that all information is held in relatively comparable form, and then to allow for its automatic exchange — provided the country in question has passed the appropriate legislation to guarantee confidentiality of the data that will be acquired from foreign jurisdictions. Automatic exchange is the lynchpin here because it allows for financial information concerning nationals of a country who maintain bank accounts in other states to be accessed by tax authorities without having to file a specific request under a bilateral treaty arrangement. This is something that has thus far served as a barrier to the exchange of information.

Pakistan has not yet passed this legislation, so it is not in a position to enter into a Common Reporting Standard agreement with any other country at the moment, meaning the automatic exchange of financial information is still some distance away. But it is significant that many jurisdictions, especially the UAE which has been a favoured destination for black money from Pakistan for many years now, will be asking everyone to disclose their tax details. That information will then be maintained in a database and, at any point in the future, could be shared with the Pakistani tax authorities. The implications of this are momentous. It is high time Pakistan joined this process in order to take advantage of the automatic exchange of information that it enables. For now, the government has signed the Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters sponsored by the OECD, which is a step in the right direction. But in order to enter into CRS agreements with other countries, enabling legislation and reform of the Federal Board of Revenue is required — these are more difficult to undertake — to demonstrate a more earnest commitment to global best practices in tax affairs. This is precisely the sort of direction the country needs, especially in the wake of repeated disclosures of the vast offshore wealth held by Pakistanis.

## Orange Line secrecy

THE latest disclosure by a department of the Punjab government that a secrecy clause in the loan agreement for the Orange Line train being built in Lahore prevents the release of the terms of the loan is serious cause for concern. The disclosure was made by the Punjab Information Commission to the Lahore High Court recently, and if it is true it raises serious questions about the legality of the loan agreement in the first place. In Pakistan, all public loans to be repaid with public funds need to be disclosed since there is an abiding public interest in the terms of agreement. If it is true that the government of Punjab, with backing from the centre, has entered into a loan agreement with the Chinese EXIM bank for construction of the rail project containing a clause that requires the terms of the loan agreement and repayment obligations to be kept secret, then the issue needs to be scrutinised and discussed to determine whether or not it is legal.

Many things about the Lahore Orange Line rail project are disturbing, including the failure to carry out a proper environmental impact assessment, as well as confusion over whether or not it is part of the CPEC bouquet of projects. Now we add another item to the list: the terms of the loan agreement through which the project is being financed. The Punjab government needs to make a more proactive effort to address the serious issues that are coming to engulf the project; denying access to records of decisions as well as terms of financing does little more than buy a little more time. In due course, all these questions will require a response to clear doubts, and it is better that the answers come earlier rather than later to avoid having to sink more money into the project. Transparency is an important pillar in government operations in Pakistan. Shoving it aside will only result in stoking the controversy further.

## The sun must set on military courts

AS the fallout from Justice Qazi Faez Isa's report continues and governments, federal and provincial, struggle to explain their inaction, there has been yet another manifestation of the collective failure of the state. On Friday, newly installed army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa signed off on what may be one of the final orders upholding death sentences for terrorism offences handed down by military courts set up under the 21st Amendment. The 13 latest confirmed death sentences means that over 150 individuals have been condemned to die by military courts since their creation in January 2014. With the sunset clause of the 21st Amendment set to take effect early next month, a stark choice awaits the country's elected representatives: contemplate an extension to the life of the military courts and in doing so further perpetuate the gross distortions to

the Constitution and justice system in the country, or, at long last and however belatedly, take up the issue of criminal justice reform.

The preferred option for parliament may well be the option utilised in the case of extreme detention powers and special courts created under the Protection of Pakistan Act, 2014: when that law expired in July, parliament simply opted to do nothing. Pending cases in the special courts have been transferred to anti-terrorism courts and there appears to be no appetite in parliament to give security forces further special powers to detain individuals for prolonged periods. The do-nothing option may seem palatable in a distorted system; after all, when controversial laws expire and their controversial powers no longer exist, the state cannot rely on them to perpetrate unjustness. So, if military courts under the 21st Amendment cease to exist on Jan 7, an opaque and indefensible system of so-called justice will stand dismantled and army chiefs will no longer have the authority to confirm death sentences handed down by those courts. But the do-nothing option is, in fact, deeply problematic. It is the lack of justice system reforms that makes possible the creation of abominations such as military courts in the first place. If no reforms are attempted, the demand for ad hoc systems of justice will invariably be mooted.

Justice system reforms are not easy, but neither are they as hard as they are made out to be. Under its chairman Raza Rabbani, the Senate is trying to nudge parliament to take up the matter of terrorism-related legal reforms. Two bills covering anti-terrorism and protection of witnesses passed by the Senate should be taken up by the National Assembly — and the sooner it is done, the better. As Mr Rabbani has warned, a legal vacuum may appear on Jan 7. And if history is any guide, dealing hastily with vacuums or emergencies tends to create further problems. Judicial reforms must be undertaken in a determined, but measured way.

## Karachi operation

WHILE maintenance of law and order is a nationwide challenge, the problems of Karachi — thanks to this vast city's numbers, size, social, political and economic complexities — are of a special nature. The traditional colonial-era model of policing has failed the metropolis miserably, while corruption and ineptitude within the ranks have created a negative public image of the police. And while the Rangers-led law-enforcement operation, in progress since September 2013, has brought down levels of violence considerably, Karachi remains a dangerous place awash with guns, and criminals not afraid to use them. On his maiden visit to the Sindh capital after taking up his new post, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa reiterated that despite the change in the

military's high command, the gains of the operation would be consolidated. Gen Bajwa highlighted the city's economic value and the fact that lawlessness would be bad for business activities, adding that "sustainable peace" was the target.

Clearly, few will counter the argument that before the current operation began, the levels of daily violence in Karachi were abnormally high. Circumstantial evidence suggests that crimes such as targeted killings and kidnappings for ransom, as well as acts of terrorism, have come down. However, as the army chief pointed out, militant groups' sleeper cells are still believed to exist, while 'banned' groups continue to function. Moreover, while several ethnically and politically motivated militants have either been eliminated or are in custody, many may be simply lying low, waiting for an opportune time to resurface. And street crime continues to plague the life of Karachi's people with no area of the city safe from this menace. The Rangers-led operation has indeed achieved results, and it would be inadvisable to fritter away these gains. What is needed is a transition plan that allows the current militarised model of policing to eventually give way to the model of community policing. Karachi is far too complex to be policed in a bureaucratic, top-down fashion. Whether it is militants, criminal mafias or street criminals, a depoliticised, well-trained and professional police force — overseen by the city's elected officials — is the best long-term antidote to crime in Karachi. For this, dedicated and honest men and women must be inducted and retained in the force while elected officials — answerable to the people — must oversee the workings of the force in a transparent and democratic manner.

## Political prisoners

WHEN state forces acquire unbridled powers in pursuit of vaguely defined objectives, political victimisation is a given. Many among the power elite — including the prime minister himself — have been incarcerated on flimsy criminal charges in the past, which makes the claim on Friday by members of the treasury in the Senate that there are today no political prisoners in Pakistan, a stunningly glib misrepresentation of the facts. The actions by law-enforcement agencies on the pretext of tackling crime and by security forces fighting terrorism give the lie to such an assertion. Certainly, criminality and security threats must be addressed. However, for the exercise to be credible, there must be an impartial application of the law, and due process scrupulously followed to bring alleged offenders to book.

That, unfortunately, is not in evidence. Instead, on the pretext of law enforcement, mechanisms of accountability are being used to target only those individuals who belong to the opposition, or those whose beliefs and actions run counter to the



establishment's security objectives. That is not to say all of them are innocent. However, the charges against them are fashioned in such an arbitrary and ad hoc manner that the only possible conclusion one can draw is that the objective, rather than achieving the ends of justice, is to conduct a witch-hunt. To cite but two instances: former federal minister Asim Hussain's indictment came after nine months in custody, and had no mention of the original allegation of terror financing; and Dr Zafar Arif has been detained without charge, for the 'crime' of being affiliated with MQM-Altaf. Sometimes the process is even more opaque. Political activists across the country are finding themselves swept up in the drive against terrorism. Instead of being produced in a court of law, with prosecutable charges framed against them, they are often picked up summarily and detained in shadowy internment centres for indefinite periods of time. These are actions that will only exacerbate political differences and deepen the ethnic divide with terrible long-term consequences.

