

DAWN



Editorials for the Month of February 2017

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Table of Contents

Crackdown on JuD.....	7
Yemeni tragedy	8
Joseph Colony acquittals.....	9
Sabotaging Saarc.....	10
World Bank report	11
Ride-sharing services	12
CNIC denial.....	13
Rise of xenophobia.....	14
Finance minister’s debt defence.....	14
Unsafe blood.....	16
Posthumous acquittal	17
‘Khabaristan Times’ ban.....	18
Kashmir solution	19
Schools in KP	20
Inaugurations galore	21
Outsourcing justice	21
New Iran sanctions.....	22
Banks for all.....	23
Debating debt	24
Winter tragedy.....	25
Leagues of the world, unite	26
Ego and Nandipur	26
Former mayor’s advice	27
Another law to curb extremism.....	28
Broker’s flight.....	29
Delayed Fata reforms.....	30
Hekmatyar’s new role	31
Ban on ‘Raees’.....	32
Sindh’s police culture.....	33
Media freedom and hate speech.....	34
PSL promise.....	35
Rohingyas’ misery	36

Money laundering software..... 37

Pharma sector protest 38

Panama Papers: the larger picture 39

Trade and remittances..... 40

Saving Moenjodaro 41

TTP in Afghanistan 42

Incomplete census 43

Media worker’s killing..... 44

Lahore tragedy 44

Valentine’s Day order 45

Fixing cricket 46

Series of attacks 47

Okara farm ‘resolution’ 48

BDS officer’s death..... 49

Military courts’ revival on the horizon..... 50

Volte-face on Israel 51

Women’s vote..... 52

Attack on a place of peace..... 52

Hunger amidst plenty 54

Needless loss of lives in Sehwan 55

Saving languages..... 56

Syrian talks 57

State’s knee-jerk response to terror..... 58

Juvenile death penalty 59

Book festival in Gwadar 60

Honouring our sportswomen..... 60

Rangers in Punjab 61

Current account deficit 62

With Afghan cooperation..... 63

PSL final 64

Buying dollars..... 65

Islamic banking..... 67

Hardly healing 68

Another operation 68

Accountability bodies..... 70

SECP obligations..... 71

Panama hearings..... 71

Post-blast confusion..... 72

Dubai properties 74

Middle East questions..... 75

Nigar Ahmed 76

Fighting militancy together..... 76

Gas politics 78

Overloaded PIA 78

Data on glaciers..... 79

AJK CJ’s directive 81

Crackdown on JuD

In a move that will be closely watched both inside Pakistan and abroad, the federal government has put Hafiz Saeed and four of his colleagues under house arrest, and placed the Jamaatud Dawa and the Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation on further terror watch lists.

The arrests in Punjab, the statements attributed to federal officials and the supportive comments by DG ISPR Gen Asif Ghafoor indicate that the actions against Mr Saeed and the organisations he leads have been taken after inter-institutional, federal-provincial discussions — increasing the likelihood that the clampdown will be sustained and meaningful.

Clearly, Pakistan cannot win the fight against militancy and extremism until it adopts a zero-tolerance approach against all manifestations of the problem. And just as clearly, notwithstanding the protestations of innocence by the JuD/FiF/LeT and the angry denunciations by their cadres of the government's action, Hafiz Saeed and his associates have a great deal to answer for.

There are at least two issues that must be quickly addressed. First, the legal case against Mr Saeed and the organisations he leads must be methodically assembled. The watch-listed JuD and FiF and the banned LeT have sophisticated legal operations that have often, and easily, been able to outmanoeuvre investigators and state prosecutors.

This time, the investigators must be of the highest calibre, the accumulation of evidence meticulous and the eventual framing of charges should meet the very highest standards of law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Anything short of that and the state's will to progressively eliminate all non-state actors operating on Pakistani soil will once again be called into question.

The various groups in the LeT umbrella network will likely try and hide behind ostensibly legal activities such as charitable operations and social welfare services. But if the strategic control of the various groups in the network and the financial linkages between them are unearthed and made public, the dismantling of the entire apparatus should become possible.

Second, the state must start to move against all militant and extremist networks in a methodical manner, doing so on a timeline that suggests an internal consensus and not external pressure.

Already the JuD/FiF, like-minded groups and a sprawling national network of supporters have tried to cast the crackdown as an external agenda, of a government and state cravenly submitting to the diktat of outside powers, especially the US.

But a sweeping set of actions against all groups here — those that the US, India and Afghanistan have long demanded action against as well as other networks that are deeply problematic but that may not necessarily have an external dimension — and emphatic public ownership of those actions by the military and political leadership would send a strong signal.

The fight against militancy is a fight for Pakistan by Pakistan for Pakistani reasons — that is the message that the state must send urgently.

Yemeni tragedy

THE nearly two-year-old Saudi-led assault on Yemen has been an unmitigated disaster. Riyadh has roundly failed in its objective of ejecting the Houthi rebels from areas under their control and restoring the president Hadi-led government. Moreover, as a UN report recently observed, a number of air attacks carried out by the Saudi coalition may amount to war crimes. The UN has zeroed in on 10 air strikes in particular, saying that “in eight of the 10 investigations, the panel found no evidence that the air strikes had targeted legitimate military objectives”. The attacks killed nearly 300 civilians, including women and children. The UN also criticised the Houthis for ill treatment of detainees. Indeed, the Yemeni war has been an unrelenting catastrophe for the people of this impoverished nation. Around 10,000 civilians have died. In another report, the UN’s humanitarian chief told the Security Council that Yemen sits on the cusp of a “full-blown famine”, with 63pc of children in the country malnourished. While all parties to this conflict must shoulder the blame for this pathetic situation, the Saudis in particular should reflect on what their destructive campaign has achieved so far. Also, those in the West backing Riyadh’s effort — the US and the UK in particular — must answer for their role in providing the logistical support base for the Saudi campaign.

To end the Yemeni people’s nightmare, a negotiated settlement must be reached through which the bombing is stopped immediately, relief is brought to the population and the belligerents agree to settle their differences peacefully. With an air of uncertainty clouding the West, especially Washington D.C., it is futile to look in that direction for a solution. Instead, it is the nations of the region that must take the initiative to end the Yemeni war. For example, while the Syrian imbroglio is far from solved, the situation has undoubtedly improved through Turkish, Iranian and Russian cooperation. In this case also, Turkey can act as a bridge between the Saudis and Iranians, as the latter are believed to have influence over the Houthis. The good offices of Oman can also be used; not only does the country border Yemen, Muscat also enjoys cordial ties with both Riyadh and Tehran. While political negotiations may well be protracted and difficult, at least all

belligerents can be asked to immediately silence their guns and stop raining death from the skies upon Yemen's people.

Joseph Colony acquittals

THERE is a devastatingly telling contrast in the outcome of the Joseph Colony incident. On Saturday, citing lack of evidence, an antiterrorism court in Lahore acquitted 115 people charged with torching over 100 houses belonging to Christians in the city's Joseph Colony. The incident had taken place in March 2013 after a resident, Sawan Masih, was accused of having committed blasphemy the day before. An enraged mob, reportedly 3,000-strong, had rampaged through the locality, ransacking the houses and setting fire to them. The residents, fearing exactly such an attack, had already fled their homes and there was fortunately no loss of life. The case against the alleged perpetrators of this violence made its way through the courts at a snail's pace over four years during which all the accused were set free on bail. Compare this with the case against Masih, who was put on trial and sentenced to death for committing blasphemy within the space of one year.

We can well imagine the impact of Saturday's verdict on minority communities in Pakistan. One of their own was handed down the harshest sentence on an allegation made by a single individual, but the police could not gather enough incriminating evidence, nor the lawyers build a prosecutable case, against a mob that had unleashed violence against an entire Christian locality. Moreover, the attack followed a predictable pattern; when a Muslim is accused of blasphemy, the fallout remains limited to the individual, but when the accused is a member of a minority, the community pays the price. That no one has been found guilty in the Joseph Colony rioting is sadly also part of the norm. Certainly, one could point to the Kot Radha Kishan case, in which a Christian couple was burnt alive by a mob, as an instance in which perpetrators of faith-based violence were punished. But that is an exception in a chronology of shame that includes Gojra, Sangla Hill, Shanti Nagar and others, where justice is but an elusive hope.

Sabotaging Saarc

THAT Saarc is an organisation with great potential but perpetually undermined by the Pakistan-India rivalry is a truism as old as the organisation itself. Forming a geographically obvious trading bloc with a great deal of cultural and language convergences, the Saarc countries could in theory become an engine of growth and wide regional stability. But the Pakistan-India rivalry and India's aspirations to dominate the bloc have led to a Saarc that is moribund and ineffectual. The latest Indian manoeuvre to impede the workings of Saarc and also deal Pakistan a diplomatic blow is an example of all that is wrong with New Delhi's approach to Saarc and regional politics. The Nepalese incumbent secretary general of Saarc is set to complete his tenure at the end of the month and be replaced by a Pakistan nominee, a former diplomat. The secretary general is elected for three years by a Saarc council of ministers and by agreement the post rotates among the eight members. Pakistan is set to get its first Saarc secretary general since 1998 — but India appears to have different ideas.

Having proposed its nominee last March during the foreign ministers' summit in Nepal, Pakistan's candidate was to have been formally approved at the Saarc summit that was to be held in Islamabad last November. The summit was infamously scuttled by India at the last moment after Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided he would not travel to Pakistan. Not content with the automatic cancellation — the absence of any head of state/government causes a summit to be postponed — India also leaned on other member countries to announce their withdrawal. Saarc immediately plunged to yet another low. But now India appears determined to inflict further damage on the organisation. The Indian foreign affairs ministry has effectively objected to the appointment of the Pakistan nominee as secretary general by using a diplomatic ruse: objecting to the appointment via a diplomatic note to all member states and insisting that the secretary general can only be appointed by a council of ministers. So not only will India not allow the summit that Pakistan is scheduled to hold take place, it won't allow a new — Pakistani — secretary general to be installed either.

Clearly, the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears to believe that at the regional, Saarc level, pressure must continue to be applied on Pakistan. Perhaps the hope is that Saarc-level pressure will cause Pakistan to rethink its approach to dialogue with India at the bilateral level. But the message that is being received here in Pakistan is that Mr Modi and his national security and foreign policy teams are not really interested in any kind of dialogue, hence the wilful damage by India to even the traditionally less acrimonious Saarc forum. A hard-line approach by India is against its own interests — and certainly against the interests of all members of Saarc.

World Bank report

IN its latest World Development Report, the World Bank has selectively cited a work of a duo of Pakistani economists to highlight “policy capture” by elites, specifically on the politicised allocation of credit from public-sector banks being able to undermine growth. The citation comes in the middle of a long discussion on how governments can distort growth with their intervention, either through “failed development programmes”, the political grant of import licences, creating regulatory barriers for the entry of new players into the competitive field, or through outright ‘clientelism’ in public investment. The entire discussion sounds so obsolete that one is pressed to double-check the date of the publication to ensure that one is not reading a document from the early 1980s.

Take the Pakistan example that is invoked by the authors. The research they cite was conducted in 2005 on a dataset that ran from 1998 till 2002, and looked at how political connections helped firms obtain credit from public-sector banks. But most of Pakistan’s banking sector was privatised from that year on, and went on to see a period of rich liquidity growth as a result of 9/11-related inflows from 2002 onwards. In another paper, published in 2008, the same authors looked at how effectively the privatised banks were able to utilise that liquidity to increase lending to firms. Their conclusion was that access to credit in a period of abundant liquidity was not constrained by the state, whether through political interference or regulatory distortions, but because of a backward-looking creditworthiness test that banks used widely, “based primarily on firms’ pledgeable assets and historical cash flows”. In short, following privatisation, the market created other barriers and distortionary mechanisms to impede access to credit beyond a select membership, which had substantial consequences for growth. In another study, the same authors found that membership, and location, in the right social network played a crucial role in determining a firm’s access to credit, especially in difficult times. Briefly, in the years after 2002, access to credit was not distorted through state intervention as much as by social networks and incapacity to deal with risk. The world of politicised credit and import licences belongs to the past. The World Bank would be better off dwelling on the distortionary mechanisms that the market creates, and on how developing country policies can be framed to help tackle the issue.

Ride-sharing services

The Pakistani bureaucracy has an undeniable knack for adding to people's problems and hindering solutions.

A recent example of this has been seen in the actions the Punjab and Sindh administrations have taken against popular ride-sharing companies such as Uber and Careem.

As it emerged on Tuesday, the Punjab government announced that the services were 'illegal'; the Sindh administration, on the other hand, said that while it didn't want to ban the app-based companies, they had to operate "under the ambit of law".

Some of the justifications given for the actions were difficult to believe. For example, the Punjab Transport Authority said the vehicles were operating without fitness certificates and route permits and that the "drivers ... are not cleared by the security authorities".

Are we to assume, then, that all mass transit vehicles currently operating in the country are in perfect shape, and that all drivers of these vehicles — from Karachi to Gilgit — have perfect safety records and security clearance? The rash driving by operators of mass transit vehicles on Pakistan's roads, and the many needless deaths caused by such recklessness every year, confirm the fact that the opposite is, in fact, true.

While all firms operating in this country must abide by the relevant regulations, vague reasons and legal lacunae must not be used by the bureaucracy to prevent ride-sharing apps from doing business.

In a country where public transport options are inadequate, these services are offering commuters a viable option. For example, while Punjab has taken steps to introduce better public transport options — in Lahore, in Rawalpindi and now in Multan — with metro buses and metro trains, Karachi still has many miles to go.

Meters have disappeared from rickshaws in the metropolis, while buses are too few, uncomfortable and unsafe.

Both the Punjab and Sindh governments should allow ride-sharing services to operate legally without harassment, while in the long term, efforts are needed to provide safe and affordable public transport options for commuters in all of the country's major metropolitan areas.