## Review of bill on forced conversions

IN the quest towards a progressive, tolerant and inclusive Pakistan, there will be setbacks and intense challenges. What will matter is the mettle and alacrity of those on the side of progress, tolerance and inclusivity. The PPP Sindh government initially showed much courage and enlightenment when it passed the Sindh Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill, 2015, in the provincial assembly last month and vigorously defended the outlawing of forcible conversion and marriage of anyone under the age of 18. The notorious practice is sadly widespread in areas of Sindh where non-Muslim populations reside. But now the PPP appears to be backtracking in the face of a vigorous challenge by the religious right. On Friday, the PPP announced that it will review the bill that has yet to be signed by the Sindh governor, a legal formality. Then on Saturday it was revealed that the Sindh Assembly members involved in the drafting and passage of the bill are under threat and the Assembly secretariat has sought police protection for 13 MPAs and a bureaucrat. Courage has given way to fear — a not unreasonable reaction perhaps, but one that the PPP leadership should have foreseen and been prepared for.

Reviewing a bill passed by an assembly is legal and, in particularly sensitive legislative domains, it may even be desirable. But the manner in which the religious right has campaigned against the bill and now seemingly forced the PPP into a rethink does not augur well for democracy. It has been apparent for a while that regressive forces and the religious right have been unhappy with the actions of elected governments and assemblies. From the protection of women against violence to madressah reforms to any administrative or legislative act that even hints at progressive social change, the



religious right has mobilised and attacked governments. The PPP and the Sindh government have been major targets of the regressive forces in the country. More determination but also a well-thought-out strategy is needed to fight back — something that appears to be missing in Sindh.

Rather than yield to the extremists' demands, Sindh should take pragmatic steps to defend and protect the imminent anti-forced conversion law. A committee of experienced legislators and religious scholars should be set up to examine the bill and explain both its welcome intent and its legal and societal acceptability. If any amendment to the bill does become necessary, it should not violate the core principles the legislation is built on, namely, that under-age marriage cannot be permitted under any circumstances and that forced conversions are a threat to a peaceful and cohesive society. The legislators under personal threat should be provided the protection they need. In the long term, however, the surest protection against violent and extremist elements in society is to systematically and persistently deny them the space they seek and have appropriated.

## Census decision, again

YET another agreement has been reached to conduct the population census in March 2017, and this time it is essential that no excuses are given for further delays. The Council of Common Interests has agreed that the exercise must be held in March, and the government has given its assent. It is only fair to assume that if there are any procedural or logistical hurdles in the way of the exercise, these have been discussed at the meeting and that the government's assent means that ways have been found to overcome them. Given the Supreme Court's orders, the government's own promise of holding the census during its term and now the agreement at the CCI meeting, there are no excuses left to not stick to the March deadline. This time, if further reasons are cited in an attempt to postpone the census, one would be justified in doubting the government's sincerity and commitment to holding the exercise.

The continuing delays have reached absurd proportions. By the time this government completes its term, it would have been two decades since the last census was held. This means our policy tools are now so woefully outdated that the state can credibly be said to be operating blind. Seat shares in parliament will be affected by the new headcount that the census will produce, but if this creates too many political stresses, it is easy enough to postpone the impact of the revised seat-sharing rather than postpone the exercise. Policymaking, from the NFC award to devising social protection schemes, hinges crucially on data produced from the census; continuing to use data that is almost

two decades old is clearly putting the wheels of the state on rails that may or may not exist. This is the last chance this government has to fulfil its commitment. Perhaps, given the winding down of active fighting on many of the major fronts in the war against terrorism, the conditions to hold a census are more favourable now than they have been for over a decade. But even as we return to some modicum of economic stability, and less tension on the political front, the government manages to pull out excuse after excuse for not carrying out the census. If there is yet another delay, we will know that it was never sincere about holding the exercise in the first place.

## Excesses in IHK

AN Indian rights group — the Concerned Citizens Collective — that includes individuals known for taking a position on the most dangerous issues in their country, came up with a strong statement on India-held Kashmir. Coming at the end of a four-day probe, during which group members met some 150 people of various ages and from all walks of life living in the troubled area, the statement read: “The high proportion of injuries on the face and above the waist demonstrate that there is official intention to shower hundreds of pellets on the agitated population, not to disperse but to kill or permanently disable it.” The group has demanded a ban on pellet guns, that have been decried globally but that still continue to be allowed by the Modi government bent on demonstrating its belligerence in defiance of all good sense and against historical evidence. This not only puts the administration in New Delhi among the ranks of the most oppressive governments anywhere, it also gives it some additional points for blatantly wanting to perpetrate its excesses in the most crude of ways.

The images from IHK are heartbreaking. Not a week passes without some part of the valley reporting some grave violation of the rights of the people and of the conventions and traditions that form the basis of interaction among human beings. The pictures, stories and indictments by local and foreign rights activists that escape the captive territory are piling up fast. They are all directed at a BJP set-up that has for several months now been determined to resort to violence to cripple a people and to end a popular movement. Unfortunately, New Delhi’s rage does not allow it to see the writing on the wall. It is clear that its tactics are only adding to the courage and commitment of the Kashmiris who are keen on extending and expanding the latest spell in their struggle for freedom that, at the end of the day, can only hurt the Modi government itself.

## Return of Zardari

THE curious case of a missing ex-president is set to become curiouser still. Eighteen months ago, in June 2015, former president and current PPP supremo, Asif Ali Zardari, left Pakistan, seemingly in a hurry after stirring up controversy with his remarks against a military leadership led by a wildly popular army chief.

No credible explanation was offered then by the PPP for Mr Zardari's exit from Pakistan and none has been offered since. But from self-imposed exile — occasionally in New York, sometimes in London and mostly in Dubai — Mr Zardari has continued to control his party.

The current chief minister of Sindh, Murad Ali Shah, was anointed in Dubai after the previous chief minister, the long-serving Qaim Ali Shah, was informed in Dubai that his services were no more required.

And while Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has made a show of reorganising the party in Punjab on his terms, there is little doubt that the elder Zardari is the real power in the party nationally.

With so many unanswered questions about his exit and self-imposed exile, it may be wishful thinking that Mr Zardari will answer questions about his plans for the PPP generally and the Sindh government in particular upon his return on Dec 23rd — a date confirmed by the PPP, but that may yet change, if history is any guide.

First, what is Mr Zardari's plan for Sindh? The devastation wrought by more than eight consecutive years of PPP rule in the province is only partly obscured by the fact that historically Sindh has been governed poorly and that perhaps over the past decade only Balochistan has been governed worse. The governance deficit in rural and urban Sindh is acute and unending. More troubling, the governance deficit is wilful. The removal of the inspector general of Sindh yesterday by Chief Minister Shah is a grim case in point — it both makes a mockery of the chief minister's promise of a fresh start and hints at the dark impulses and compromises that shape key decisions in Sindh.

Second, what does Mr Zardari intend to do about the PPP's drift towards political irrelevance in the country? The PPP's continuing electoral dominance in Sindh seems assured, but everywhere else where there are credible political alternatives, it has fallen behind its mainstream rivals. Mr Bhutto-Zardari has tried to project a party of the next generation, but his

leadership thus far has been characterised by whimsicality and uncertainty.

Few outside the party can take him seriously when few inside the party believe he has the power to take independent decisions. External factors may have played a role, but it remains true that Mr Zardari has presided over a great decline in the PPP's electoral fortunes, to the extent of the party being reduced to a regional rump in Sindh.

Merely returning to Pakistan will not fix much for Mr Zardari or the PPP.

## Indian films are back

INDIAN films are back in Pakistani cinemas. The exhibitors have decided that it is about time they lifted the 'ban' they had angrily imposed in late September, in response to Indian producers stopping Pakistanis from working in film ventures in India at a time when tensions between the two neighbours were very high. Scores of jobs were reportedly lost because of the ban, and the cinemas lost life-sustaining revenue. The ban was opposed then, just as its lifting has now led to objections from some well-known names associated with the film industry. Whereas prominent names such as Javed Sheikh and Shehzad Rafique have reason to welcome the resumption of Indian movies, filmmaker Syed Noor has opposed it, on the grounds that the move is commercial — this is hardly a revelation about a form of entertainment that thrives on money. He also said the move was "devoid of ... patriotism" bringing in an old debate that the pro and anti groups have engaged in for a long time. The debate raged most in the run-up to the 2008 return of Indian films to Pakistan. That marked the beginning of a spell which later raised hopes about the revival of the cinema-watching culture here. It was then argued that this country needed to resurrect the old trend where people turned up frequently at cinema houses. Once that happened, in time those who were watching foreign productions would eventually be inclined towards patronising cinematic ventures by local producers as well. Then as now, the soundest way of showing one's love for what was local was by coming up with quality that could rival the best not only from across the border but from anywhere in the world.

Away from the unending rivalry and border tensions, and away from politics, the hoped-for Pakistani film quality that could attract cinemagoers has yet to materialise. Quite clearly, this quality cannot be acquired in forced isolation by producers who are shy of competition. There have been many Pakistani films in the last few years but the facts of business tell us that the local industry cannot quite sustain cinemas, exhibitors, etc on its own. Simply put, if the show has to go on, cinema houses must screen films that

have an audience. The Pakistani audience has been 'exposed'. It will only see what it wants to see. There is no running away from this market rule in this day and age.

## Goat to the rescue

IT was not a sight to inspire confidence in either man or beast. But to some in our national airline, perhaps cold, hard science is no substitute for good old-fashioned superstition.

Thus it was that a struggling black goat was held down on the tarmac and sacrificed at the foot of an ATR-42 after the aircraft was cleared to take off from the Islamabad airport on Sunday. The plane later left for Multan, the first ATR-42 to be pressed into service after the crash of PK661 on Dec 7.

The aircraft operating that ill-fated flight was also an ATR-42, after which the entire fleet of PIA's twin-engine turboprops was grounded so it could be put through shakedown tests to check for airworthiness. No doubt PIA thought that passengers on the flight to Multan heaved a sigh of relief: after all, they had witnessed with their very own eyes the ultimate assurance against disaster.

PIA has come in for some vociferous criticism in the wake of the PK661 crash. Aside from the inevitable human tragedy, the disaster once again highlighted the problems that have for long bedevilled our national flag carrier. PIA's spotty record in terms of service, punctuality and safety has also been the butt of much humour, and the sacrificial goat will certainly provide rich pickings for many a wit, with some asking — rightly so — for black sheep in PIA to be sacrificed instead.

However, it is disheartening to see that an airline already suffering unrelentingly negative press internationally could proceed to shoot itself in the foot in such a spectacular manner. Superstitious rituals have no place in a field where technological excellence is the key to success.

That is not to say, of course, that passengers are foolish to seek solace in prayer when they fly, but when an airline itself resorts to animal sacrifice as the aircraft is about to take to the air, it is enough to strike terror into the hearts of potential passengers.

## Regulatory capture?

A CONVERSATION has kicked off in the country following the government's move to place five key regulators under the administrative control of their respective line ministries. Many are drawing the obvious conclusion from this step — that the government is moving to capture the regulators and influence the decisions they make. Whether or not this actually happens will take time to determine, but for now, it is enough to underscore that the laws that ensure the autonomy of the regulators have not been touched by the move. If the administrative powers that are being transferred could provide leverage over the regulator's functioning and decision-making, common sense tells us that they would have been used to that effect when they were wielded by the Cabinet Division. Yet there is little to no evidence that this happened.

Having said that, much of the alarm that has been raised in the wake of the decision is justified. Take the case of Nepra, one of the five regulators. This is the statutory body that decides tariffs for all power projects, approves their cost structures, and determines which elements of their costs can be considered a 'pass-through item', meaning which expenditures can be passed on to power consumers and which must be borne by the state or the project sponsors. These are enormously delicate decisions, and the smallest adjustment can result in the burden of large liabilities moving from one set of shoulders to another. As such, these powers must never be entrusted to the government of the day alone since its incentives may not always align with the interest of the consumers. A separate statutory body, empowered to make its decisions autonomously through proper transparency safeguards, is required to wield such powers. We already know that the centre has been chafing at Nepra for its refusal to grant certain tariff escalations in some projects, as well as the proportion of transmission and distribution losses it allows government-run distribution companies to pass on to consumers.

Given the enormous stakes that regulators play with, from the auction of frequency spectrum to deciding tariffs and approving costs and margins, there is understandably great concern at what the present move means and how it will play out in reality. If the move helps increase the ministries' leverage over the regulators, a little bit like how a few years ago the Competition Commission of Pakistan was restrained from pursuing powerful lobbies by being starved of its resources, then there is justification for the outpouring of concern. The government is arguing that the decision is actually impact-neutral, but given other realities in play, such as the ongoing tension between Nepra and its line ministry or the move to amend the Nepra Act, there is justifiable concern that an effort may be afoot to clip the powers of the regulators.

## Trauma of loss

ONE can scarcely imagine the pain and grief of 14-year-old Hasina Gul, the sole surviving member of a family from Chitral that perished in the PIA plane crash on Dec 7. The devastating loss of her parents and four siblings has caused her to suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. The condition, as suggested by its name, affects those who have experienced trauma at close hand; it leaves them with nightmares and flashbacks which can be debilitating in severity. According to a report in this paper yesterday, a medical board constituted at the Chitral DHQ Hospital which arrived at the diagnosis of PTSD after Hasina was taken there complaining of anxiety and pain, has referred her to a psychiatrist in Islamabad. We can only hope the young girl will receive sustained and long-term counselling to put her life back together again. The only silver lining, if it can be called that, in her tragedy is that her need for psychological help is acknowledged and recognised.

There are, however, countless others in Pakistan who never manage to access the psychotherapy services they so desperately need. Over the past decade or so, this country has been ravaged by natural disasters, armed conflict and terrorism. Millions have been displaced, forced to live in overcrowded, squalid camps for years, while others have had to contend with life-altering injuries or the loss of near and dear ones as a result of violence.

Long after the news fades from television screens, the dead are buried and the physical wounds have healed, the survivors' mental trauma endures. Left unaddressed, the impact on their psychological health leads to chronic — sometimes psychosomatic — problems that exacerbate their sense of despair and set in motion a crippling vicious cycle. That in turn affects productivity and overall economic indicators. Unfortunately, there is little realisation on the state's part that this is a critical component of healthcare towards which energies must be directed and resources allocated. Let alone a substantive mental health infrastructure, which largely exists at the tertiary-care level in the form of academic psychiatric departments, or specialised counselling, Pakistan does not even have a comprehensive mental health policy. There are only some 400 psychiatrists to serve the entire population, of which it is estimated that 20pc may be suffering from mental disorders. The government cannot afford to treat mental healthcare as a luxury. It is the bedrock of a productive society.



## Musharraf's remarks

IF past candour is any indication, the sensational new disclosures by retired army chief and former military ruler Gen Pervez Musharraf may well be true. That the remarks need at the very least to be responded to by the principals dragged into the fresh controversy is clear. In claiming that former army chief retired Gen Raheel Sharif leaned on the superior judiciary to remove Mr Musharraf from the Exit Control List and thus allow him to leave Pakistan, the former military ruler first alleged that it was the PML-N government that had put pressure on the courts in a bid to punish Mr Musharraf. While it is entirely likely that the PML-N's failed attempt to have Mr Musharraf convicted for treason for the 1999 coup was politically motivated, it is not apparent what leverage a political government could have over the superior judiciary in the particular matter. Certainly, political governments have tried to pressure the courts in the past, including, notoriously, the previous PML-N government, and the superior judiciary has reason to punish Mr Musharraf for the November 2007 Emergency, but the latest allegations by Mr Musharraf are more revealing about the institution he belonged to and its leadership.

For one, it shows the casual disregard Mr Musharraf has for the rule of law and institutional integrity. To make such public claims is to show contempt for other institutions of the state and be oblivious to the changed — improved — national dynamics in this era of democratic consolidation. It is quite apparent from Mr Musharraf's statements that he was not seeking to dilate on institutional weaknesses in order to help strengthen them; his were the words of a former dictator used to speaking his mind, regardless of the consequences, and not yet adjusted to the reality that the country he illegally ruled has moved on. For another, surely Raheel Sharif has to come forward and clarify Mr Musharraf's allegations. Mr Sharif was army chief until very recently; he is still in the public domain and his record in office needs to be explained where necessary.

## NAB's plea bargain

IF the National Accountability Bureau believes it has done a good job by recovering over Rs3bn from a former finance secretary of Balochistan and a co-accused under a plea bargain agreement it should think again. When he was caught, Mr Raisani was found with more than Rs730m in his home in cash. He had no explanation for what these funds were intended for and why they were in his home. Moreover, he was known to have transferred vast sums abroad, most probably using the hundi and hawala channels for the purpose. At the time, NAB accused him of involvement in corruption

topping Rs40bn. Today, we discover that all it has been able to recover from him are two automobiles and a number of houses, meaning all that NAB could find in the case, after holding the man since May, was what was visible to the naked eye: cash, gold, vehicles, houses. Nothing has come to light about the activity the former official was involved in, and now, as a result of the plea bargain, he walks away free with a clean slate.