CNIC denial

THE state's hard-fisted approach towards Shakil Afridi is extending towards his family as well. The doctor sentenced to a lengthy jail sentence for his alleged collaboration with the Americans in the hunt for Osama bin Laden has long been denied due process including a fair, transparent trial. Now his family is being subjected to harassment too with Afridi's wife and two children being denied the renewal of their national identity cards. Previously, Afridi's CNIC renewal was blocked as well, which is presumably the technicality on which the state is relying to deny renewals to his wife and children. Whatever the explanation, the situation is not acceptable. Shakil Afridi's wife and children are Pakistani nationals against whom there are no allegations of wrongdoing. And even if there were, there is no law that allows the effective denial of citizenship — and with it, everything from voting rights to passports and the means to participate in the financial sector — to individuals on the basis of suspicion alone. The denial of CNICs is quite obviously a move to keep Afridi under pressure and in fear. But that is not how the state ought to be conducting its business.

Contrast the continuing harassment of Shakil Afridi and his family with the fate of the Abbottabad Commission report. Buried by a state that would prefer to hide its failings and weaknesses, the unpublished report is a continuing reminder that little, if anything, is publicly known about the circumstances surrounding the hunt for and elimination of Osama bin Laden. Even now, more than a half decade on from that shocking episode, the Abbottabad sanctuary of the Al Qaeda chief and the American raid are mystifying, and deeply troubling, episodes. Bin Laden's death has done little to erase the searing questions his presence in Pakistan raised. While the 'complicity or incompetence' question has been asked several times since the Abbottabad raid in connection with other troubling security failures, questions from this particular episode still dominate. How was the world's most wanted man able to live undetected for many years in a large house in a high-security military zone? And how were American forces able to ingress deep into Pakistani territory, carry out a high-stakes raid and then leave undetected over the course of several hours? Harassing Shakil Afridi and his family only perpetuates the suspicions that the state is hiding a great deal when it comes to the Bin Laden affair.

Rise of xenophobia

WHILE it was not Donald Trump's capture of the US presidential seat that created the populist, isolationist wave being witnessed in many countries, there is no doubt it has further emboldened right-wing elements. In these difficult times for refugees and immigrants, Canada had been one of the relatively few countries in the developed West that has stood out for its stance of welcoming migrants and integrating them. But that sense of security was shattered by the events of Jan 29, when Alexandre Bissonnette allegedly opened fire at a mosque in Quebec city, killing six people and injuring eight. To Canada's credit, the state was swift to respond, with the accused man being charged with six counts of murder the next day; Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called it what it was — an act of terrorism — and observed that Muslim Canadians, wherever they live, “deserve to feel safe; they are home here”.

At the moment though, given that the migrants' issue that has come into focus along with the events unfolding in the US, Muslims are being made to feel that they are, in fact, in the cross hairs of resentment and exclusion. This is part of a larger, dangerous pattern that applies to other communities as well. Consider, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement in America, or the fact that in the UK, anti-Semitic hate crime increased by more than a third last year. The number of such incidents has reached record levels, and the government is spending some £13.4m to increase security in areas populated by the Jewish community. Nor is the problem restricted to the West: as Bangladesh's largest book fair began in Dhaka on Wednesday, booksellers were warned against making available any publications that hurt “religious values”. Countering global hate at such unprecedented levels requires addressing the underlying issues that include poverty and the emasculation of communities. The question is, how many world leaders are there who have the conviction and courage to go against populist sentiments?

Finance minister's debt defence

In a long and detailed article, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar recently took the extraordinary step of engaging with his critics and presenting a painstakingly detailed picture of the sustainability of Pakistan's external debt.

To the extent that the external debt servicing capacity is a crucial determinant of the country's stability, he is right to go to the lengths he went to in an attempt to reassure what he calls the “inherently sceptical” analysts who keep sounding the alarm over a deteriorating external sector.

With debt levels rising and exports shrinking, people are entitled to be alarmed about the future sustainability of the nascent economic recovery under way in the country. After all, it has been our history to achieve short-term comfort in the reserves position, only to lose it rapidly and return to the IMF for another round of stabilisation.

Have we finally broken that cycle, or are we simply sitting on another one of those comfortable perches that we have found ourselves occupying temporarily in the past as well? That is the crucial question at play here, and unfortunately, the finance minister's detailed exposition of the numbers did little to address it.

The questions being raised about the reserves and the external sector are not about the immediate term, nor do they constitute a competition between the track record of his government and its predecessor. It is a bit disingenuous of Mr Dar to compare data from that five-year period to three years of his own performance. He is comparing data from his peak to data from the trough of the previous government's record.

One could engage with the figures given by Mr Dar, but it has been observed that the finance ministry is adept at presenting numbers in such a way as to be able to make any argument it wishes to. The point is not whether net debt levels were higher in 2013 or in 2016. Nor is the cumulative annual growth rate of the external debt the salient fact here.

The central point is future debt service obligations, both public and private, because these are what will determine the direction that the reserves take.

Mr Dar has claimed that “[a]s of today, external debt servicing obligations for Pakistan are not more than an average of \$5 billion per annum until 2021”. Yet data given by his own ministry to the IMF shows that external debt-service obligations, being the sum of interest payments and amortisation, climb beyond \$8.4bn only the next year. This does not include income on direct investment by foreigners, which adds another \$3.6bn to the burden as per projections in the IMF's 12th review.

The finance minister has had his say in excruciating detail, but the questions he sought to address still remain in place.

Unsafe blood

It is an illustration of the many ways in which untold suffering can be inflicted on people when the state is unable to turn its intentions into reality.

Health authorities in Islamabad have discovered that two siblings, an eight-year-old girl and her younger brother, have been infected with HIV. The children already have a blood platelet function disorder, due to which they have been receiving transfusions from different hospitals in the twin cities since 2010.

The HIV virus they are carrying was discovered in November, when the girl fell ill. Since neither of the parents are HIV positive, the likely cause is that at some point, in one of the many health facilities where they were treated, they were given contaminated blood during transfusion. The tragic irony is that their father is an employee of the hospital managed by the Capital Development Authority.

On Thursday, the National Commission on Human Rights took suo motu notice of the matter; it intends to institute an inquiry into what kind of steps are taken by health facilities and departments to create awareness about the dangers of contaminated blood.

Reportedly, the NCHR is already carrying out an assessment in this regard of the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, one of the largest public-sector hospitals in the area. The exercise is to be expanded to include more hospitals. The needs of the ailing children mentioned above, meanwhile, will now be administered to by the National Aids Control Programme.

Instituting an inquiry is all very well, but much more needs to be done particularly in view of the high incidence of blood-borne diseases in the country. The issue is much larger than HIV/AIDS alone, serious though these are.

Hepatitis B and C, for example, both of which can be contracted through even the most minimal contact with infected blood, amongst other means of transmission, affect an estimated 15 million people in the country — or every 13th Pakistani. Malarial parasites, too, can be transmitted through blood. Then there are other realities such as the relatively high numbers of thalassaemia sufferers — a consequence of the common cultural practice of marriage between cousins.

It is absolutely imperative that Pakistan clean up its act in the context of infected blood in health facilities — and that it does so on an urgent basis.

Laws on this front started being devised in the late 1990s and, after devolution, new laws are being looked into. Most recently, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government was mulling

over the KP Blood Transfusion Safety Authority Act, 2016. But new laws will only work if there is a sincere attempt to enforce them, and this is where the challenge is the greatest.

Regulation, oversight and accountability in the donation and transfusion of blood are among the most basic needs of the healthcare sector and their absence must be addressed immediately.

Posthumous acquittal

JUSTICE delayed is justice denied. Judging by that legal maxim, justice was irrevocably denied to Said Mansoor, a murder convict in Punjab's Shahpur jail. As reported in this paper yesterday, he was recently acquitted by the Lahore High Court — some two years after he had died of a cardiac arrest. Behind bars since 2009, Mansoor was sentenced to death in 2013. His appeal, filed by his family, had been pending since then. A number of similar instances of miscarriage of justice have come to light during the last few months. For example, last November, Mazhar Farooq was acquitted by the Supreme Court after he had spent two decades on death row. Some cases illustrate an appalling lack of coordination between the judicial and prison systems. In January, execution warrants were issued by a lower court judge for a condemned prisoner despite a petition pending before the LHC to stay his hanging because of his severe mental illness. Perhaps the most harrowing case occurred in October, when the apex court acquitted two brothers in a 2002 murder case, only to find that the men had already been sent to the gallows one year back.

The instances cited above reveal a criminal justice system flawed on multiple fronts, given which the finality of the death sentence is especially abhorrent. Equality before the law is but an empty slogan in such an environment where, rather than the merits of a case, the financial status of suspects determines the outcome. Most accused cannot afford to engage expensive private lawyers to fight their cases. Instead, they are assigned overworked and often less than competent public defenders who do not pursue their cases with the diligence required. Where a tepid defence can doom an innocent man, repeated adjournments and logistical issues — such as paucity of prison vans to bring undertrials to court for hearings — prolong jail time far beyond what would be considered reasonable. Consider, for example, Karachi's central prison where the number of convicts numbers only 507 — including 154 condemned prisoners — while the undertrials total 4,918. Spending years in prison can in itself be an adverse and life-altering experience. Overcrowding is an endemic problem, and it undermines the provision of basic facilities such as healthcare, food and accommodation, besides increasing the risks associated with

living in close proximity with hardened criminals. Only far-reaching reforms can ensure that the criminal justice system does not unduly penalise the innocent.

‘Khabaristan Times’ ban

It has a small but dedicated readership — a smart, knowledgeable online publication catering to a young, politically savvy class of readers. In short, ‘Khabaristan Times’, the satirical Pakistan website poking fun at state and society in equal measure, is a project worth admiring — and vigorously defending when it comes under attack by a paranoid state.

As disclosed by the publishers of ‘Khabaristan Times’ and corroborated by a report in this newspaper, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority has blocked the website.

No official notification has been sent to the website’s publishers; they were not given a chance to respond to the allegations against them; and, according to unnamed sources at the PTA quoted in this newspaper, the action was taken because of so-called, unspecified objectionable content in ‘Khabaristan Times’.

What is clear is that the PTA action is unwarranted, ill advised, an assault on a thoroughly democratic tradition — and probably illegal. The ban on ‘Khabaristan Times’ should be reversed immediately and the PTA must be forced to disclose the complainants if they are state agencies, as well as explain the basis for taking such an extreme step.

The widening and deepening assault on free speech and particularly on the media is a source of great worry for right-minded and sensible people in the country.

With internet usage growing swiftly in an age of relatively cheap smartphone technology and expanding coverage nationally of mobile data, the state is ramping up its oversight of the online market in Pakistan.

Part of that is necessary, for example, when it comes to militant propaganda and online crime, but a great deal of it is arbitrary or designed to muzzle speech that the state is uncomfortable with. Poorly drafted laws and regulators who are beholden to state authorities are causing the very worst impulses to be acted on.

That is simply unacceptable, and in the case of the ban on ‘Khabaristan Times’ it appears to be rooted in an ignorance of satire. Whimsical, politically motivated bans have no place in the great, democratic online space.

Kashmir solution

ON this Kashmir Solidarity Day, with the people of India-held Kashmir continuing to suffer from the latest bout of violence and repression by the Indian state, some long-standing realities need to be reiterated.

First, India will never be able to bury the Kashmir dispute — not inside IHK and not in its relationship with Pakistan.

To the proud, defiant and infinitely courageous people of IHK, a message of solidarity is important: whatever the rulers and policymakers in the region choose to do or not do, oppressed people everywhere share a common bond — the quest for dignity, basic rights and self-determination are fundamental to human existence. The state of India has long been in denial of core human values in IHK, but its denial cannot go on forever — the rightful and intrinsically just demands of the people of IHK will ultimately prevail.

Second, India's stubborn refusal to engage with Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a policy doomed to failure. For parochial, domestic reasons, Mr Modi may be in denial of the centrality of the Kashmir dispute to the normalisation of ties between the two countries, but that cannot undo the legal and moral basis of Pakistan's demand for a fair and just solution to the Kashmir dispute.

The framework of an eventual settlement is readily available and the initiation of publicly acknowledged or backchannel talks can build on the last pragmatic and sensible approach to conflict resolution: the four-point agenda of the Pervez Musharraf era. While the specifics can change, the four-point agenda was based on the right principles: a phased, progressive, mutually acceptable military de-escalation in the disputed region with a simultaneous, coordinated ramping up of a people-centric governance structure.

If war is not an option — as it can become in a nuclear-armed region — then the honest pursuit of peace is the only alternative.

Third, there are lessons for Pakistan in its thus far faulty strategy of keeping the Kashmir dispute alive internally, inside the country, and externally, on the global stage.

Domestically, the reliance on the religious right and extremist networks to keep the Kashmir dispute front and centre of the national consciousness has been a historical mistake. Mainstream politics based on a mainstream acceptance of human rights and self-determination and rooted in mainstream sections of society is the only sensible approach.

The more the Kashmir dispute is allowed to become the exclusive remit of right-wing and violent groups, the more the inherent justness of the Kashmir cause will be obscured. The

external benefits will be clear too if Pakistan can present to the world a rational and peaceful case and if the powerful human dimension of the suffering in IHK is made central to the message of why the Kashmir dispute needs the outside world's attention. Kashmir Solidarity Day can be the start of a much-needed diplomatic and strategic rethink.

Schools in KP

IF the figure invites incredulity it only goes to show how low the general opinion is of the state of public-sector education in the country. On Friday, PTI chief Imran Khan said that 34,000 students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had opted out of private schools and joined government schools; he was implying, of course, that educational standards at public institutes had seen some drastic improvements under his party that rules the province. Talking about the PTI having initiated reforms in the health and education sectors in the province, he also mentioned the Insaf Health Card programme. These remarks were made at a conference arranged by the Gynaecology Association of Pakistan's KP chapter. But the rosy lens used by Mr Khan does not quite bring out the full picture. The relevant survey was conducted last summer by the KP Elementary and Secondary Education Department, with the assistance of a non-profit organisation, and involving students who had transferred from private to public-sector schools between September 2015 and March 2016. And while some respondents did indeed refer to an improvement in standards, other reasons cited for transferring children to government-run schools were the increasing costs of education in private schools, long distances, as well as the dwindling quality of education and inadequate learning material.