This is truly shameful. Are the investigative powers of NAB so rudimentary that the institution was unable to learn anything about the rackets in which Mr Raisani was involved? Nothing at all about who else was involved with him? Nothing whatsoever about the illegal channels for the transfer of the funds, or how many funds were sent abroad? If one can engage in corruption so brazenly and walk away scot-free simply after surrendering a few assets that are worth less than a twentieth of what one is accused of embezzling, then what sort of accountability is NAB really in the business of?

The chairman's message that all of this money would be returned to the government of Balochistan sounds almost farcical next to the questions that arise from the plea deal. The people of Balochistan were undoubtedly expecting more than a few billion rupees. The message that NAB has sent to all would-be corrupt officials is simple: keep a little bit of what you steal aside so that you can buy your reputation and freedom back once caught. The Supreme Court has rightly questioned the powers of plea bargaining under which NAB routinely releases people after recovering paltry amounts from them, and Mr Raisani's case along with that of his co-accused, who is supposedly a front man for a former adviser to the Balochistan chief minister, only strengthens the argument that these powers ought to be taken away from the bureau. Accountability does not mean simply handing over a wad of cash in order to walk away from one's crimes. It means ensuring that such crimes are exposed and the loopholes plugged to prevent similar wrongdoing. If NAB cannot ensure that, perhaps in his next news conference the chairman should explain why the bureau should continue to exist at all.

## PM's militancy denial

WHEN Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif or members of his government speak about terrorism- and militancy-related issues, it often only serves to expose their lack of understanding of the matter or their wilful denial of the facts, or perhaps both. Addressing parliamentarians in Sarajevo, Mr Sharif claimed not only that all sanctuaries of Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban have been eliminated in Pakistan, but that there is no presence of the militant Islamic State group either in the country. He went on to

claim credit, as has become his practice, for the multiple successes in the fight against militancy. Perhaps on all counts, Mr Sharif is wrong. To begin with, while military operations have cleared Fata of the strongholds of the banned TTP, the steady pace of militant attacks in tribal areas and the provinces suggests the continued existence of terrorist hideouts in the country. Indeed, that is the reason the military leadership has demanded greater action in Punjab — a vast jihadist infrastructure there operates undamaged and in plain sight. On Al Qaeda, while there have been great successes and the global attraction of its so-called brand has diminished, can the prime minister or indeed any official here realistically claim that every last strand of the group in Pakistan has been found and eliminated? What is the likelihood that Ayman al-Zawahiri is hiding on Pakistani soil?

It is, however, Mr Sharif's careless words about IS that rankle most. For several reasons, IS has not emerged yet as the biggest militancy threat in the country — but it could if the state is not vigilant. In neighbouring Afghanistan, its growth is often linked to the mass arrival of the TTP and anti-Pakistan militants in eastern Afghanistan. While there are certainly domestic reasons for the expansion of IS in Afghanistan, the very existence of a Pak-Afghan nexus should be alarming for Pakistan. Moreover, in recent times, several of the biggest terrorist attacks in Pakistan have been claimed by IS. While those claims have been contested, the existence of IS propaganda cells here cannot be denied. So while Mr Sharif may be right that several successes have been won in the fight against militancy, the principal lesson has been that success is hard-fought and hard-earned. Politicians claiming credit for things they have not done is routine. But in the fight against militancy, it is the continuing lack of seriousness of the political leadership that is alarming.

## Mystery virus

IN any population that suffers from a general lack of awareness, there is always a danger of situations being misunderstood. Unfortunately, this may be the case in what is being perceived by many, especially amongst the poorer sections of society, as a wave of the virus chikungunya sweeping across Karachi. The figures are very high: over recent days, thousands of patients complaining of high-grade fever and body aches, the prime symptoms of chikungunya — a word from the African Makonde language that refers to the crippling arthritic effects of this virus — have visited hospitals from parts of Malir. However, the reality might not be as grim as it sounds: as reported on Thursday, a team of public health specialists investigating the matter has identified only 127 cases as that of 'suspected chikungunya', with the medical superintendent of the Sindh Government Qatar General Hospital telling the media that most patients were suffering

from a viral infection other than chikungunya. According to another expert, who is leading the medical investigation team spearheaded by the government, hospitals had also erroneously reported cases of malaria and other seasonal viral fevers as chikungunya.

Samples of the genetic strain of the virus have been sent off to various laboratories in Pakistan and abroad, and until the results are received it cannot be said for sure whether or not the virus is indeed chikungunya. However, the current situation ought to be taken as a reminder that the campaign to spread awareness about the dangers of mosquito-borne illnesses must be promoted on an urgent basis, just as the city's hygiene and sewage realities should be drastically improved — as promised so often by those in the corridors of power. The populace in Karachi, as well as across the country, has not yet been completely made safe against dengue, another, more dangerous, mosquito-borne illness. If another similarly transmitted virus is now in the news, clearly the cleanliness and fumigation campaigns are not working as effectively as they should be.

## Palestine resolution

WHILE many in the Arab world are prone to mouthing support for the Palestinian cause, over the decades it has been witnessed that when the time comes for solid action, pressure from certain quarters is difficult to resist. This was the case in the UN Security Council when a resolution calling for a halt to illegal Israeli settlement activity on occupied Palestinian land was delayed at Egypt's 'request', before it was finally passed on Friday. Cairo's request reportedly came as the Arab power wanted more time for 'consultations' on the matter. However, a call from US president-elect Donald Trump to Egyptian strongman Abdel Fattah al-Sisi may have been instrumental in Cairo's decision, before the resolution was eventually passed with an American abstention. While the US has always preferred to look at the Arab-Israeli dispute through the Israeli lens, all indications are that under the Trump administration, any pretence of American neutrality will be jettisoned in a gesture of naked partisanship in Tel Aviv's favour. The case of the UN resolution may simply be a taste of things to come, as Mr Trump's America decides to throw its weight around in Israel's support.

Israeli settlements are considered illegal by the world community, apart from, of course, Tel Aviv and its far-right supporters in the US. Mr Trump should avoid further emboldening hardliners in Israel by underwriting these blatantly illegal land grabs. Moreover, the American president-elect's rhetoric about recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital is inflammatory. We hope this reckless plan is abandoned once Mr

Trump moves into the White House. As it is, the Middle East is in a state of tumult. If Israel — backed by a new Republican administration in Washington — continues gobbling up Palestinian land and denying the Arabs their rights, a new intifada cannot be ruled out. While it may look unlikely at the moment, Mr Trump should attempt to address the Palestinian question fairly and justly, given that this forsaken nation has been denied justice for nearly seven decades.

## Baldia fire confession

COLD-blooded mass murder — even by the standards of violence to which Karachi has been subjected over the last few decades, it is a chilling confession, provided, of course, it was not made under duress. What makes it even more horrific is that the man who has admitted to the crime belongs to a major political party that has been a coalition partner on both national and provincial levels. Abdul Rehman, alias Bhola, a former MQM sector in-charge, confessed on Thursday before a judicial magistrate to his involvement in the Baldia factory fire case, claiming he acted on instructions from his political masters. According to the suspect, he, along with an accomplice, set the multistorey garment factory ablaze on Sept 11, 2012, at the behest of the then MQM Tanzeemi Committee chief Hammad Siddiqui because the factory owners had refused to pay the protection money demanded. Over 250 factory workers were burned alive in the inferno, the deadliest industrial disaster in Pakistan's history.

Abdul Rehman's confession blows the lid off the workings of the MQM, down to the very sector and unit level upon which the party was organised in its areas of influence. The MQM used fear and intimidation to enforce its vice-like grip over Pakistan's largest city; that much was well known. But the latest revelation illustrates the ruthlessness with which it pursued its objectives, and the impunity that it believed it enjoyed to achieve them. If party leaders could go so far as to order arson at a place where it was obvious that hundreds would die an agonising death trapped behind locked doors, one may well ask: what else were they capable of? The venality of the MQM's militant element is no longer in any doubt. They must be brought to book, and every allegation against them and their partners in crime investigated.

However, the truth is that the political machinations of the establishment — not to mention the competing agendas of the different groups that comprise it — and its penchant for playing off one 'asset' against another, have much to do with the MQM's rise, its dominance and subsequent factionalisation. Now that the ghastly details of the party's criminal acts are coming to light, impartiality and due process are all the more critical: without them, even compelling evidence can be presented by the perpetrators

as political victimisation. Finally, this is also an hour of reckoning for those who have been affiliated with the MQM for decades and who still aspire to represent the people of this country. Certainly, they have distanced themselves from party supremo Altaf Hussain — whether tacitly or otherwise, but undeniably for opportunistic reasons — since the crackdown against the MQM began. However, that does not absolve them of responsibility for the crimes committed by the MQM. Instead of more lies and prevarication, the people of Karachi, in particular, deserve an apology.

## Punjab LG polls

THE PML-N's selection of local council heads in Punjab is not unusual at all. It has gone for reliable people who are expected to stamp their authority on the proceedings not only because they are PML-N nominees but also because they are considered powerful in their areas in their own right. There are very few exceptions to the 'rule' that entails assigning local councils to scions of well-known political families, in many cases close relatives of MNAs or MPAs. Among the lucky ones, many are known to possess the talent for arm-twisting or taking other stern action to implement discipline in the ranks and even outside. Reports from some districts, such as Faisalabad, indicate that those who could flaunt close ties with Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif were able to do better in a fight which was more often than not a contest between various PML-N groups. The theory that gave an edge to contestants claiming to have been blessed by Mr Sharif sought to remind these grass-roots representatives of a simple fact — that ultimately they will be dependent on the allocations and patronage of the Punjab government. The same theory is said to have been used to neutralise whatever little success the PTI, and to a much lesser extent the PPP, had in the earlier phase of the local government polls. There were desertions from the PTI in some places and the PPP saw an upset defeat in the vote for the Rahim Yar Khan district council chairman.

These results show that the hugely present PML-N has just gotten bigger in Punjab. The party faces little opposition in the provincial assembly and there are, today, not too many challenges to it on the streets. The completion of the local government formality a year and half before the scheduled general election is a boon for a party with long experience of how to operate and hold on to power. But there are so many other dimensions apart from the fact that the opposition parties confront a huge challenge. For instance, despite it being a one-party show at the local level all across Punjab, there are, inevitably, expectations that these councils will help Lahore rationalise its priorities and bring in a just order to the 'Shahbaz-speed' development. An overwhelming majority of the local council heads and members do belong to the PML-N, but they must all try and find ways to fight for the people they represent.



## Madressah reform

THE government has been going around in circles where madressah reform is concerned. Its weak attempt at getting these religious schools to agree to uniform control by the state bore little fruit, and the emphasis is now on another old favourite of the authorities: curriculum reform. On Friday, the federal minister for religious affairs stressed the necessity of educational standards at seminaries matching mainstream trends, but there has been little discussion on how to implement such recommendations. This, more or less, sums up the government's indecision regarding the subject of madressahs.

It is a case of officials not wanting to take the risks entailed. Like the Musharraf regime and the PPP set-up before it, the PML-N government has been reluctant, to the point of being afraid, to deal with the problem. Even though the NAP consensus was expected to empower the PML-N to undertake reform, the campaign to do so has been helter-skelter. There have been several slogans and words about the need to upgrade the seminaries and about the basic principle of streamlining the sources of their finances and ideally creating a system where the state itself allocates the funds. And the talk about curriculum reform has been unending. Nevertheless, there has been growing realisation in this debate that madressahs are not simply the result of the failure of the 'secular' education system. Growing conservatism in society is a big factor in the mushrooming of madressahs across the country.

There have been so many assessments of the reasons why the reform campaign has failed to take off. Let us add to it a fundamental assertion. Pakistan is still some distance away from understanding a basic fact about these religious schools. The country seeks to deal with — albeit half-heartedly — the seminaries through the five boards that represent five schools of thought or sects in Islam. What is still not accepted is that underneath there are so many divisions. There are a large number of seminaries that work as satellites without any outside control and aided by their own sources of finances. They consider themselves as not answerable administratively to the board they might be linked to in theory on the basis of schools or sects. This is against the old norm where seminaries belonging to a school of thought or sect would be under the administrative influence of an order or individual. Authorities wanting change will have to find a direct route to the madressah down the road before it can be brought under a chain of command. As far as the question of sources of funding for the madressahs is concerned, there is no group more capable of keeping an eye on this and on seminaries in general than the state's own people at the grass roots: the local governments.



## Stock exchange sale

At long last the process of making Pakistan's stock exchange independent of the powers of the broker community is reaching fruition. With the sale of a strategic stake in the newly created Pakistan Stock Exchange to a Chinese consortium, the country's capital markets could well receive the boost that the fundamentals merit. A lot depends on how well the new investor can manage the peculiarities of the PSX. There are grounds to be confident though, since the consortium brings plenty of experience to the position, and the stock market here is not particularly complex or diversified. That gives the new investor much room to introduce and prioritise new products and deepen trading. A futures market would be one related development.

With the power of the broker community dwindling further now, the front-line regulator should also take a more aggressive stance with regard to malpractices and the enforcement of rules. Many companies are habitually late in filing their financial results but suffer little to no penalty. Also, there have been a number of cases where bogus companies have been allowed to float an IPO. Many other companies that have ceased to exist continue being traded. And, of course, that ultimate bugbear of the stock market — manipulative trading, where share prices are artificially inflated through pump-and-dump schemes. There is a wide area where the PSX needs to strengthen its performance before the real potential of the country's stock market can be unlocked. With the arrival of the new consortium, we will now see if the original vision behind the road to demutualisation will bring in the benefits that it promised at the outset. In addition to the stock market, the commodity exchange needs to be deepened as well. Considering Pakistan is a large wheat-growing country, there is massive scope for a commodity exchange to flourish. Thus far, widespread rackets in the agricultural sector have pre-empted this, and the commodity sector remains largely informal as a result. The new consortium in the stock exchange has its work cut out for it, but if it takes its responsibilities seriously and succeeds in curbing the kinds of practices that have given the stock market a bad name in the past, it could yet deliver a measurable boost to the economy. Perhaps we might actually see the day when the stock is used to raise capital for investment as well.

## Xmas peace train

CHRISTMAS cheer got a head start this year. The Christmas Peace Train, launched by the government as a gesture of solidarity with Pakistani Christians to mark their most important religious festival, departed from Islamabad on Thursday on a 15-day countrywide tour. It arrived in Peshawar the next day carrying some 60 Christians, and is scheduled to reach Karachi on Dec 31. The festive carriages are painted red and decorated with Christmas imagery and there is, of course, the obligatory Santa on board. Described as the first train launched in South Asia as a part of Christmas celebrations, the initiative is a joint venture of the railways and human rights ministries. During its journey to Karachi, the train will stop at various places in Punjab and Sindh and offer a chance for locals to interact with the passengers.

In a country with a far from stellar record of religious tolerance, the Christmas Peace Train is deserving of appreciation. Ironically, the considerable police presence around the train, as seen in the media, itself illustrates why such an initiative is welcome — and also, despite Pakistan's war against extremism, that it is too early to claim that minority communities here can practise their faith freely without fear of reprisal. For far too long, as religious extremism increased, those belonging to minority faiths have found themselves with their backs to the wall and a state unwilling or unable to do its duty to protect their lives and property. As everyone knows only too well, the state's policy of appeasing dangerously fanatical tendencies and extremist groups has cost this country dearly — both in terms of the blood of innocents and Pakistan's international image. The Christmas Peace Train thus represents a much-needed celebration of inclusivity and pluralism. However, with reports that the Sindh legislature may amend the recently passed law against forced conversions, and with blasphemy prisoners such as Asia Bibi who belong to minority faiths and are shown no mercy, is this anything more than window dressing?

## Protection against libel and slander

BALANCING freedom of speech, especially the freedom of the media to report and comment on public figures and issues of public importance, against the right of individuals to be protected against libel and slander is a delicate art. In all cases, the public interest should be given precedence over unreasonable personal protection of information and reputation. This newspaper is a front-line and consistent defender of media freedom, and is aware of the potential chilling effect on the media of laws that can be misused or implemented overzealously. The public interest to have unfettered

access to information provided by a resolute media should be robustly protected at all times. Nevertheless, there are clearly identifiable cases of flagrant abuse by sections of the media — of libel and slander and unacceptable harm to reputations — that should not go unexamined.

The successful legal action taken by the Jang/Geo group against the ARY group is an example of where courts and the legal process can have a sensible and balancing effect against wild and dangerous accusations masquerading as news and fair comment. Yet, litigating local disputes in foreign courts cannot be a sensible solution to the problem. Foreign litigation can be very costly to pursue and it depends on whether the media outlet in question has a presence on foreign soil or in the jurisdiction of a foreign court — something few Pakistani media houses do. Moreover, legal systems cater to local factors — where the UK has set its libel and slander bar is very different from the US, for example. What Pakistan needs is a Pakistani law — for individuals and organisations to challenge in court instances of what they believe to be libel or slander against them and for the courts to enforce a sensibly drafted law that protects free speech and media freedom while allowing for the punishment of those acting with wilful malice. The problem is not limited to the electronic media — many print publications have erred, deliberately and otherwise, over the decades — but it is on TV where the most egregious violations of basic journalistic norms and standards are now routinely found.