That said, the PTI must be appreciated for making a push for reform in the education and healthcare sectors in a province where both these sectors have for years been neglected and allowed to deteriorate. Indeed, across the country, public facilities are accessed only by those who have very little choice. As a result, health and education facilities in private hands have become a booming business, fuelled by pecuniary interests rather than concern for the provision of an individual's constitutional rights. Sadly enough, it is not as though these sectors were never built up in the first place. Until rot, lethargy and routine resource-starvation were allowed to seep in, many of the country's public-sector health and education institutes were of exemplary standard. Happily, the KP government has set a positive example in these sectors, one that should be emulated by other provincial governments in the country. The day when a sitting MNA chooses a government-run hospital for his and his family's medical needs, and a government-run school or college for his children, instead of accessing private facilities, will be the day when those in power can start congratulating themselves.

Inaugurations galore

IT is the same old routine. Another inauguration. Another address by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. A speech by a politician in power hitting out at his chief rival. This time the occasion was the opening of a section of the Karachi-Hyderabad motorway. The ceremony provided the prime minister with an opportunity to formally unveil and introduce to the public Mr Muhammad Zubair, the man who is now representing the federal government in Sindh. This was perhaps a necessary exercise in politics where the chief executive had to be seen by all to be comfortably by the side of the new governor. Indeed, this was a platform for flashing the promise of the new appointment — which is not to say that it was planned like this. But having said all this, the complaints about an overdose of such events cannot be ignored forever.

Although those in charge of maintaining Mr Sharif's itinerary may emphatically disagree, there are so many who are a little jaded by all the grand prime ministerial activity that takes place all too frequently in the name of groundbreaking and auspicious beginnings. The ultimate statement in such instances is that not all these moments, so brilliantly flashed in the media, require or are worthy of the prime minister's presence. The old remarks are repeated, with greater intensity and purpose, as in the latest ceremony. There are people in this country, and they include those that are not sworn to opposing Mr Sharif in the name of politics, who think he did not need to go down and celebrate just as yet. The motorway is undoubtedly big. But so is the office of the prime minister and it is in Mr Sharif's interest to remember that. Considering that he is so rightly against those who are guilty of wasting resources, maybe he needs to hold himself back a little. And maybe, he needs to be more selective in what he chooses to launch and more careful with his time.

Outsourcing justice

BY passing a bill that gives legal and constitutional cover to the jirga and panchayat system of dispute resolution, the National Assembly has only highlighted its own weaknesses. The non-serious approach to the matter must also be criticised: only 23 members of the house were present, and none of them pointed out the lack of quorum, allowing the crucial responsibility of administering justice to be outsourced to some of the most regressive elements in society. It may be true that the jirga and panchayat system has existed in the country for centuries, but that does not mean it should be handed the responsibility to administer justice, even in supposedly minor cases. Over the years, this system has given us heinous 'judgements', supposedly endorsed by 'tradition', such as vani where young girls are forcibly married off in order to settle disputes or enmities. If the law minister, who introduced the bill, thinks that the provision of

attaching ‘neutral arbitrators’ to each case is sufficient to ensure that the verdicts pronounced will be in accordance with the law and fundamental rights, and will protect the rights of women, then it can reasonably be assumed that he is washing his hands of the responsibility of providing justice to the common citizens of this land.

If the government wants to bring in alternate dispute resolution mechanisms to help reduce the caseloads in the courts, which is the language in which it is justifying the passage of this controversial bill, then an option already exists in the form of the office of the federal and provincial ombudsman. That office can be strengthened and expanded to perform dispute resolution functions in the 23 different offences applicable in the jirga and panchayat bill. This way dispute resolution will remain the responsibility of the government while minor issues can be settled quickly in accordance with the rules and principles the state is obligated to uphold. If it can find ‘neutral arbitrators’ for jirgas and panchayats then surely it can find the personnel to staff the office of the ombudsman at the union council level too.

No assurance given by the law minister regarding the protection of the rights of women under a jirga and panchayat system should be entertained. The lawmakers who were present in the Assembly on the day the bill was voted upon, disgraced their oath of office by approving the bill with such little discussion. The Senate should move to block its passage, and if that fails, the provincial governments should steer clear of invoking its provisions. Perhaps the Supreme Court can examine its legality as well. The state should be working on strengthening modern forms of dispute resolution, not reinforcing antiquated bodies that do more harm than good and giving them legal cover.

New Iran sanctions

AS if temperatures in the Middle East were not warm enough, the hot air blowing into the region from Washington D.C. is bound to make things even more combustible. On Friday, the Trump administration slapped new sanctions on the Islamic republic, accusing it of conducting a ‘provocative’ missile test. Tehran has denied that the test violates 2015’s landmark Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the Iran nuclear deal is formally called, and has reiterated its right to carry out such military activities. Moreover, just before the new sanctions were announced, Donald Trump said that the option of military action against Iran was still on the table and that Tehran was “playing with fire”. It is debatable whether or not the Iranians are playing with fire; however, most will agree that the Trump administration’s bluster is adding fuel to the fire. Friday’s drama was followed by more bellicosity a day later, when the US defence secretary termed Iran the “single biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world”.

While Barack Obama's Middle East policies were far from perfect, there was an air of caution about them. His successor's strategies, conversely, are a strange mix of ignorance, arrogance and recklessness. When the 2015 nuclear deal was reached between Iran and the five permanent members of the Security Council, plus Germany, there was a feeling of relief in most of the international community; conflict had been averted and diplomacy had won the day. Of course, there were critics of the deal, most prominently members of the far right in the US, as well as the powers that be in Tel Aviv and the Gulf sheikhdoms. However, today, as a novice sits in the White House — egged on by a foolhardy clique — a lauded diplomatic initiative may well be in the process of being undone. Today, as conflict rages in the Middle East — fuelled both by the attempts at regime change in the region engineered by the West, and the chaos unleashed by extremist forces — a new confrontation with Iran must be avoided at all costs. Pakistan should be concerned for two major reasons; firstly, the thought of aggression against a sovereign country is in itself reprehensible; secondly, Pakistan shares a long border with Iran, and war involving its western neighbour is not in this country's interest. The sane voices of the world — including within the US establishment, Europe and the Middle East — must play their role to prevent a new conflict.

Banks for all

TWO reports this week highlight the limits of private-sector banks. One informs us of the enormous spread that banks charge between rural and urban borrowers, sometimes in excess of 10pc. The second tells us of the large spreads that banks enjoy over the discount rate, particularly in the area of consumer banking. In both cases, there are pressing urgencies related to the needs of the borrowers and a manifest inability of private-sector banks to meet these needs. Growers need loans because their enterprise crucially depends on borrowed money, and the inability of large private banks to meet their requirements pushes them into the hands of usurious money lenders, whose role in our agriculture sector is a highly regressive one. Individual borrowers need housing loans urgently since housing is one of the most important elements of daily life that is in very short supply in our country. Yet the rates at which the private-sector banks give these loans are so high that for most people they are beyond their reach.

There is no way to compel private banks to change this system without going back to the bad old days of credit ceilings. The only way to channel credit to these high-priority areas at an affordable price, therefore, is to keep a strong role for public-sector banks. Credit plays far too important a role in a modern society for it to be left to the vagaries and caprices of the market. Banks like the House Building Finance Corporation are one example of how low-cost credit can be made available for those borrowers who cannot afford to repay at 20pc, sometimes even more. Instead of moving towards divesting these

entities, and privatising them, the government should earnestly look to retaining them, expanding their presence, and improving their operations. These are the vital areas where credit is needed, in addition to infrastructure finance, and the government must retain a role for itself in this.

Debating debt

A SERIES of questions raised by parliamentarians in the National Assembly last week shows that the increasing the national debt is becoming a growing concern, despite Finance Minister Ishaq Dar's attempts to explain it away. Questions were asked about the IMF programme, whether Pakistan will be going back to the Fund in the near future, and if the government had thought through its plans of how it will carry the growing burden. In his response, Mr Dar rolled out his arguments that are now becoming all too familiar. The debt burden has crossed Rs18tr, but as a proportion of GDP, he argued, it is still manageable and has not grown much over the past few years. That may be true, but given the context of falling exports and remittances coming under continued pressure, it is also a misleading representation of the facts. The high level of growth in the domestic debt also points to a sustained fiscal malfunction, especially as this has come at a time when the government claims to have raised the tax-to-GDP ratio from less than 10pc to almost 12.4pc since it took office.

One problem with all the questions that were asked, though, is that the answers to them are available on the web. The websites of the State Bank and the IMF provide all the data that the MNAs asked for. In fact, in his response to each of these questions, the finance minister simply presented the same data that is already posted. The right of parliamentarians to ask questions in the National Assembly is a powerful tool to ensure accountability in policymaking, and MNAs can sharpen its impact if they use it to push for more meaningful disclosures.

For instance, some important questions could have been asked about the debt service obligations connected to some of the project loans the government is taking. Or they could have focused on the government's plans to elevate exports, beyond the package of incentives that has just been announced. But in all this, the growing debt burden, whether internal or external, remains a key concern. It reminds us of the fact that previous growth spurts in the country's history, which had been far more vigorous than the present one, were also purchased with borrowed funds, and fizzled out once the repayments began. The government may be correct in pointing out that it inherited a crisis-like situation, but now that it is past the three-year mark of its tenure, people are right to look for a more substantive track record than a simple stabilisation of the macroeconomic fundamentals that the government presents in response to questions of this sort. Progress on the

underlying structural dynamics is still lacking, hence the growing dependence on borrowing to bridge the deficits that are bleeding our economy.

Winter tragedy

THE general haplessness of the citizenry is often reflected in the tragedies that continue to occur every year as a result of climatic events. Currently, with the country in the grip of a severe cold wave, the weekend saw the deaths of over a dozen people, many injuries, and other crises emanating from record levels of snowfall, and heavy rain. The mountain region of Chitral found itself in the eye of the storm: incessant snowing — key roads are under four to five feet of snow — in recent days caused avalanches that swallowed up an entire village, Shershall, and a security check-post near Arandu. Meanwhile, at various locations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Fata, there were a number of rain-related deaths, largely as a result of the collapse of dwellings. The response of the state has been patchy. Power remains suspended in many areas and the nazim of the Breshgram village in Chitral told the media that no government official had shown up. But on Sunday, 108 people in Balochistan were rescued (with the reported death of a child) from a remote area after a 17-hour operation; their convoy had lost its way in the extreme weather conditions and ended up stranded in marshland.

It is, of course, the state that must bear a large part of the responsibility; it has been very slow in its response, despite the existence of disaster management authorities. However, the knottiness of the issue is illustrated by the tragedy that befell Shershall village. It was home to 42 households, but the majority of the residents evacuated on Saturday when a local NGO working on natural disaster warned of an impending avalanche. Why some stayed behind is easily understood: who guards homes and belongings in a country where the trust deficit between the people and the state is so cavernous? This pattern is repeated over and over again, whether the looming disaster is a flood, a river breach, an earthquake, or something else. Some solution, perhaps a procedure, needs to be devised. Lives must not be lost so senselessly. Should people be forced to evacuate under such circumstances? It is possible to argue this when lives are at stake. But the state too must be immediately responsive in terms of providing transport, alternative housing, and imparting a sense of security to assuage the worries of those leaving home and hearth behind. As always, it is the trust deficit that needs to be addressed.

Leagues of the world, unite

THE unification of the various Muslim Leagues is an old topic in Pakistani politics. The attempt to unite them on a single platform becomes that much more pronounced when there is an election on the horizon. So frequent is the exercise that Chaudhry Shujaat Husain, known for his penchant for knitting together the unlikeliest of alliances, has lent a hand or two in a series of such League get-togethers in the 40 years he has been doing politics at the top. It has been a frequent coincidence that Chaudhry Sahib's circular searches for partners have taken him to the door of the same politician he had once been an ally of — and whom he later had to ditch for one reason or another. True to tradition, his latest lunge has landed him in the illustrious company of his former boss, and, indeed, the head of the then Muslim League in power — retired Gen Pervez Musharraf. The union must have given hope to many, for strange things happen when the Leagues pretend to be one for power. The issue is that most of these successes have been recorded when the unification was directly desired by the man — say a general — at the top. This is history, as it happened during Gen Ziaul Haq's rule and under Gen Musharraf who created the Q-League that sort of reinvented some politicians and prevented them from going waste. Going to a retired general in the hope of a part revival is an idea that is inherently problematic.

Just as it is impossible to keep all souls happy it is quite difficult to cater to all Leaguers in all Leagues. There are certainly some rebels upset with the PML-N, most notably those who are angry with the Sharifs in their home province of Punjab. Yet for the moment they appear to pose little to no threat to the PML-N. It seems that Chaudhry Shujaat will need to flaunt much more than a former general's wish to return home to set the ball in motion.

Ego and Nandipur

THE ill-fated Nandipur power plant finally has an operator, but the good news will not last long. With an 80pc hike in the operational cost granted to the Chinese company that will now assume responsibility for keeping the plant running, one is hard-pressed to figure out the rationale for pursuing completion of this project on such a high-priority basis. That has been the story of this project from the day this government took office and announced that it would complete it at any cost. Finding a party to operate the plant without a blowout in its costs has been the challenge, and now the government is in the position of seeking a review of its tariff so it can meet its new, vastly elevated, operation and maintenance expenditure. A new slogan is being born in Pakistan as more ego-based projects such as Nandipur advance towards commercial operations: if at first you don't succeed, ask the Chinese.

There was a time in the early 1990s when the government of Nawaz Sharif was caricatured for its propensity to privatise everything. Whatever the state could not do itself, it handed over to the market. That track record gave us a mixed legacy. Privatisation helped bring about a communications revolution in the country as the state monopoly was broken, but failed to bring about a similar revolution in banking and finance. Now we have a new approach. Whatever we cannot manage ourselves, we hand over to the Chinese. Today, Chinese companies are operating our stock exchange, picking up the garbage from the streets of our largest city, and building roads in places where we failed to build them for decades. One wonders what is next. If a population of 200m cannot pick up its own garbage or run its own power infrastructure, can they really expect somebody else to do it for them without ever seeing a bill? Foreign investment is a healthy sign for any economy, and it is amply obvious that there are many projects that will never see the light of day until a foreign partner steps in to execute them. What is sad beyond measure is the fact that we can make an egotistical decision to complete the construction of a power plant, but cannot muster the skill needed to run it afterwards. That is where ego-based decisions get you.

Former mayor's advice

THERE is a feeling in Sindh — particularly in its urban areas — that the provincial government has encroached upon the duties of the elected local bodies, rendering them powerless. This position is most forcefully argued by the MQM-Pakistan. However, the PPP-led government feels the local bodies have enough powers and funds, and should get on with the business of running civic affairs. On Sunday, former Karachi mayor and head of the Pak Sarzameen Party Mustafa Kamal weighed into the debate, essentially backing the stance of his old party and demanding full powers for the metropolis's mayoralty. Criticising the PPP's provincial set-up, he remarked that cleaning storm drains and picking up the city's rubbish was not the chief minister's job. Some Sindh-based PPP leaders have defended the current LG law in the province, saying that the Musharraf-era law — under which Karachi and other urban areas saw considerable development — was designed by the dictator to bypass the provincial administration. That may or may not be true, but the uncomfortable reality is that in Pakistan, it has been military strongmen who have empowered the third tier (though for their own ends), whereas democratic dispensations, including the current rulers in Sindh and Punjab, have weakened local bodies and sought to preserve all powers.

Indeed, it makes little sense for Sindh's provincial administration to oversee key municipal functions such as solid waste management, water supply and sewerage. These are matters best dealt with at the local level. The result of the provincial bureaucracy's

management of Karachi's civic affairs is clear for all to see: the city has become a huge dump reeking of putrid waste and foul-smelling sewage, with broken roads resembling a war zone. By all means, the provincial government should maintain checks and balances on local bodies. But Mr Kamal is spot on when he says that full powers must be granted to municipal bodies in Karachi, as well as the rest of Sindh.

Another law to curb extremism

UPDATING and strengthening laws dealing with religiously motivated crimes, especially sectarianism and violence against non-Muslims, is a sensible and necessary move by the government. The Criminal Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2016, is set to become an Act of Parliament after the National Assembly once again voted to approve the bill, this time for a version incorporating several changes recommended by the Senate. While a number of laws are affected, the core principles of the update are apparent: increase fines and jail sentences to make them more of a deterrent where the previous punishments may have become too weak; introduce specific language to target sectarian crimes and those against non-Muslims; and strengthen the police regime by requiring law enforcement to act against sectarian crimes and by enhancing the possible punishment of police officers who wilfully disregard or are negligent about their duties. The changes do suggest a stronger regime has been put in place against sectarianism and crimes against non-Muslims, too.

Yet, the law is only as effective as its implementation. And therein lies the great problem of law enforcement in Pakistan: stronger laws do not automatically or even necessarily translate into more vigorous enforcement. Consider that under the new law, the punishment for inciting religious, sectarian or ethnic hatred has been increased to three years and a more significant fine can be imposed by the courts. Arguably, a sensible move — but was the problem in the past the lesser possible sentences or that the authorities did not believe they could intervene in such matters on a routine basis? Similarly, by allowing for the punishment of local law enforcement if it does not act against sectarianism, will the entrenched police culture really be changed? While parliament may be right in addressing the matter legislatively, are the executive and the criminal justice system ready to take on the new responsibilities the country's lawmakers are giving them?

Sectarianism and crimes against non-Muslims have a complication: while the crimes themselves are often local, it is the national culture of impunity against which they occur. So while a hate speech in one part of the country may not be directly connected to another elsewhere in the country, they both draw on the same environment of fear that has been created for members of certain sects and most non-Muslims. NAP and other national-level policies do acknowledge the organised-level dimensions of the problem,

but the poor implementation is well known. As in the past, it is unlikely that simply mandating a clampdown on hate speech and incitement to violence will work. Parliament has taken the right step, but it is only a step. The hard work begins now: of changing institutional cultures to make sectarianism and crimes against non-Muslims problems that are determinedly addressed.

Broker's flight

ANY institution that is entrusted with the care of other people's money must be strongly regulated. That is a crucial bottom line in the world of finance. Pakistan has been lucky to have never experienced a banking crisis of the sort that has hit many other countries, in large part due to the successful vigilance that the State Bank has maintained over the banking system, ensuring that the institutions under its supervision remain adequately capitalised in order to meet depositors' obligations. But the stock market is an exception. For the second time now, we have news of a stockbroker who has fled with investors' money. The last time we had such a situation was two years ago in Karachi, when Ace Securities went under and the family that owned the brokerage fled abroad with almost Rs350 million of investors' money. That happened more than three years after the SECP, the apex regulator charged with oversight of brokers, had served a show-cause notice on the company for failure to maintain a net capital balance as per the rules, and announced a fine of a measly Rs100,000 at first, followed by another fine of Rs25,000 a year later when deficiencies in the brokerage's obligations persisted. Less than a year after the second fine, the brokers fled the country with the investors' money.

Now the owner of another brokerage (located in Lahore and by the name of M.R. Securities) has fled the country with all his investors' funds, although the amount is not yet known. Once again, it turns out the SECP was in the middle of an investigation of the said brokerage when its owner, who claims he has every intention of returning his clients' funds, absconded when asked for disclosure of key information by the SECP. This is a shameful pattern pointing to critical regulatory vulnerabilities in the equities market. Brokers have to be watched with the same vigour that banks are, and penalties need to be served up harder and faster if requirements to maintain reserves, or segregate client funds from a brokerage's own funds, are breached. Brokers also need far tighter oversight so that a breach of trust can be caught in time, rather than pursued after the damage has been done. Despite a running bull market, and claims of having fixed things since the stock market crash of 2008, the latest episode of broker flight shows that Pakistan's equities market remain shark-infested waters.

Israeli audacity

ISRAEL couldn't have chosen a more appropriate time to legalise its theft of more Palestinian land, knowing it would enjoy greater support from the new occupant of the White House than it did from the Democratic administration. On Monday, Israel passed a law that legalises with retrospective effect 4,000 Jewish homes built in 72 settlements and 55 'outposts' on over 800 hectares of a land that belongs to the sons of the soil — a move that has evoked scathing criticism from the UN and world capitals but elicited a rather bizarre response from the Trump administration. The Arab League, Turkey, Britain and France denounced the move, but perhaps the most alarming observation came from the UN's Middle East envoy Nickolay Mladenov, who said Israel's action had not only crossed the "thick red line", it had also paved the way for the "full annexation of the West Bank". While France called it a "new attack on the two-state solution", Mr Mladenov said the Israeli law undermined the two-state formula "substantially".

The truth is that the two-state solution has long been dead, several Israeli governments having had the audacity to virtually abrogate an international treaty to which Tel Aviv and several other powers, including America and Russia, were party. The Declaration of Principles, signed on the lawns of the White House in September 1993, visualised a phased Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and the emergence in due course of an independent Palestinian state. Israel, however, continued with the construction of illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which is now home to 600,000 Jewish settlers in violation of international law. The Zionist state has every reason to be intransigent, given not only America's categorical backing but also the utter powerlessness of the Arab world and the trauma it is going through. The White House's diplomatese deserves to be noted — perhaps for the fun of it — for it said the new administration "needs to have the chance to fully consult with all parties on the way forward".

Delayed Fata reforms

THE long road to Fata reforms has veered off course again — and this time it appears to be a case of the PML-N putting politics ahead of policymaking and the public interest. The painstaking work of the Fata reforms committee headed by the prime minister's adviser Sartaj Aziz was to have reached its much-awaited culmination this week with the tabling of the final reforms package before the federal cabinet for final approval. Instead, at the very last moment, the item was dropped from the cabinet agenda with no reasons given and no indication of how long the postponement will last. The move caused an immediate and rightful furore among Fata parliamentarians and appears to have sent ripples of concern across the Fata region. The Fata reforms committee has produced a set

of recommendations that is by no means ideal and leaves a great deal to be fleshed out and followed up in the implementation phase. But it remains a foundational document and the broad contours of the plan to politically, legislatively and administratively merge Fata with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has drawn support from a wide cross section of Fata's leaders and society. In short, the reforms committee has a road map that is ready to be implemented, but approval has been now withheld by the government.

Disappointing as the delay is, the reason for it is more troubling. Through the entire consultation process, two figures have largely been opposed to the work of the reforms committee and the inexorable conclusions it was drawing, especially the merger of Fata with KP. JUI-F supremo Maulana Fazlur Rehman and PkMAP leader Mahmood Achakzai appear to believe that a merger would damage their political standing with their respective bases and further marginalise them in a combined unit. The two leaders are certainly entitled to their opinion and political calculations, but what this appears to be doing is squeezing their political ally, the PML-N, at a time when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is facing pressure over the Panama Papers. Certainly, the greater blame lies with Mr Sharif for succumbing to what amounts to mild political blackmail and postponing the much-needed reforms for short-term reasons.

All three of the protagonists in this unhealthy democratic spectacle ought to reconsider their positions. For Maulana Fazlur Rehman and Mr Achakzai, the question is whether they can step back from reflexive opposition to the reforms committee and consider what is in the long-term interest of Fata and KP. For Mr Sharif, a historic opportunity beckons, akin to the 18th Amendment passed by the last parliament. It is the Supreme Court that will decide the legal fate of Mr Sharif. As for the political fate of the PML-N, with a majority in parliament and a governance agenda of its own choosing at the moment, the unreasonable objections of minor political allies should not be allowed to dominate.

Hekmatyar's new role

IS the peace deal between the Afghan government and former warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar a template for future peace agreements or a one-off affair that comes down to the savvy of Mr Hekmatyar and Kabul's desperation? With the lifting of UN sanctions and the likely release of some of Mr Hekmatyar's allies, the Hezb-i-Islami leader is expected to come out of hiding and enter Kabul as a rehabilitated public figure of Afghanistan. While some power centres in Kabul may regard Mr Hekmatyar as a potential ally in the complicated and ever-worsening political balancing acts in the Afghan capital, the greater value may be in the Hezb leader showing the way for those among the Afghan Taliban who may be interested in knowing the possibilities of life in Afghanistan if they strike a deal with the government. But it will not be easy. The deal has been facilitated by the reality that both sides had something to offer the other: Mr

Hekmatyar is a relatively marginal opposition, militant figure who appears to have been looking for political relevance in Kabul again; the Hezb-i-Islami is small enough for Kabul to not need to make massive concessions.

With the Taliban, the calculations are necessarily different. The group may not be in a position to overrun government strongholds, but neither is the government in a position to wrest back Taliban strongholds. To that years-old position, the annual spring uncertainty is about to be introduced: will the end of winter and the start of the fighting season cause a tipping point this year? For at least two external reasons, the Taliban may feel more emboldened than usual this spring. First, the new US administration appears focused on the militant Islamic State group and does not, at least for now, appear interested in significantly expanding the US military mission in Afghanistan. Second, Russia has upped its interest in Afghanistan in a manner that may favour the Taliban in the short term — the fear of IS spreading inside Afghanistan and to regional countries may release some of the military and diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to work towards a peace settlement. But for Pakistan, the policy must remain focused on a peace settlement. It is the only guarantee of long-term regional peace and stability. Short-term interests should not cloud the greater good. Quiet but determined diplomacy towards a peace settlement should continue to be the approach.

Ban on ‘Raees’

Over the years, we have seen the rise of right-wing elements and growing intolerance in both India and Pakistan. An immediate casualty of this has been the already fragile cultural equation between the two countries.

Recently, there have been calls for Pakistani artists to be ejected from India; even Karan Johar, a giant in a cinema industry that is amongst the biggest in the world, was forced to ‘apologise’ for the hiring of Pakistani star Fawad Khan.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, much was made of the unfairness of such pressure, and of how this greatly undermined India’s projection of itself as a progressive nation. Its commitment to the betterment of the region, went the argument, meant little if this was the extent to which the ‘other’ was targeted.

Yet soon after, the Pakistan cinema owners’ association decided to cease the screening of all Indian films here, followed by a ban placed on Indian content by Pemra, the electronic media regulatory body

If that was ironic, the current situation can only be considered doubly so: while Indian films have started being screened again, one film — *Raees*, featuring Indian star Shahrukh Khan and Pakistani icon Mahira Khan — has been singled out by the censors.

It had already been granted the go-ahead by the Sindh and Punjab provincial censor boards, but it emerged on Tuesday that the Central Board of Film Censors in Islamabad would have none of it. The reason, reportedly, is those shady handmaidens of censorship and state control over narrative, anti-religion and ‘anti-Pakistan’ content. It is difficult to imagine this, given the film’s fairly usual Bollywood-esque plot and the onerous commercial demands on it to succeed with mainstream audiences. But it would appear that the authorities’ ego is brittle.

While cinema-owners have little choice but to quietly acquiesce — given the risks attached to attracting the wrath of the state — where is there in Pakistan any discourse on hypocrisy and double standards now? Or is our ability to vociferously criticise limited to the ‘other’?

Sindh’s police culture

WITHOUT a responsive and modern police force, long-term peace will be difficult to establish in our cities, and militarised policing is no sustainable alternative to an effective police service. When it comes to policing Sindh, specifically its vast capital Karachi, while an ongoing law-enforcement operation led by the paramilitary Rangers has brought a modicum of peace to the metropolis, there are still many miles to go before Karachi can be termed a safe city. For example, episodes of violent crime — targeted killings, kidnappings — still occur, while the province’s top officials have acknowledged that street crime remains a major problem. In this regard, Sindh’s inspector general of police, A.D. Khowaja, while speaking to the business community in Karachi recently, highlighted many areas which require attention if the police service is to be reformed. Amongst the major problems highlighted by the provincial police chief was the killing of police officers, as well as the need for a modern police law.

Where the killing of police officers is concerned — whether it is the gratuitous violence the city witnessed in the 1990s, or the targeting of police officers by militants and gangsters in the recent past — IGP Khowaja was absolutely right in saying that when the killers of officers are not brought to justice, the inaction saps the morale of the force. Our justice system is notoriously slow, where justice is delayed by years, if not decades. However, if the state wants to encourage police officers to do their best, it must try and punish those responsible for murdering their colleagues. Furthermore, the families of fallen officers must be cared for and treated with dignity. There have been media reports

which have highlighted the humiliating bureaucratic runaround some heirs of killed policemen have been given by the machinery of the state.

As for the Sindh IGP's second point — of the need for a modern police law — this is also a very valid observation. In 2011, the PPP-led government repealed the Police Order 2002 and replaced it with a relic of the Raj, the Police Act of 1861. It is difficult to understand how political forces that swear by progressive values continue to justify the reimposition of this colonial law. Clearly, Sindh needs a law in sync with the spirit of the times, not an instrument the British used to control the colonised population. The current set-up encourages the politicisation of the police force — under this system, officers' loyalties lie with their political masters, not with the state and the law. Due to heavy politicisation of the force and the corruption it engenders, the genuine sacrifices of police personnel are overshadowed. Mr Khowaja's recommendations may have not gone down well in some quarters; but these bitter pills need to be swallowed in order to reform the Sindh police.