With the regulatory capture of Pemra by the state — both the political government and the military establishment use the regulator for narrow political and messaging purposes — individuals who believe they have been libelled or slandered in the media have no forum in which to seek redress. A new libel and slander law, if drawn up with care and implemented sparingly and in clear cases by the judiciary, could help right the imbalance that exists at present. A free and emboldened media is vital to a democratic state and society. But the media exists to inform, not to defame — where appropriate, individuals should have recourse to a reasonable law. A sensible new libel law could help nudge the media back to its public-interest roots.

## Trump's nuclear tweets

GOING by his tweets, it seems that Donald Trump's presidency will be every bit as dangerous and erratic as feared. Some days ago, the president-elect tweeted that America "must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes". Even a schoolchild knows that nuclear weapons are no joking matter, and the diplomacy around them is so delicate and cerebral that it is a specialised field unto itself. For a president-elect to make declarations of this sort via Twitter shows a breathtaking disregard for the seriousness of the issue. All presidents since John F. Kennedy have realised the importance of shrinking nuclear arsenals, with the possible exception of George Bush Jr who eschewed arms control, but whose efforts to produce a new generation of smaller, 'usable' nuclear weapons that he called 'bunker busters' was stymied by Congress.

Now comes Mr Trump, with all the subtlety of a bull in a china shop, to make this bombastic announcement out of the blue on a social media platform, garnering more than 18,000 retweets and 66,000 'likes' within a day. The recklessness of the tweet, as well as the absurd idea that it propounds, points to the very real dangers that we will see in a Trump presidency. For one, what does "greatly strengthen" mean in this context? We know that in an hour-long briefing on nuclear weapons given to him during the presidential campaign, he asked multiple times why America possesses these weapons but does not use them. That was worrying because it hinted that he would actually consider crossing that red line that was marked in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Now we have the tweet that conveys to the entire world that his thinking on the subject is just as dangerous as was indicated by his line of questioning during that briefing. Nuclear weapons are quite possibly the most serious subject there can be in the world of international relations, and if an incoming president is going to be so cavalier about them, there are genuine grounds to be worried. Such thinking will only encourage further nuclear proliferation as more countries come to believe that the best way to protect themselves against the capricious and arbitrary exercise of force is to possess a nuclear deterrent. Those around Mr Trump should counsel restraint before it is too late.

## Parental abduction

AN increasingly interconnected world throws up new challenges. One of these is parental abduction: with marital unions that cut across continents and nationalities, in recent decades the incidence has increased of one parent removing a child from his or her place of habitual residence and taking him or her across national borders. This puts the child out of reach of the other parent, as well as the court system where a custody dispute may be under way. The practice can unleash profoundly detrimental consequences, yet until recently it has remained a matter that Pakistan has largely shied away from. The problem was recognised as far back as 1983, when dozens of countries ratified the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction; Pakistan only addressed the matter piecemeal in 2003, when the superior judiciary of Pakistan and the UK signed the UK-Pakistan Protocol on Children Matters. This is a judicial understanding that aims to secure the return of an abducted child to the country (and court system) where they normally reside, without regard to the nationality, culture or religion of the parents. Useful as this instrument has proved, its benefits could obviously not be accessed by parents with connections to countries other than the UK.

Thankfully, this glaring gap has now been filled. As announced by the Pakistan embassy in Washington recently, on Dec 15 President Mamnoon Hussain signed the instrument of accession for the Hague convention, becoming the 96th country to do so. This paves the way for this country's formal entry into the group. Having received nearly unanimous approval from the ministries of law, finance, information and foreign affairs, the convention has also been endorsed by the relevant ministries of the provincial governments, and is now to go before the federal cabinet. It is to be hoped that this endorsement occurs in a timely fashion, so that help can be provided to the many parents and children who are aggrieved on account of transnational parental abduction.

## Judiciary's challenge

THE incoming chief justice of Pakistan, Saqib Nisar, has asserted that the superior judiciary will not yield to outside pressure in making its decisions and that his tenure as chief justice will be marked by scrupulous adherence to the letter and spirit of the law and rules governing the judiciary. While there are expectations that Justice Nisar's track record as a judge so far may indeed lead to a rededicating of the superior judiciary to the cause of genuine and efficient justice, two other factors ought to be kept in mind. First, the very fact that Justice Nisar felt compelled to make such statements to a gathering of lawyers suggests that the recent track record of the superior judiciary has

been below the high standards it must set itself. Be it the Panama hearings, widely hailed at first and then quickly bogged down in multiple hearings without end, or the validation of military courts or dismissal of petitions against death sentences handed down by those courts or a sense that the superior judiciary has not initiated substantial reforms regarding a vast backlog of pending cases, there is a real sense of a judiciary adrift.

If Justice Nisar was suggesting that his tenure will be marked by an awareness of problems and a resolve to address them, then the incoming chief justice should also be aware of another issue: each one of his predecessors made similar promises at the outset of and during his tenure as chief justice — but to seemingly no avail. If anything, the problems have mounted to the point that attacks against the judiciary and senior judges have become explicitly open — an unfortunate state of affairs and a trend that accelerated under the latter part of Chief Justice Anwar Jamali's tenure. Indeed, the first challenge for Justice Nisar after he takes the oath of chief justice will be to address the public criticism against the judiciary. This newspaper is a consistent defender of free speech and the right to robustly criticise institutions of the state and public officials. Yet, making the superior judiciary controversial for political ends — as has sadly happened in recent days — risks tarnishing the entire court and the full array of its power and responsibilities.

Ultimately, Justice Nisar's tenure will be shaped by basic judicial reference points. How much of the backlog will be cleared? What is the quality of the judgements handed down? How will the court navigate the inevitable forays at the intersection of law and politics? Immediately, Justice Nisar will have an important task: with the activation of the sunset clause in the 21st Amendment, military courts created under the law will stand disbanded. The critical challenge for the criminal justice system will be to demonstrate that the civilian sphere is capable of both drafting sensible reforms and improving the existing system. Hopefully, the next chief justice knows the challenges well.

## **NFC: one step back**

HAVING failed to mobilise new revenue lines or broaden the base of taxation, the federal government is now reduced to knocking on doors it has no business to be knocking on. The finance minister is now telling his provincial counterparts that the size of the federal divisible pool will need to be reduced by as much as 8pc in order to meet other expenses such as CPEC security and development spending in sub-federating regions like Azad Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan and Fata. The provinces are correct to resist this move, although it is regrettable that some options exist through which the federal



government can unilaterally undertake this step, such as by re-designating certain taxes as non-tax revenue lines, thereby removing them from the federal divisible pool. Given the strength of the imperative that the finance minister has put behind this demand, it seems likely that he will resort to such unilateral moves, especially given that he may not be able to obtain the consent of two crucial provinces: Sindh and KP. This will be a regressive step and will open the door to rolling back the NFC award of 2009, and must be resisted.

To support its move, the federal government is claiming that provincial governments have failed to utilise the resources given to them under the last NFC award to improve social service delivery despite the passage of seven years. The argument by itself is fine, but it cannot be used to disentitle the provinces of their share under the NFC award. That entitlement exists independent of how the funds are utilised, and if there is concern at how the provinces are spending their incremental resources, then there is a case for strengthening centre-province coordination on service delivery and social protection, and not for rolling back the award. It is important to bear in mind that the last NFC award was not simply about resources. It was about correcting a long-standing defect in the federation that had left the provinces weak and starved in the effort to meet the revenue requirements of the centre. The finance minister should understand that his need of the day for revenue is less important than the structure of the state, and he should seek to meet his requirements through a more vigorous revenue effort rather than squeezing those already within the tax net, or disentitling the provinces of what has always been their rightful due.

## Fishermen's plight

AS the African proverb goes, when two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled. To be more specific, in this case it is the poor fishermen that get netted when Pakistan and India want to flex their muscles. So it was heartening that Pakistan released 220 Indian fishermen from prison in Karachi on Sunday, enabling them to return home and start the new year reunited with their families. The men had spent more than a year behind bars on the charge of trespassing on Pakistani waters. As per a report in this paper yesterday, all of them said their boats had drifted off course while they were asleep and they had been arrested by the coastguard in the middle of the night. For at least one of them, incarceration in Pakistan for the same crime was a repeat experience.