Media freedom and hate speech

IT is a freedom that ought to be guarded jealously and ferociously at all times. The freedom of the media in Pakistan has been hard-fought and hard-won over the decades and, arguably, the challenges the industry faces today from the state and certain elements of society are comparable to some of the worst crises of the past. Together, the media must fight off attempts to maim, muzzle and mutilate it. Yet, a strong, credible and honest media must also address the problems within the industry, especially when those problems threaten the core mission of bringing news, information and analysis to the public. There is today an undeniably serious problem within the media: hate speech and incitement to violence are being propagated under the guise of free speech and media freedom. The specific organisations and media personalities actively peddling hate are well known, but a partisan regulatory environment and the wild claims of the protagonists have obfuscated a clear-cut and entirely unacceptable state of affairs.

Drawing bright red lines when it comes to media freedom and freedom of speech is almost always a bad idea and a slippery slope towards censorship and suppression of independent thought. However, in certain narrow and very specific cases, the line between free speech, however uncomfortable, and hate speech that invites or instigates violence is clear and must necessarily be drawn. Leave aside the law of the land for a moment; in Pakistan, arbitrary and suffocating laws have been legislated over the decades. But when a media platform is used to denounce certain individuals in a manner in which the person making the allegation believes that automatic punishment ought to follow, the line between free speech and hate speech has been crossed. Incitement to

violence follows quickly if the person making the allegations has clear reason to be aware that others may act on them and commit violence against the accused.

Clearly, not all media wars are the same and in most cases there is no need for industry or state intervention. In a free marketplace, media organisations should be free to criticise and, without seeking to attract physical violence, attack each other's politics and positions taken. But with the line into incitement and hate speech now so deliberately crossed, the management and journalists of media organisations need to come together to draw up a fresh code of conduct that can form the basis of future action by the Press Council and Pemra. Sensible and fair guidelines with adequate checks and balances can be drawn up by scouring global practices and making acceptable adjustments for the local context. Surely, even those playing with fire can be made to understand that long-term survival and self-interest demand that mutually acceptable red lines be respected. An industry adrift needs urgent correction; the public, journalists and media organisations all deserve better.

PSL promise

THE PSL's second edition kicked off in the UAE on Thursday evening with a game that offered pointers to what possible excitement lay ahead for fans. The inaugural game — between Islamabad United and Peshawar Zalmi — flaunted the Pakistani diehard perseverance in the shape of gutsy performances by old hands such as Kamran Akmal and Muhammad Sami. This was topped off by glittering professional contributions by master foreign players including Brad Haddin and Dwayne Smith. There were some hiccups on Friday when two players were suspended for reportedly violating the 'anti-corruption code' but it will be sad if this diverts focus after the beginning was marked by a run feast and goodwill — a tonic for Pakistan cricket. Those who want the country to reclaim its old place by winning back privileges such as hosting the highest-level international games have pinned their hopes on a smooth PSL — a wish that is expressed frequently and fervently.

If the tournament is absolutely central to restoring cricket to the country in all its glory, the Pakistan Cricket Board's decision to hold the final of the PSL in Pakistan is a bold one. It leads to the building of two immediate scenarios. One, the board will be able to convince certain foreign players of repute to travel to Lahore for the final and this precedent could then be cited to force decision-makers to ease the 2009 ban on Pakistan hosting top-class cricket on its soil. Conversely, international players could refuse to play on Pakistani territory, which could lead to the final being far less spectacular than the preliminary games. Such an anti-climax may cause some pain — but, frankly, that is a risk the PCB must take, as it cannot afford to wait endlessly and not resort to action. For

all we know, the PCB could well have some kind of tacit understanding with, or at least an initial encouraging response from, certain international players who may be willing to do us the favour of a quick visit to Gaddafi Stadium. The hope is even more justified since we know the board is in the hands of those who love to have their predictions proved right. For a country without a home game for so long, there is no harm in expecting that the little birdie with a knack for foretelling the future has been chirruping all the right things about the revival of Pakistani cricket.

Rohingyas' misery

A RECENTLY released report compiled by the UN reveals a shocking picture of the abuse and violence faced by the beleaguered Rohingya minority in Myanmar. Based on witness testimony, the report documents an ugly series of crimes this Muslim minority group was subjected to during a 'clearance operation' carried out by the Myanmar military. Amongst the horrific crimes perpetrated are gang rape and murder, including of children in which, the report says, members of the army and police as well as civilians took part. Another example of the xenophobia the Rohingya face emerged on Thursday, when Buddhist monks and laypersons protested against the arrival of a Malaysian aid ship carrying relief for the community.

The narrative in Myanmar is that the Rohingya are not 'sons of the soil' and are 'illegal immigrants' from Bangladesh. Even if this debatable proposition was accepted, would it justify the atrocities the Rohingya have been subjected to? By all standards of human rights, this community has faced unconscionable and consistent abuse from large sections of the majority; there is simply no justification for this horrendous violence. It is not without reason they have been dubbed the world's most persecuted minority. The state of Myanmar, especially supposed human rights champion Aung San Suu Kyi, must investigate the claims highlighted by the report. The global community must also let the Myanmar government know that, if this persecution continues, it cannot be business as usual. Of course, in a global milieu where xenophobia and crude populism have become acceptable, this is a difficult proposition. Even if the Myanmar authorities cannot accept the Rohingya as citizens, they must treat the community with the dignity all human beings deserve. Otherwise, Myanmar's attempts at reform — and the credibility of Ms Suu Kyi — will remain under a cloud for letting down these persecuted people, and, in fact, being complicit in the crimes committed against them.

Money laundering software

IN a long-awaited move, the State Bank has finally inaugurated a system for the automated detection of possible money laundering and terror financing that uses the banking system. The absence of such a system was one of the key impediments to properly tracking the abuse of the financial system for criminal purposes since all monitoring was done manually. Now, with a little help from the UK government and the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, an automated system will track millions of transactions and be able to flag suspicious ones instead of the authorities having to wait for banks to manually generate reports, a task that was being performed by branch personnel until now. Whereas vigilance at the branch level will continue, it is now going to be augmented by an automated system, similar to the type that banks use to monitor credit and debit card transactions to look for anomalies and generate an alert if any unusual activity takes place, thereby letting the customer know in time if their card is being used by an unauthorised party.

Manual monitoring of all transactions was simply unable to keep up with the task of tracking abuses of the financial system. But with an automated system, a few further challenges now open up. For one, the algorithm being used will need to be fine-tuned with the passage of time to minimise the number of false positives that it throws up. Each false positive will mean trouble for an innocent party. In order to minimise this, the authorities need to constantly update their knowledge of the numerous ways in which money laundering is carried out in Pakistan and sensitise the algorithm to the right signatures to search for suspicious activity. This will mean a constant, structured liaison between the State Bank, the Financial Monitoring Unit (where the automated system is housed), and the banking community to share information on the evolving techniques used by money launderers and terror financiers.

More importantly, it is common knowledge that many powerful parties, whether individual or institutional, are involved in the enterprise of money laundering and terror financing. In the past, we have seen parties against whom substantial amounts of proof had been gathered by law enforcement get off scot-free due to higher influence. One way to inhibit the play of influence is to increase transparency, perhaps by mandating a regular disclosure cycle for publicly sharing the information generated by the system without compromising individual privacy. Also, those channels that are not covered by the system, such as ‘mules’ who ferry cash physically, although they are an imperfect substitute, will still need to be apprehended with greater vigilance. In the end, implementation will hinge on the willingness of the authorities to take action when wrongdoing is detected, and courage will be required for this.

A troublesome ally

AS the new US defence, foreign policy and national security teams settle in, the task of addressing Pak-US relations is coming into focus. The early signs suggest a degree of pragmatism, but also confusion on the American side. The pragmatism was reflected in the positive message of US Defence Secretary James Mattis in his telephone conversation with army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa: the defence secretary recognised the gains made by Pakistan in its war against militancy and offered to continue military engagement on multiple levels. The confusion, though, was reflected in the assessment of Gen John Nicholson, commander of US forces in Afghanistan, that there is a need for a “holistic review” of US policy towards Pakistan. With the war in Afghanistan now in its 17th year, three successive US administrations have reassessed ties with Pakistan; all have reached a variation of the same conclusion: Pakistan is a troublesome ally. What few in the US are willing to acknowledge is that the US has been a troublesome ally for Pakistan, alternating between the carrot and stick with no clear idea of how to proceed in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has long chafed at the hyphenation with Afghanistan and, indeed, the very existence of the term ‘AfPak’. It not only implies that Pakistan is equal to Afghanistan, but that as long as the war there continues, the US will continue to view Pakistan through the Afghan prism. Worse, the prism itself has been distorted by US actions in that country. Consider how US policy has thwarted the possibility of a better, more responsive Afghan government since 2002: first, the installation of Hamid Karzai proved a disaster; and once that era ended, the US seemingly set up another failing experiment with the forcible imposition of a so-called National Unity Government. Seemingly, every study, every commission on Afghanistan this century has made the link between better government and a weaker Taliban, but at no point has the US been willing to consider its own role in a weak state there. Moreover, policy confusion on the Afghan Taliban persists. While some American officials seem to accept that a negotiated settlement with them is the only viable option for Kabul, the US seems unable to embrace the policy fully. Dithering and meandering in Afghanistan and then blaming Pakistan for poor results — the US needs to break old habits.

Pharma sector protest

THE makers and sellers of medicines in Punjab are intent upon protest. Unless something drastic happens and someone from the government offers the protesters a good enough reason to pause and ponder, the province is set to be the site of a rare occurrence: a shutter-down strike by pharmaceutical manufacturers and drug stores. The protesters are wary of the Punjab Drugs (Amendment) Bill 2017. The bill introduces harsher

punishments for violators as compared to those provided for in the Drugs Act 1976. The pharma industry says this new code is against the spirit of the Drug Act and the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan Act, 2012. The Punjab Assembly's statement of objects and reasons that accompanied the bill when it was tabled last month says the change was essential "...in order to cope with the emerging menace of spurious, adulterated, substandard, counterfeit and illegal drugs". It said: "It is imperative to strengthen provincial institutions such as the Provincial Quality Control Board, the Chief Drugs Controller office and the Drugs Testing Laboratories" in the province.

A major objection raised against the bill was that it discusses the adulterated and substandard in the same vein as the spurious and counterfeit — whereas there is a difference between low quality and fake. Similarly, there may be a few other points where pharmaceutical businesses need to be taken into confidence. For example, there is always a fear that those empowered by the law will end up abusing their authority. The government must address such concerns but one thing is clear: it will have to justify the severity of the law by highlighting how huge the challenge is; this is something over which the government will probably enjoy public support. There have been far too many violations in the pharmaceutical sector, putting lives at risk. To call for a review of the law is not unusual but pharma must realise that theirs is a very sensitive business that must be subjected to the strictest of regulations.

Panama Papers: the larger picture

After an enforced break, the Supreme Court is set to resume the Panama Papers hearings this week.

While the legal case has not taken full and final shape as yet, the political context of the hearings has become relatively clear: the opposition believes that damaging revelations against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family can be translated into electoral gains; the PML-N believes that the unprecedented financial scrutiny of a serving prime minister has given the government further legitimacy and exposed an opposition that wants to derail the government's economic agenda.

To the extent that the government and opposition want to make their respective political cases to the public and are willing to accept the will of the people at the next election, the democratic system will emerge strengthened from this episode, irrespective of what the Supreme Court decides. Yet, it is clear that strident politics alone is not a recipe for true democratic success. The challenge that remains for all sides — the government, the opposition and perhaps even the courts — is to produce stronger institutions from such episodes. Specifically, whatever the fate of Mr Sharif and his family members, can the

Panama Papers hearings become an institutional watershed in Pakistan, a moment that leads to greater long-term transparency in the democratic system and allows for the creation of a fair system of accountability for public representatives?

The virtual obsolescence of parliament and a political fight for survival and ascendancy by the government and the opposition respectively have meant that little attention has been paid to putting in place checks and balances for parliamentarians and public officials that are adequate for a new century of politics and governance. At its core, the Panama Papers hearings have revealed sweeping new dimensions of possible corruption and conflicts of interest. The moving of money into and outside Pakistan; private business dealings with foreign heads of government; the potential for inherited wealth and power to further perpetuate a closed political system — a worthy democratic transition progressively identifies and addresses problems in the system.

Change will not be easy, but it is possible. Today, the PML-N seems as stubborn about the PTI as it was once about the PPP. But a decade of alternating governments culminating in the ouster of both the PML-N and PPP brought detente and eventually produced the Charter of Democracy. The PTI too has gained parliamentary experience since 2013 and been forced to address governing concerns in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The two leading parties are not operating in a vacuum: a progressively more informed and modernising electorate wants change from the bad ways of the past. It is time to start delivering on those expectations.

Trade and remittances

AMIDST a flurry of celebratory analyses coming out on Pakistan's economy, a worrying trend is materialising. The external sector of the economy — which measures the total transactions between Pakistan and the outside world and has historically been the Achilles heel of the economy — has been deteriorating consistently all fiscal year. The trade deficit has swelled, driven by a combination of falling exports and rising imports, by almost 29pc in the first half of the fiscal year. And now we have a new report of remittances dipping, although marginally, by almost 2pc in the same period compared to last year. Both indicators — trade and remittances — are crucial to the health of the economy, and historically, all periods of difficulty that Pakistan has found itself in have begun with declines in these areas.