While the India-Pakistan relationship is at present going through a particularly fraught period, thanks largely to unreasoning hostility from the Modi government, the plight of

fishermen from both sides being arrested for maritime trespassing is a long-standing, chronic issue. It need not, and should not, be so. This is an indigent community whose detention behind bars causes enormous suffering to their dependents back home. Their incarceration will not compel the other side to change their policies on matters that bedevil their relationship; it in fact serves no purpose other than petty point-scoring. Groups of fishermen, sometimes after having spent years in cross-border prisons, are periodically released from time to time in 'goodwill gestures', only for the same exercise to be repeated over and over again. At a recent news conference in Karachi on the issue, speakers highlighted how the arrest and detention of fishermen by maritime security agencies violates international law and contravenes the victims' legal rights. For example, consular access is granted only after they serve their sentences; some have even died in prison. It is high time India and Pakistan tackled the issue of maritime boundary demarcation.

## More of the same in Balochistan?

A trip to Quetta has yielded a familiar set of talking points on Balochistan. On Monday, army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa in a series of public events reiterated the mantra of strength and development in Balochistan — and held out a perfunctory olive branch to Baloch separatists while warning the presumably foreign enemies of the country who seek to destabilise the province.

By itself, the message was seemingly comprehensive and coherent. But in the context of a long-simmering, low-level insurgency and a province wracked by all manner of other violence, an opportunity to expedite the peace process in the province has been missed. If anything, the familiar, military line on the province gives the impression that it is likely to be business as usual in Balochistan.

Earlier, when Baloch activist Wahid Baloch was released soon after Gen Bajwa assumed office, it had appeared there was a possibility of a fresh look at the Balochistan policy. But thanks to the centre's inability to come up with a political solution, Gen Bajwa's comments suggest that the Baloch issue is still being seen from a security perspective.

Yet, for all the attempts to try and reinforce the status quo in the restive province, it has been clear for many years that a more-of-the-same approach will not work. At its core, the Baloch insurgency is a political issue.

While entwined with developmental concerns, the imposition by the federation and the military establishment of a top-down solution to localised problems will simply not work.

And although Balochistan does have an elected assembly comprising the province's political mainstream, Baloch dissidents and their leaders can only be wooed if the elected representatives are given real autonomy and negotiating powers.

The continuing failure to include Baloch dissidents in political dialogue realistically has also something to do with the stubbornness and politically uncompromising view of separatist factions. Nevertheless, the unquestionably dominant power in the province is the state apparatus and as such it is the responsibility of state actors to pursue dialogue wherever possible — and where currently not possible, to use peaceful means to create the conditions for dialogue.

Finally, there is the growing question of a securitised view of development. With dismal socioeconomic indicators, Balochistan desperately needs an injection of job-creating business opportunities.

The investments under CPEC could change the destiny of parts of the province. However, the state-led version of investment and business opportunities threatens to install in Balochistan an economy that is not only overseen through policy directives by state and security officials but where projects, assets and businesses themselves are owned and controlled by the state.

The future implications in a province that has long resisted outside dominance could be dire. If CPEC is truly to benefit Balochistan, it must be owned by the Baloch and Balochistan.

## Blight of extremism

THE gradual but steady transformation of Mumtaz Qadri's grave into a shrine is a powerful indictment of both society and state. Qadri was tried, convicted and hanged for murdering the then governor Punjab, Salmaan Taseer — the man who Qadri, as part of his security detail, was duty-bound to protect. Instead, the police commando turned his gun on Taseer for the 'crime' of sympathising with Asia Bibi, a poor Christian woman accused of blasphemy, and asking that changes be made to the blasphemy law to prevent its abuse. And he gloried in his act till the very end, without compunction or regret — and garnered a huge following in the process. The travesty that a killer is on track to being immortalised as a saint flies in the face of our cultural traditions where saints in their lifetimes were recognised as icons of tolerance and pluralism. It also makes a mockery of the state's claims of tackling extremism.

What we are witnessing is the effects of a far right narrative allowed to percolate unchecked through society for decades. No doubt, the state has vowed to counter the religious extremism that has exacted such a terrible toll on the people of Pakistan, and its prosecution of Qadri may have been an effort to assert its writ. Nevertheless, the varied manifestations of religious extremism, the different strands that make up the whole, continue to flourish. Banned organisations hold public rallies; sectarian elements participate in the electoral process; religious activists are mainstreamed as charity workers; madressahs continue to resist government regulation and control, etc. Lal Masjid's Maulana Abdul Aziz, who not too long ago declared his support for the militant Islamic State group, named his library after Osama bin Laden, and called for jihad against the government, apparently remains above the law. While no longer in retreat as it appeared to be in the last few decades, the state seems unwilling or unable to confront the problem in its entirety. Its politically expedient approach — or timorousness, as the case may be — can only send mixed signals at a time when there must be a clear-cut policy based on an unequivocal rejection of any semblance of religious zealotry. Military campaigns and intelligence-based operations can only rid the country of the symptoms of extremism. It is the disease itself that must be cured, and that requires far more consistency than the state has thus far demonstrated.

## Education in Fata

DISPLACED children affected by the military operation in many parts of Fata are at a distinct disadvantage because their schooling may have been disrupted and they might have missed all or part of their primary education. This schooling hiatus could result in a generation deprived of future opportunities, if the gaps in learning are not bridged. Yesterday, this paper highlighted the significance of Fata's alternative schools as a way of providing education and teaching life skills to children between nine and 16 years. Established by the Fata Education Foundation, this is a commendable attempt at increasing the enrolment of children who have suffered mass displacement. However, political will is integral to education in the tribal belt — a region that has endured the impact of decades of militancy on its education quality and infrastructure. Further, alternative learning opportunities may be a way of drawing unschooled and unskilled youth away from militant recruiters.

Whenever there is talk of mainstreaming Fata, education is sidelined. If ignored in a post-conflict context, the consequences could trigger great local resentment. For now, alternative learning schools will require more than a makeshift classroom in a community centre. As students themselves were quick to point out, they lack study equipment and even basic amenities such as toilets. Teaching methods will also need

revamping because some older children whose primary education was disrupted at a young age might not be able to grasp what is being taught and would need extra help; or others might want to learn basic literacy and numeracy skills, as well as some kind of trade or skill. Having witnessed how war destroys communities and livelihoods, this generation, battered and bruised, deserves a chance at learning to fulfil its ambitions. Mindful that the government has little capacity for quality education provision nationwide, the FEF — with plans to educate 24,000 children — would do well to consider a public-private partnership to enhance learning outcomes.

## Zardari's NA hopes

A SURPRISE it was as former president and PPP supremo, Asif Ali Zardari, announced on his wife's death anniversary that he and his son, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, will seek to enter parliament via by-elections. To the extent that parliament is the apex democratic forum and this National Assembly in particular has suffered from a lack of interest by PML-N principals, particularly Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and the PTI too, the entrance of high-profile politicians could re-energise the house and attract fresh public interest. But Mr Zardari's unexpected decision is in many ways a perplexing one — and perhaps undesirable too. The reasons are several. To begin with, the real challenge for the PPP is to reorganise the party and make it electorally relevant outside rural Sindh again. The party has no unifying or coherent message nationally and it is increasingly hamstrung by the perception that the government in Sindh is riddled with corruption and gross misgovernance. A turnaround is desperately needed, but it's not clear how Mr Zardari's entrance into parliament will help engineer that. If anything, the by-election contests will further detract from focusing on matters of party reorganisation and regeneration.

There is also the matter of Mr Zardari overshadowing the parliamentary education of his son and PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari. What in substantive terms can Mr Zardari hope to achieve by joining parliament approximately a year before its term expires? In recent years, there is no legislative issue or corner of executive oversight that the former president has expressed an interest in. By choosing to contest a parliamentary seat alongside Mr Bhutto-Zardari, and for the first time since 1990, Mr Zardari has all but guaranteed that the parliamentary focus, especially within the PPP, will be on him. While Mr Bhutto-Zardari certainly has a long political education ahead of him, the simultaneous parliamentary entry may send a hard-to-rebut signal that all decision-making in the party remains tightly controlled by the father. For a young politician who has already seen his political career launched with fanfare several times, the latest development cannot bode well.

It remains, of course, the prerogative of the PPP to choose its own destiny and for its leadership to select its own path. To be confounded by internal decisions the party takes is not to deny the party's inherent right to make those choices. Yet, there are at least two realities that make the PPP's internal decisions a matter of immediate public interest. The party nominates the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly and has a majority in the Sindh Assembly — positions of power that come with real responsibilities. A quiet parliamentary education of Mr Bhutto-Zardari would have made sense. Adding Mr Zardari to the parliamentary equation seems largely a matter of ego and self-indulgence. The PPP deserves better and the country deserves more — Mr Zardari still has time to get his priorities right.