But this time, there appears to be a silver lining. The deterioration in trade is partially driven by increasing machinery imports due to the mega projects under way in the country on account of CPEC. And the declines in remittances are marginal for the moment, especially considering the significant problems afflicting the oil-rich Middle

East countries from where a large share of these remittances originate. So one can possibly make the argument that the present deterioration we are seeing is a departure from historical precedent in that the machinery imports will spur further growth and rectify the trade imbalance in the future once the projects begin commercial operations and remittances show more resilience than anticipated. This would be comforting had we not heard this story before. When the current account deficit began to worsen in 2004, leading ultimately to the crisis of 2008, we were also told that much of it was on account of machinery imports which would rectify the imbalance once the imported equipment was up and running. That never happened, and we found ourselves in a full-blown balance-of-payments crisis only a few years later. Once again, we are pinning far too many of our hopes on future growth lifting this trend automatically. It would be wise to not be too complacent about this eventuality. Likewise with remittances — it might be true that there is resilience in the marginal declines, but the big story is the flattening out of their growth. Taken together, the deterioration in trade and remittances is far too serious a story to be taken lightly.

Saving Moenjodaro

IT is common in Pakistan to find state and society citing heritage as a source of national pride. When it comes to actually protecting such inheritances, though, the national track record leaves much to be desired. Be it Taxila or Makli or some other site, both public and governmental interest are sadly lacking. This point was brought to the fore yet again last week at the three-day International Conference on the Moenjodaro Indus Valley Civilisation. The archaeological site of Moenjodaro is one of the largest settlements of the ancient Indus Valley Civilisation, and is estimated to have been built around 2500BCE. It was included on the Unesco World Heritage Site list as far back as 1980. While over the years it has been the subject of much interest for the international archaeological community and its much smaller local counterpart, the site itself has been allowed to deteriorate to a point that, to quote the Unesco country director Vibeke Jensen, if left unprotected, it will disintegrate altogether. Quite apart from the battering of the millennia, the site has also, in recent years, faced debilitating onslaughts of different kinds, including floods. But, as Ms Jensen said, while Unesco's cooperation to protect the ruins will continue, the dwindling lack of funding is severely hampering such efforts.

On the occasion, Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah gave the assurance that the government would meet the financial needs of experts who sought to conduct research on and preserve Moenjodaro. It can only be hoped that this is not an empty promise. After all, it was the PPP, which has held the government reins in the province for years, that three years ago decided to organise a Sindh cultural festival at the site, subsequent to which there were reports about it having been damaged. Moenjodaro needs urgently to be

saved from further damage as it is part of the world's shared inheritance. The provincial government needs to live up to its responsibilities.

TTP in Afghanistan

AMONG the many complexities of militancy in the Pak-Afghan border region, there is a relatively straightforward reality. The inability — or partial unwillingness, as some in Pakistani security circles suspect — of both the Afghan government and US forces to move decisively against militants belonging to the banned TTP, who have found sanctuary in eastern Afghanistan, has allowed the threat to metastasise in a way that poses a serious, new danger to both countries. In a testimony before the US Senate Armed Forces Committee last week, Gen John Nicholson, commander of US forces in Afghanistan, claimed that TTP militants from Orakzai Agency have formed the core of the militant Islamic State group in Afghanistan, expanding from a small footprint in Nangarhar province to a presence in several parts of the country. The evolution is unsurprising: TTP factions have been notoriously violent, in some case predating the terror tactics of IS in the Middle East; the TTP has always had a pan-Islamist outlook, rejecting a focus on merely Pakistan, and many of the constituent units originally gathered under its umbrella have a virulent sectarian strain. Moreover, the ingress into Afghanistan was predictable: IS had early on shown a historical interest in Afghanistan, while large-scale military operations in Fata with poor border management and coordination between Afghanistan and Pakistan made it almost inevitable that the TTP would try and relocate to Afghanistan.

If the militant linkages are by now well known, what Gen Nicholson's comments have perhaps unwittingly helped shed light on is the role of Afghanistan and the US in allowing a once manageable problem to grow quickly. By their inaction, despite Pakistan's urgent appeals in recent years, Afghan and US forces inadvertently allowed the TTP to morph into IS. True, US drones have killed two of three supreme TTP leaders, and Afghan forces have launched the occasional raid on TTP sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan. But far more evident has been the reluctance to prioritise the fight against TTP/IS. Indeed, Pakistani officials have publicly and privately voiced their concern that elements within the TTP based in Afghanistan are regarded by Kabul as a potentially useful way to bleed Pakistan to either punish or incentivise it to take on Afghan militants based in Pakistan. That mindless game hurts everyone, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US, leaving the TTP to morph and expand. The TTP-IS militant nexus in Afghanistan needs to be urgently dismantled.

Incomplete census

THE fact that a census is finally going to take place this year after a gap of almost two decades is welcome news, but it is disappointing to note that the data being collected will be incomplete. The exercise is conceived as little more than a head count, with other vital demographic data to be collected later in the year according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, “if we are given permission”. The data left out of the picture includes district of birth, previous district of residence, duration of residence at present location, educational attainment and information related to fertility. Whereas a census can be narrowly conceived as nothing more than a head count, along with rudimentary data on mother tongue, literacy and nationality, the inclusion of the kind of questions which will not be asked would have made the exercise more meaningful — especially if the data collected is to be used for calculating population growth rates or migration trends in the country.

There is a possibility that politics has played a role in the decision to leave out the more meaningful demographic data this time. Migration is a politically charged issue, particularly in the province of Sindh which has absorbed the largest share of in-country migrants over the decades. If an accurate picture of the number of migrants who are now domiciled in the province is presented, it could reveal that the number of native Sindhi speakers is declining in Sindh. It is easy to see why such a revelation would have all manner of consequences for the province’s politics. Similarly, if population growth rates are made visible, particularly with reference to specific ethnic groups captured in the data using mother tongue as the variable, it could have political ramifications for ethnic-based parties. In fact, the failure of the last census to accurately portray a picture of migration trends in Sindh was one of the principal objections that demographers had regarding its veracity. This time, it appears, the government wishes to circumvent the issue altogether.

A second issue with the exercise is the role of the army. Initially, we were told the military would be required for security and to lend credence to the exercise so nobody could allege tampering with the numbers. But now we are learning that the military will be carrying out its own head count next to the PBS enumerators, as well as gathering data about the number of foreigners. If so, will this data be cross-referenced? How will the military decide who is a foreigner and who isn’t? Will it be on the basis of self-identification, or will respondents be asked to furnish documentary proof of citizenship? The fact that a census is to be conducted is positive news, but many questions still remain to be addressed before the exercise gets under way in earnest.

Media worker's killing

THE death of a 22-year-old cameraman who worked for Samaa TV has led to the usual round of condemnation. Officials, right up to the level of prime minister, have condemned the death of young Taimur, who like so many media workers must have felt the pressure that is exerted by media houses on their employees to be ahead of rivals in the race for the news. Indeed, senior government officials from Karachi to Islamabad have ordered the prompt arrest of those who killed the young man. This comes across as an empty cliché, as if all that was needed was permission from the authorities to round up the murderers. The fact is that this has happened before. Over the years, the media in Pakistan has been targeted repeatedly, followed by protests by journalists like the ones staged after Taimur's killing on Sunday evening as he ventured out on Karachi streets to cover a cracker attack. But none of this has led to any substantive step being taken to ensure the safety of media persons, who were also in the line of fire during an explosion in Lahore yesterday.

The media must report, of course, but that does not mean that it cannot or should not exercise the right amount of restraint when it comes to marshalling its foot soldiers in search of news. The competition has to be rationalised against the backdrop of the danger that threatens media teams, especially those in the vanguard of the forever-running, often crazy operations to gather news. The sternest action must be reserved for those who killed Taimur. Unfortunately, we have yet to see such action in the case of many media workers who have been killed or injured in targeted attacks previously. At least, there must be realisation on the part of all media houses of the great risks they expose their workers to in the absence of a code that some journalists have been demanding for long. Many lives can be saved if the necessary precautions are taken.

Lahore tragedy

ANOTHER attack in Lahore, another set of lives lost and damaged — the long war against militancy continues. As bereaved families, the injured and shocked denizens come to terms with Monday's bombing in the provincial metropolis, perhaps the least that could be asked of our leaders is to refrain from politicising the grim loss of life. But some of Punjab's rulers do not appear to have empathy and compassion, nor do they seem to understand their jobs. The comments made by Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah in which he blamed protesters for giving the terrorists a target on Monday are shocking. It is not the first time that Mr Sanaullah has waded into controversy and perhaps it will not be the last; the provincial law minister appears to deliberately court controversy and has styled himself for his supporters as a blunt, truth-telling leader. In

reality, many would agree that Mr Sanaullah embodies the very worst of the PML-N and Punjab's political class.

It would perhaps even be possible to dismiss Mr Sanaullah's outburst as the rantings of an under-pressure politician if it weren't for the fact that he is at the centre of power in the province and that his boorish behaviour is endlessly tolerated by the party leadership. Could it be that the crude politics of Mr Sanaullah and not the ostensibly citizen-first approach of Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif is the real reason why, despite being the richest, best-resourced province in the country, Punjab cannot seem to deliver results that are decisively and everywhere better than the other provinces? Consider what is implied about the Punjab government's response in Mr Sanaullah's comments. No lessons are being sought — none about better intelligence-gathering, improved law enforcement and new crowd control measures — because a top official has already blamed the citizenry. The specific circumstances of the attack may have made it especially difficult to stop the suicide bomber, but ought that not to be the job of the state — to learn incrementally and tighten procedures? If the bomber had struck a market instead, would Mr Sanaullah have blamed the public for visiting markets and shopkeepers for selling their wares?

What is clear is that Punjab has a militancy problem on a scale that the province's political leadership is unwilling to acknowledge. Worse, the PML-N appears determined to thwart the very systems and institutions that can help roll back the threat of militant violence in the province. The government is averse to a military-led operation; that is within its administrative right. But then, civilian-led institutions such as the police are kept tightly controlled by the politicians and anti-militancy strategies are created on an ad hoc basis. It is as if the politicians do not want to acknowledge the problem, do not want to be a part of the solution, and do not want anyone else to solve it either.

Valentine's Day order

OF all the days in the calendar, nothing quite agitates conservative elements as does Feb 14, Valentine's Day. This time around though, the controversy has been taken to the Islamabad High Court that passed an order against Valentine's Day celebrations in response to a petition seeking a ban on the event for being un-Islamic and encouraging immorality, nudity and indecency. The court directed the secretaries of the ministries of information and broadcasting, information technology, and the Pemra and PTA chairmen to stop the "promotion" of Valentine's Day in the media and the chief commissioner Islamabad to not allow any public celebration of the event. Following the ruling, the capital administration cancelled permissions that had been given to hotels, restaurants and clubs for holding activities pertaining to the occasion. Among others affected by the order

were vendors selling flowers, balloons and greeting cards, some of the staple paraphernalia of Feb 14.

We need to have a public debate in legal circles as to whether a court can pass an order that may come across as unduly harsh and restrictive of behaviour that is considered by many as harmless, especially in a society whose problems stem far more from an excess of hatred rather than love. For several years now, close-minded elements in society have been pursuing a concerted and ludicrous campaign to demonise Valentine's Day, and the court's ruling may be perceived by them as encouragement to expand their moral policing. A report in this paper yesterday illustrated the absurd measures that young people on campus, mostly out of fear of intimidation by right-wing student groups, have begun taking to avoid even appearing to celebrate the day, such as not wearing red. Moreover, the order — other than the portion relevant to the chief commissioner Islamabad — that has been issued by a single judge on a petition filed by an individual based on the latter's personal definition of morality, may be perceived as censorship that affects the entire country. Thanks to conservative elements in society, Pakistan is being held up to ridicule in the international media. This unfortunately reinforces the impression of the country as a dour, cheerless place where personal freedoms taken for granted elsewhere are strictly regulated. Is this the sort of image-building that Pakistan needs at this point — and all this kerfuffle over an innocuous event that, if anything, promotes little more than a one-day boom in red roses?

Fixing cricket

THE recent spot-fixing row in the Pakistan Super League involving promising batsmen Sharjeel Khan and Khalid Latief has put the country's flagship T20 cricket tournament under the spotlight. Allegations against the players have prompted fears about corrupt practices still being rampant in Pakistan cricket. True, the PCB's anti-corruption unit, in a rare instance, acted promptly and sent the guilty players home, while its chairman Shahryar Khan and PSL head Najam Sethi have talked of severe penalties likely to be imposed. But the lack of punitive action following such incidents in the past belies their words. It is also foolhardy on the PCB's part to name other players under investigation at this stage as this could jeopardise the league's future besides infuriating the franchises in case no concrete evidence is found. But then, such unprofessionalism has often defined the cricket board.

The PSL row has, indeed, come as a shock to Pakistani fans, especially since it follows the exciting, incident-free inaugural season last year. However, since most UAE venues have the reputation of being happy hunting grounds for the bookmaking mafia, the PCB ought to have anticipated the players' vulnerability and blocked their interaction with

external elements. It remains to be seen how the PSL fixing saga unfolds and what the players divulge. The truth remains shrouded in mystery especially after a former Pakistan opener Nasir Jamshed, along with a bookie, was questioned in Britain for alleged links to the PSL spot-fixing scam. Although Monday's blast in Lahore was a setback, if the PCB wants to save the league and resurrect its image, it will have to demonstrate its intent to relocate the event in Pakistan next year as all such leagues are played in the host nations. Earlier this month, the International Tennis Federation — apparently showing more confidence in Pakistan's security situation — successfully organised the Davis Cup fixture against Iran in Islamabad which was seen as the beginning of the return of international sports to the country.

Series of attacks

THE lull has been broken and the country is bleeding again. Lahore, Mohmand Agency and Peshawar have been attacked in rapid succession by the militants. In between, Karachi and Quetta have suffered violence too; a diverse map of militancy and terrorism appears to once again be stretching the will and capabilities of the state. As the country mourns the latest casualties in the long war against militancy, policymakers need to urgently turn their attention to the reasons and causes for the latest spike. While panic must be avoided — the attacks are extremely disturbing, but have not been catastrophic in scale — the political and military leadership clearly have no reason to be complacent. The Lahore, Mohmand Agency and Peshawar attacks have all targeted security forces or public officials and none of them appear to be random or unplanned. It appears that the militants are once again not only growing in confidence but that the support and facilitation networks on which attackers rely are being rehabilitated. In the past, growing confidence and execution capabilities have been a prelude to a sustained and painful series of attacks. The past must not be allowed to repeat itself.

If a new, sustained wave of terrorism is to be avoided and the resultant downturn in violence to become a permanent trend, the anti-militancy policy framework will need to be overhauled. Already, officials are publicly pointing fingers at outside powers, especially Afghanistan, and appear to be trying to externalise blame. Certainly, the existence of TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan is undisputed. But the policy challenges there need to be addressed incrementally, meaningfully and in a sustained manner. The sanctuary problem along the Pak-Afghan border is a stubborn one and will not yield to short-term convulsions and rancour on either side. Indeed, the quiet spells are when behind-the-scenes diplomacy and military dialogue are most important — the high emotionalism in the aftermath of an attack can inform the need to have a long-term solution, but is likely to prevent results-oriented talks in the short-term. Afghanistan and Pakistan must keep dialogue open and be incrementally progressive at all times.

Domestically, the bombings have shed an unsavoury light on the patchy implementation of the National Action Plan. Developing the will to want to end all forms and manifestations of militancy is important, but the strategy and operational tactics to do so is an essential concomitant. The reaction of the Punjab government to the Lahore bombing is illustrative of the muddleheaded nature of the state's response. Rapid-fire, after-the-event orders for crackdowns and heightened security measures appear to be announced more for public consumption than out of hope for real gains in the fight against militancy. To break the link between tribal sanctuaries and urban targets, and to break up the terrorist networks inside the country's cities and towns, a calm, focused national leadership is needed.

Okara farm 'resolution'

ALL disputes are in search of amicable solutions — which is another term for a compromise that ends with smiles all round. And a compromise has been reached between the Okara tenants and the military. This, of course, is the official version. The National Commission on Human Rights says it has been so told by the district administration of Okara. The state-run commission had taken suo motu notice of the issue and the NCHR head says the affair may be resolved by next month. According to a report in our paper on Tuesday, commissioner Chaudhry Mohammad Shafique said: “Three members, including myself, visited Okara and ... we submitted a report to the Senate and shared it with the federal and provincial governments. We also said that the issue could be addressed amicably.” This indicates a development that must have surprised many. He spoke of a “broader agreement” and of an acceptable formula in which the tenants will pay the military a share from their crops instead of cash. In return, they will not be evicted from the area. Meanwhile, a committee drawing its members from the military, district administration and the tenants has apparently been set up to sort out any other disputes.

So, has the matter finally been settled after a long, nerve-wracking battle that pitted the military against the Anjuman-i-Mazareen? There is definitely a longing for an end to the stand-off, but does the news conveyed by the NCHR on the good authority of the obviously well-meaning Okara administration merit celebrations at this point? Not quite. The dispute involves so many elements that the NHCR and others would do well to be more circumspect before declaring the matter resolved. There are so many riddles to deal with en route to the solution. It must be ensured that what is being presented is not an oversimplified, rushed job to fix matters, and that all genuine concerns have been addressed and all groups taken on board. There has to be some confirmation by those in the forefront of the tenants' struggle, something which is difficult to be secured, especially with many who were leading this fight — including Mehr Sattar and others

who are detained and under trial — removed from the scene. It is good if progress towards finding an answer has been made, but the NHRC must take a hard look at these factors before it decides that durable peace has been achieved.

BDS officer's death

EXTRAORDINARY bravery in a nation of brave people — that is what is required to be a member of the bomb disposal squad in Pakistan. On Monday night, a senior BDS officer laid down his life while trying to save his fellow citizens from harm. Commander Abdul Razzaq was defusing an explosive device planted by suspected militants on Sariab road in Quetta when it detonated unexpectedly, killing him and a constable standing nearby. Eight people, including two policemen, were injured. According to newspaper reports, Razzaq had defused around 500 explosive devices during his nearly quarter century of service; just a few days earlier, he had disabled a 20-kilogram bomb elsewhere in Quetta. Suffice it to say, this man of almost inconceivable courage may well have saved hundreds of lives while playing Russian roulette with his own every time his skills and training were called upon.

However, it was a high-stakes gamble that need not have been quite as risky as it routinely was because, as is the case with many other BDS personnel, Razzaq reportedly had to carry out his work without the benefit of protective gear. Nothing — except for rock-steady nerves — stood between him and almost certain death as he painstakingly defused IEDs, suicide vests, etc. For perspective, consider this: a bomb suit, given the proximity of the individual to the device he is defusing, needs to provide far more overall protection than the ballistic body armour used by combat soldiers, police tactical units, etc. Yet BDS personnel in Pakistan are among the most poorly trained and badly equipped sections of the security apparatus, with low salaries and few avenues for career progression. Fatalities on the job are par for the course. Peshawar lost two consecutive heads of its bomb disposal squad, Hukum Khan and Abdul Haq — who between the two of them had defused over 2,500 bombs — within a little over a year. The state must do everything it can to ensure utmost protection for the bravest among us.

Military courts' revival on the horizon

Slowly but stubbornly, and mostly out of view of the public, a debate on the revival of military courts for civilians appears to be edging towards a decision to reactivate the courts.

A draft law by the government that appears to have been shared with parliamentary leaders proposes, according to news reports, a three-year extension for military courts.

The last time this debate was held, shock and horror at the Army Public School attack in Peshawar overwhelmed broader constitutional and rule-of-law concerns. The country had been deeply wounded and a chaotic political leadership was unable to resist a determined military leadership's demands for symbolic new powers in the name of fighting terrorism.

And while the Supreme Court did eventually uphold the hastily passed 21st Amendment, it was apparent that a conflicted court only envisaged military courts as a temporary aberration. Yet, a door to the normalisation of military courts had been opened — and sure enough, more than two years on, the military wants to keep its powers to try terrorism suspects in secrecy and with a minimum of due process.

What is deeply troubling about the push for the revival of military courts is that the PML-N government appears to have become a thoroughly willing accomplice in the further distortion of the Constitution. A government sworn to protect and uphold the Constitution appears blithely unaware, or perhaps deliberately ignorant, of its democratic responsibilities, opting to align itself with a militarised view of safety and security inside the country.

Perhaps the federal government is calculating that reviving military courts will create goodwill with the military leadership while causing minimal political damage, especially since a terrorism-weary public is supportive of extreme steps taken against terrorism suspects. But expediency and populism do not make the government right. Indeed, it is possible to make a case that the government, having no interest or appetite for judicial reforms, sees military courts as an easy cover for its legislative and administrative failings. Instead of having to explain why justice system reforms have not featured on its agenda, the government is simply turning to military courts to plug the gaping hole in its record.

As the government works to assemble the coalition necessary to amend the Constitution once again, now is the time for conscientious and right-thinking parliamentarians to speak out and push back against the government's plans.

Once an amendment bill is tabled in parliament, the individual will of parliamentarians will not matter; they will be required to vote in line with their parliamentary party leaders' orders. Certainly, even in the government ranks, there will be unease at what is being attempted.

Military courts for civilians are a distortion of bedrock constitutional and democratic principles — and distortions, once introduced, have a way of growing in unpredictable ways. The fight against militancy will be a long one; it must be fought and won honourably.

Volte-face on Israel

AS far as President Trump is concerned, America has abandoned the two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute. The diplomatic volte-face is the latest of many egregious missteps by the new administration. Ironically enough, it came in that very White House on whose lawns an American president had put his signature to an international agreement that pledged the superpower to a two-state solution that combined Israel's security concerns with the Palestinians' right to a sovereign state of their own. Those who signed that agreement were Palestine's indefatigable fighter Yasser Arafat, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin — later murdered by a Jewish fanatic — and the late Israeli statesman Shimon Peres, besides America's 42nd president Bill Clinton. Signed on Sept 13, 1993, the Declaration of Principles laid down a phased withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories leading ultimately to the emergence of a sovereign Palestine. It left some issues, including occupied Jerusalem's final status, to subsequent negotiations, but there is no doubt the DoP was a watershed and committed all parties to a peaceful settlement of the decades old dispute. But on Wednesday, President Trump had no qualms in virtually repudiating the DoP as he entertained Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and enabled him to gloat over his 'advice' to the Palestinians to get rid of "the hate they're taught from a very young age". The president toyed with the word "one" and said he had looked at "two state and one state, and I like the one that both parties like. I'm very happy with the one that both parties like. I can live with either one". Then, somewhat flippantly, he asked Mr Netanyahu to "hold back" on the settlements "a little bit".

While dwelling on "one", the president perhaps did not know that the "one-state" idea is also abhorrent to the Israeli far right. Were Tel Aviv to annex the West Bank and Gaza, Israel will lose its Jewish character, given the higher Palestinian birth rate. What suits the Israeli state is an indefinite occupation of the West Bank and Gaza with the country having what Mr Netanyahu called an "overriding security control" over the occupied

areas. Trump's move was denounced by the UN and France, but given the world's geopolitical power structure, the tottering Arab world, and the Israeli lobby's hold over America's policymaking organs, such rhetorical denunciations will do little to address the Palestinian people's legitimate aspirations.

Women's vote

IN a country that gave the Muslim world its first woman prime minister, it is surprising to see opposition to measures designed to bring out the women's vote. A proposal to order re-election in any constituency where women have cast less than 10pc of the vote has been under discussion for a while now, but is being resisted by the JUI-F and the Jamaat-i-Islami. Both parties claim the proposal amounts to "forcing women to vote" and such mandatory measures should be avoided. But in a country like Pakistan, where it is so important to increase women's political participation and where their right to vote is not always respected, it makes perfect sense for there to be a requirement that a minimum threshold of women's votes be present in any election for it to be considered fair and representative. We need more robust assurances that parties have not colluded to suppress the women's vote in certain constituencies, like Lower Dir, where this has happened more than once. In the last by-election there in May 2015, none of the 50,000 registered women voters cast their ballots, because some of the religious parties who are opposing the current proposal had joined hands to ensure that women would not turn out to vote.

Maybe the reason why these parties are opposed to measures designed to encourage the women's vote is that they have difficulty in mobilising that segment — or perhaps, in winning their vote. In fact, the requirement of 10pc minimum women's vote is too low, and in time should be raised further. And on top of that, women's votes should be recorded in more detail at the polling station level, to reflect not just the number of votes cast by them, but also give a party-wise breakdown. This will facilitate greater analysis of the role of the women's vote in various constituencies across Pakistan, and help incentivise parties to seek this vote as their political strategy rather than trying to suppress it.

Attack on a place of peace

THE terrorist violence unleashed across the county culminated on Thursday with a devastating attack on the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan, Sindh. The country is at war. While high officials of the state have vowed to take the fight to the militants and terrorists with renewed vigour, it is apparent that an urgent overhaul is needed in the state's approach. From the scale and geographical spread of the recent attacks across the

length and breadth of the country, it appears that militant networks have either been rebuilt or that they were not depleted to the extent claimed by the state in the first place. The two metrics of anti-militancy success most touted by the state were the overall decline in terrorist incidents and the number of militants killed. While eye-catching, those numbers conceal a great deal about the extent of militant activity, particularly the network of facilitation that hides attackers, and arms and helps them to reach their targets. So, the first thing that should be determined is why the recent wave of bombings, whether deliberately coordinated or opportunistically coincidental, is taking place. A fierce response by the state must be rooted in an honest, accurate assessment of the militancy problem in its latest manifestation.

Unsurprisingly, the military leadership has turned instantly to Afghanistan and the problem of anti-Pakistan militancy sanctuaries there. There will almost certainly be some evidence linking at least some of the recent attacks to militant leaders and fighters in the Pak-Afghan border region; militants invariably congregate and are concentrated in areas where the state's influence is relatively scarce. But the reactive nature of the Pakistani demand to capture or eliminate militants is familiar and worrying. The Afghan government and US forces in that country can surely do more to prevent anti-Pakistan militants from operating on Afghan soil, but it appears to be a policy problem tied to the overall issue of militancy in the region. Pakistan cannot and should not accept the current state of affairs and the indifference that Kabul has shown towards its core concerns. Afghanistan must be made to understand and accept that the fight against militancy is a common war that requires regional effort and coordination. Yet, does Pakistan truly make the diplomatic and security effort needed to persuade Afghanistan in what amount to peaceful interruptions between waves of violence? Six months from today, will Pakistani officials be as determined to seek and win Kabul's cooperation?

Domestically, the challenges are even more daunting. The National Action Plan has become something of a running joke: the plan is more of a wish list and its implementation is more wishful than real. Indeed, a case can be made for a review of NAP itself, to make it more focused and to assess how its implementation can be improved. Coordination between the civilian and military leaderships, across the provinces and between the tiers of government, is an obvious impediment. All sides bear some responsibility for the situation. The military leadership's militarised approach to security and partial politicisation of counterterrorism operations, especially in Sindh, has blocked effective coordination with the civilians. Meanwhile, the federal government continues to send mixed signals on the militancy issue and appears in denial of the true dimensions of the problem. When senior government ministers publicly contradict the known sectarian and religious dimensions of militancy, can the government really steer the anti-militancy problem effectively?

Finally, there is a need to reiterate what is at stake and the parameters within which the state must conduct itself. On this, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is right: the attack on the

shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is an attack on the ideology of Pakistan and the vision of Mohammad Ali Jinnah. What the militants seek is not just the overthrow of the state, but the very rejection of a tolerant, peaceful and inclusive Pakistan. Theirs is an ideology of hate and it involves robbing this country and its people of their very essence. Jinnah's Pakistan stands for the peaceful coexistence of all and a celebration of diversity. It must be the bedrock of all state action, even against militants. The violence unleashed by the state in response to the recent attacks is therefore disturbing — militancy must be fought decisively, but it must be fought while maintaining the moral vision of the country's founding father.

Hunger amidst plenty

ONE of the signature achievements of the modern era has been the near elimination of famines. In pre-modern times, the majority of humanity lived just above the hunger line, meaning more people experienced hunger on a daily basis than they do now. The vast increases in agricultural productivity were partially responsible for the improved situation since they made larger food surpluses available around the world. But in equal measure, the increasing capacity of the state to target vulnerable populations, and the growing embrace of a value system that made it the rulers' core responsibility to ensure that they fed their poor populace, played a crucial role. The technology for increases in agricultural yields were coupled with massive amounts of money spent on food subsidies and public procurement programmes for food, as well as targeted feeding programmes in the decades following the Second World War and the rolling back of colonial empires.