## Sailors' fate

THE fate of a number of Pakistani sailors on board an Iranian vessel off the coast of Yemen remains shrouded in mystery. As reported in this paper on Wednesday, a shipping agent claims the vessel — en route to Dubai after unloading cargo in Egypt — came under missile attack on Dec 18 near the Yemeni port of Hodeidah. Out of eight Pakistani sailors on board, seven are reported to have died in the attack. However, the relevant authorities in Pakistan, namely the ministries of ports and shipping and foreign affairs, remain tight-lipped about the incident, which has added to the anxiety of the men's families. Moreover, Iranian news outlet Press TV had reported on Dec 5 that at least six Pakistani sailors had been killed after Saudi warplanes allegedly attacked a vessel off the Yemeni port of Mokha. Are both these reports referring to the same incident? The conflicting details need to be reconciled so that the facts of the matter can be known. While it is true that Yemen is presently a war zone and details are difficult to verify, the government must make extra efforts to ascertain the fate of the missing sailors. The relevant ministries should seek more information from the shipping company, as well as contact the littoral states in order to gather more information about the missing crew.

Unfortunately, as has been often witnessed, whether it is the fate of the sailors mentioned above, or Pakistanis caught in difficult situations abroad in general, the state's response to their woes leaves much to be desired. For example, when citizens of this country end up in foreign jails, particularly in the Gulf states, they are left to deal with opaque legal systems without much help from Pakistani missions, unless of course some conscientious diplomat decides to intervene on their behalf. The response of our missions in Saudi Arabia could also have been better when, recently, Pakistani workers were caught in a crisis after their employers held up their pay for many months. When their citizens are under any distress on foreign soil, many governments spring into



action to provide any possible assistance in the form of consular access or legal help. Pakistani missions must also strive to look out for the welfare of our citizens overseas, offering them all possible help. In the case of the missing sailors, the state must redouble its efforts to establish the truth and hopefully discover their whereabouts.

## Neglected animals

IN a country where basic human rights for all is still a dream, worrying about animal rights may seem a bit of a stretch to some. However, there are occasions when the neglect and downright abuse of animals is of such a shocking magnitude that it is impossible to stay silent. A photograph carried yesterday in this newspaper constitutes such an occasion, depicting as it does the plight of a pair of white lions from South Africa housed at the Karachi zoo. The female has clearly contracted some sort of skin infection that has left her hide piteously patchy and her skin obviously raw and painful. The male is seated in a way that the condition of his pelt cannot be gauged, but its snout is covered with flies — always a warning sign regarding the health and vigorousness of any animal. According to the report, this suspicion is borne out by the state of the lion housed in the adjoining cage, whose belly was also covered with flies.

All the zoo director, Fahim Khan, had to offer when confronted about the condition of these animals was that it was only the female lion that had “some infection”, and that she was “much better now” after two months’ treatment. Yet, why should he be singled out for censure when the same abuse is repeated in zoos across the country? To give just one other example, the plight of the elephant at the Marghazar Zoo in Islamabad was so dire that the Senate Standing Committee on the Cabinet Secretariat was moved to recommend that he be shifted to a sanctuary abroad. There must be deep pity for animals that are thus transported out of their natural habitats, to be housed in facilities that may not have the interest or the resources to look after them properly. Given this institutional failing, the country needs to start the debate on shutting down those zoos where the neglect of animals is rampant. It is high time.

## Afghan peace

IT was a strange spectacle, but nevertheless one that may yield some positive results. Russia, China and Pakistan meeting to discuss Afghanistan without the presence of Afghan representatives seems a recipe for adding to the contradictions and confounding regional dilemmas that bedevil Pakistan's neighbour to the west. It is, therefore, welcome that the new axis of three has decided to invite Afghan government officials to future talks. If there is one certainty in the region, it is that stability and peace will be elusive if arrangements are made and decisions reached without the participation of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Indeed, it has long been apparent that a big-tent approach, however unwieldy, is the only realistic way to stabilise and forge peace in Afghanistan. A roughly analogous situation may be the Iran-US nuclear talks. While it was always clear who the principals were in those talks, the presence of other big international powers in the group helped both keep the talks alive and act as guarantors of a final deal.

Certainly, given the two major decisions that appear to have been reached in Moscow, the continued exclusion of Kabul makes little sense — though the Afghan government ought to consider how its own behaviour may have contributed to Afghanistan's marginalisation. First, the warning of the growing presence of the militant Islamic State group in Afghanistan can help bring international focus to a problem that so far has not got the attention it needs. The rise of IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been complicated by a number of factors, but the potential for the group to grow to prominence and become a real menace remains. Yet, the idea of using the Afghan Taliban to fight IS would be disastrous. While IS is carving out a space for itself from old Afghan Taliban and TTP elements, the future of Afghanistan must not reflect its past where militias fought against militants. Instead, it is the Afghan state that must be strengthened and made more capable to lead the fight against militants whose goal it is to overthrow the Afghan state. Second, the decision to review a UN blacklist of Afghan Taliban leaders — and in doing so, addressing one of the core demands of the Taliban in all negotiation attempts over the years — could open the door to a new round of intra-Afghan talks. The clout that Russia and China have in this regard at the UN is particularly important, though the US will have to be convinced too. Welcome as all moves that increase the possibility of a resumption of Afghan talks are, all steps should be taken with a view to strengthening the intra-Afghan nature of eventual negotiations. If the Afghan Taliban believe they can wrest core concessions from outside powers and bypass Kabul, future talks may become all the more difficult. At the same time, Kabul should reconsider its own stubborn positions of late.

## Politicising power

THE inauguration of the Chashma III nuclear power plant may have been a good time to talk about the future of Pakistan's power sector, but Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif chose to make it an occasion to harangue the political opposition, as well as criticise previous governments. Telling us that persistent power shortages in the country are a legacy of the governments that came before the current dispensation may be a nice political line, but he should realise that his own vow to 'end load-shedding' by 2018 could become his personal albatross. Rulers before him had also made this pledge, but failed in their efforts. The reason is not because they did not launch enough power projects, or did not 'personally supervise' them as he proudly claims to do, but because our power sector is stuck in an unsustainable position halfway between being a public and private enterprise. It has been more than a quarter of a century now since the launch of the first power-sector reforms, yet we remain in a position where the public sector stands astride all decisions and most fixed investment in this crucial area. Until this changes, load-shedding as an expression of underlying governance weaknesses will remain a permanent feature, no matter how many power projects are inaugurated, and how closely their implementation is supervised by the highest levels of government.

It would be worthwhile to evaluate the cost of the electricity from the new power projects being launched by this government. Eradicating load-shedding will take more than simply pumping more electricity into the grid. What good is increasing the supply of electricity if the cost of the new power is prohibitive? The government has made a commitment to bring down the average price of power from Rs18 to closer to Rs10, but given the cost escalations under way in most of the power projects under implementation, it is unlikely to meet this goal. The new policy of recovery-based load-shedding is another dubious element in the mix. The policy basically diverts the scarce supply of power to elite areas and creates a mistaken impression that load-shedding has been eliminated, whereas those areas where recoveries are weak suffer prolonged spells and investments also dry up. Given both these realities — diversion of scarce supplies for elite consumption and cost escalation in new power projects — any promise of ending load-shedding by 2018 ought to be made with due caution.

## Poisoned sea

WHEN it comes to waking up to an issue well after it has reached serious proportions, the state of Pakistan cannot be faulted. A case in point is Karachi's waste management problem, which even the most cursory of glances shows is formidable. Visible everywhere are piles of refuse rotting in the open, and localities choked with sewage. But this masks another, even greater issue that has serious long-term consequences: the frightening scale on which the metropolis is using the Arabian Sea as a drain into which to pour all the waste that the city management authorities cannot handle. The numbers are nauseating. As a statement issued on Monday in this regard by the federal minister for climate change, Mir Hasil Khan Bizenjo, noted, more than 500 million gallons of liquid waste flow into the sea every day. A good quantity of it is raw sewage and industrial waste, and this is quite apart from the solid waste that is also dispatched into the waters, as though neither the environment nor marine health were a concern at all. The implications of this level of pollution are profound. Quite apart from the environment, there is the matter of sea life and the human lives and livelihoods it supports.

Under these circumstances, then, it can only be appreciated that, in a case of better late than never, the state appears to have bestirred itself. Mr Bizenjo's statement came in the context of news that the ports and shipping ministry has set up a three-member committee to compile a report on the progress of a mega sewerage scheme to save the sea. The members include the chairman of the Karachi Port Trust and a representative of the Sindh government; they are to submit a detailed report to the federal and provincial governments within two weeks. It is to be ardently hoped that this initiative bears fruit and urgent action is taken to halt the poisoning of the sea. The next task will be to reverse as far as possible the damage already wrought.