Then in the early 1980s, it all began to come apart. Famine reared its ugly head in the Horn of Africa, sparking a massive reaction around the world as conscience-driven people mobilised to raise funds and arrange assistance. By the turn of the century, hunger levels around the world were increasing once again, even as the gains from globalisation lifted millions out of poverty. Today, in the opening decades of the 21st century, the clock is racing backwards at an alarming speed. Most recently, the World Food Programme has announced that more than 20m people are at risk of dying from starvation in four different parts of the world within the next six months. The programme's chief economist says that in his 15 years of experience, this is the first time he has seen such a state of affairs. In three of those regions — Yemen, South Sudan and Nigeria's Borno state — the deaths have already begun.

Pakistan has not seen any famines since gaining independence, and has been a food self-sufficient country since 1970. But even here, hunger has crept into the picture over the past decade. In most cases, famine follows crippling conflict that shuts down markets and all access to the population in the affected area. But hunger can appear in peacetime and

amidst plenty as well. Sindh suffers from chronic hunger, and emergency appeals had to go out following the floods of 2011. In 2016, the Global Hunger Index showed Pakistan faced a “serious” situation with 22pc of its population malnourished. Unicef has said Pakistan’s children are at risk from malnutrition, while the World Food Programme says Pakistan ranks 77 out of a list of 109 on the Global Food Security Index with six out of 10 Pakistanis being food-insecure. This is not yet starvation level, but it is a serious rollback from where we were headed in the years following 1970. Amongst all the regressive trends to deplore in today’s world, the re-emergence of hunger and famine, amidst plenty, must figure among the top items on the list.

Needless loss of lives in Sehwan

ONCE again in Sehwan, at the scene of the suicide bombing at the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine on Thursday, it was clear that this nation is still woefully ill-prepared in its long-running battle against extremism. While little could be done for the men, women and children who perished in the blast itself, the lack of emergency medical facilities also undoubtedly claimed the lives of many among the injured. With virtually no ambulances in Sehwan itself, it can be safely assumed that those who were clinging to life by a thread died where they lay on the blood-soaked floor of the shrine. Some of the injured were taken to hospital in rickshaws and private vehicles, but the local hospital is a modest 70-bed facility, completely inadequate in terms of personnel and equipment to deal with an emergency of this magnitude. Appallingly, it was nearly an hour before ambulances could arrive from other cities and transport the wounded to bigger hospitals in Dadu, Jamshoro and Nawabshah, a perilously long drive, especially for those with grievous injuries. Those medical facilities too were unable to handle the most critical cases, which were sent to Karachi. Already, the death toll, cited as 72 a few hours after the blast, has climbed to around 90.

Fighting terrorism in a holistic way is about far more than security operations, a depoliticised police or even reforms in the criminal justice system. It also entails shoring up the infrastructure that can prevent needless loss of innocent lives. This includes modern trauma centres, well-trained paramedics and a state-funded network of ambulances, including air ambulances, to quickly transport victims from remote areas. Here the apathy of the provincial governments and their measly budgetary allocations to the health sector deserve to be roundly condemned. The shocking state of public health facilities in Pakistan, a country that prides itself on being a nuclear power and an emerging market, is a matter of shame. These deficiencies come into particularly sharp focus whenever an incident involves multiple casualties, whether in a terrorist attack or a road accident. Moreover, it is not necessarily the case that subpar medical facilities only exist outside major urban centres. Who can forget the ghastly Aug 8 bombing last year in Quetta where, despite the explosion taking place on the steps of the Civil Hospital’s

casualty ward, lack of timely medical attention was responsible for at least some of the 70-plus deaths?

It is difficult to come to any conclusion other than that our ruling elite have little regard for the value of human life. After all, the latest target, one of the most frequented shrines in the country that attracts up to a million visitors every year, was an obvious one for a terrorist attack. The lack of preparedness for such an eventuality was short-sighted and callous in the extreme.

Saving languages

WITH the second edition of the Pakistan Mother Languages Literature Festival getting under way in Islamabad yesterday, it is worth pondering over the value attached by communities to the languages they are rightly proud of owning. But what must also be highlighted is the divisiveness that has arisen from what is understood by many as the state's effort over the years to homogenise the population. From the choice of Urdu as the 'national' language to bureaucracy's retention of English as the medium through which officialdom conducts its affairs, the promotion, or otherwise, of one language over another has always been a political issue that has even led to serious violence. Given this context, celebrations of linguistic diversity through means such as the festival take on greater importance. The two-day event in Islamabad, hosted collaboratively by public and private organisations including Lok Virsa, the Sindh department of culture and the Strengthening Participatory Organisation, brings together over 150 writers, intellectuals and critics that write in over a dozen languages other than English and Urdu. Besides attractions such as music, performances and food stalls, the backbone of the event is the availability of books in languages including Brahvi, Seraiki and Balochi, as well as the major provincial languages, and their translations in Urdu and English.

If the effort of continuing to make the languages festival can be sustained over the coming years and the event itself expanded in both academic quality and size, it holds the promise of being a game changer in terms of saving and reviving languages and dialects in the country that are at risk of being lost. The hard fact is that other than arguably the provincial languages, the state never really has made a concerted push towards a cohesive, all-inclusive and above all, doable language policy. The back and forth over the issue in different provinces, from whether or not students ought to be taught in their mother tongue at the primary level, at times reaches remarkable proportions — consider, for example, Sindh's move to make the Chinese language compulsory in schools, or a PML-N MNA's recent comment that terrorism is increasing in the country because students are not being taught Arabic. There can be no argument that it is good to teach students more than one language; but certainly the indigenous languages, those inherited

by the land that constitutes Pakistan, ought to be given precedence. There is no need to put the cart before the horse.

Syrian talks

SO many rounds of Syrian peace talks have failed that it is difficult to be too optimistic about next week's powwow at Geneva coming up with a solution to a six-year-long conflict that has led to a casualty toll estimated at half a million. The row over diplomatic phraseology alone gives an idea of the negotiators' state of mind and makes one wonder what chances more substantive issues have of being tackled in a spirit of accommodation for the larger good of the Syrian people. On Friday, the spokesperson for UN envoy Staffan de Mistura had to send an email to modify an earlier statement to make clear that the UN had dropped the word 'political transition' as a prelude to the intra-Syria talks scheduled to begin in Geneva on Thursday. For government negotiators, 'political transition' is a veiled phrase implying President Bashar al-Assad's ouster. The UN spokeswoman affirmed that the talks would, instead, be held within the framework of Security Council Resolution 2254, which supports a Syria-led political process with a view to ensuring "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance" within six months and drafting a new constitution. Passed in December 2015, the resolution saw little progress over the next year.

The Geneva meeting scheduled for Feb 23 will run parallel to the talks jointly sponsored by Iran, Russia and Turkey in Astana. But when the negotiators met last time in the Kazakh capital on Thursday both sides were so inflexible that that even a communiqué could not be issued. The sponsors themselves are at odds. Russia and Iran support the Syrian regime, while Turkey wants President Assad to go. The truth is the Syrian president expects the opposition to listen to him because his military victories with Russian and Iranian help have dramatically changed the picture in his favour; the opposition, however, seems in no mood to show flexibility. Without sincerity of purpose, talks held anywhere are unlikely to end the Syrian people's trauma in the near future.

State's knee-jerk response to terror

The civilian and military leadership may be trying to project a firmness and decisiveness of action, but the state's response to the recent devastating spate of terrorist attacks in the country has increasingly appeared haphazard and ill-thought-out.

Consider the short timeline of the publicly disclosed diplomatic and security reactions since the attack on the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Overnight, a brutal crackdown was unleashed against terror suspects, with many killed and many more arrested. The following day, attention shifted to Afghanistan, with highly charged diplomatic condemnations leading to military action along the Pak-Afghan border.

In the meantime, provincial security apparatuses appear to have launched their own uncoordinated actions helter-skelter, with a wide net cast that has possibly led to the capture of innocent citizens and Afghan refugees.

Alarming as the attacks were, the state's confused and seemingly indiscriminate reactions are cause for further alarm. The long war against militancy and terrorism cannot be won if a perpetual cycle of action and reaction is allowed to unfold.

Certainly, the shocking and grave nature of the recent attacks did call for an urgent and emphatic response by the state. But the state's response must be rooted in a clear strategy that is supported by a sensible, legal and purposeful set of actions.

The two militant groups that are believed to be responsible for the latest attacks did not come out of nowhere. Indeed, the cadres and leadership of Jamaatul Ahrar and the militant Islamic State group active in Pakistan have been drawn from banned groups such as the TTP and Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, about which much is already known.

By allowing the problem to fester and, in the case of IS, being in denial of the problem, the possibility of a devastating set of attacks eventually occurring was a very real one. In fact, it may well be the case that the IS and Jamaatul Ahrar are better positioned to withstand the state's desperate attempts to crush them.

Change is possible. Six months after the launch of Operation Zarb-i-Azb, the APS attack took place in Peshawar. In what now seems like an earlier era of the war, Operation Rah-i-Rast in Swat led to an escape of the senior leadership; Mullah Fazlullah is still believed to be at large in Afghanistan. From those episodes, lessons can be learned and better policies crafted.

There is necessarily a public component to any successful anti-militancy strategy, yet PR

cannot be allowed to dominate strategy. There are no certainties in the long war against militancy except that winning will need determination — and a plan.

Juvenile death penalty

IN a new and damning report, Justice Project Pakistan has noted that at least six convicts, who, as evidence shows, were underage at the time of their crime, have been executed since the moratorium on the death penalty was lifted in December 2014. Death Row's Children asserts that not only do these executions offend the ethos of justice they also expose the state's alarming and continued violation of national and international legal standards. With at least 10pc of the death-row population comprising juveniles, it is a travesty of justice when vulnerable children are convicted of crimes, as cases in the report demonstrate. In the absence of guidance on how and at what stage to determine the age of an accused person, there is confusion and arbitrariness when cases go to trial. There is no prescribed process under either the PPC or the CrPC to determine age at the time of arrest and during trial, which makes it even more difficult to establish a plea of juvenility. To add, the unwillingness of the superior judiciary to entertain inquiries into age during the appellate stages or even after the appeals process leads to more juvenile executions. This must be redressed through legislative protections. Recording the age of a child — either through birth records, education or medical tests — will determine the extent and severity of punishment. According to the law, the investigating officer must determine the age. For their part, police record age based on cursory visual assessments or witness statements. This means the result can be skewed as investigations are often replete with inconsistencies.

As an inhumane form of punishment — and one that this newspaper does not endorse — the death penalty, in most cases, does not accord the accused child the benefit of the doubt and disallows opportunities for rehabilitation or redemption. This is why, for now, the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance, 2000, must be adequately implemented so that young offenders are not treated as hardened criminals. Challenges abound with low birth registration and the lack of sensitisation to juvenile delinquency as demonstrated by law enforcement and the judiciary. The solution is in setting up juvenile courts and providing legal aid and rehabilitation options. Meanwhile, as a signatory to international covenants, parliament should pass a pending juvenile justice bill to ensure complete protection for child rights. Unlawfully sentencing and executing child offenders should not be the norm in a civilised nation.

Book festival in Gwadar

LITERARY, film and theatre festivals are now very much an essential part of the cultural calendar of Pakistan's metropolitan cities. Throughout the year, such events take place in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, where literati gather to discuss the questions of the day and artists display their work for the public. However, in the country's secondary cities, such cultural activities are less frequent. Moving into the hinterland, they are practically non-existent. That is why it was heartening that a four-day Gwadar Book Festival, which ended on Sunday, was held in the Balochistan port town. Usually, Gwadar is in the news either for its role as a critical node in CPEC, or for the militancy that affects Balochistan in general. To see efforts in this town to promote cultural activities, therefore, is laudable.

Speakers from Karachi and Quetta attended the event; these included author Mohammed Hanif. As Mr Hanif rightly pointed out, while much of the media focus is on Balochistan's troubles, the province's cultural richness is not given equal coverage. While indeed the stories of violence and political problems cannot be ignored, Balochistan should not be viewed through a one-dimensional security prism. The province's cultural activities, reflecting its people's thoughts, feelings and aspirations, must be encouraged to allow the rest of the country to get a fuller view of what this complex, ancient society is all about. In this regard, the Anjuman Taraqqi-i-Urdu secretary Fatima Hassan's announcement at the book festival that the body would establish a Gwadar office must also be lauded. Other activities at the event, such as plays by children in Balochi and the screening of films by young film-makers from small Balochistan towns such as Jiwani and Pasni, also helped showcase the latent talent of the province. Cultural activities in Balochistan and cultural exchanges with other parts of Pakistan can play an important role in 'normalising' the situation in the province and building inter-provincial bridges, at least on the cultural front.

Honouring our sportswomen

WITH the Pakistan women's cricket team qualifying for the ICC World Cup in Colombo on Sunday, a new hope that talented sportswomen in the country will be encouraged to perform in national and international events has been kindled. Though it was a mixed show put up at the qualifiers by Captain Sana Mir's charges, who unfortunately have yet to break the Indian jinx, the players still managed to do well by beating Bangladesh, Scotland and Ireland thanks to handsome contributions from Javeria Khan, Naheeda Khan, Ayesha Zafar and the skipper herself. One hopes that the determination exhibited on the field will translate into further laurels. In any case, their efforts must be lauded. Indeed, cricket is not the only sport where Pakistani women have shown promise. Football captain Hajra Khan, athlete Naseem Hameed, swimming's 'golden girl' Kiran

Khan, tennis sensation Ushna Sohail and scores of others have made their mark with competitive performances at home and abroad. But are these sportswomen getting the same respect and encouragement as their male counterparts?

It is true that in the past decade and a half, sportswomen have brought pride to Pakistanis by performing well even in male-dominated sports such as cricket, hockey, boxing, football, the martial arts, mountaineering and rugby. Unfortunately, these impressive strides have not been seen as significant enough to stir a revolution. For that, the social dynamics will have to change. The challenges faced by women in their professional careers are heightened in sports. Right from the moment a young girl expresses her wish to compete, a struggle ensues as she faces stiff opposition from her family and her teachers, besides facing discriminatory behaviour from sports organisers and exploitation by coaches. The media, too, is largely reluctant to give successful sportswomen prime-time viewership or the space they deserve. For instance, our women's football team is ranked at 170 despite the meagre opportunities coming its way. But it is the national men's football team, ranked at a lowly 198, that is perennially in the news. Such attitudes will surely need to change as they have contributed to the perception that the urge to compete, in sports or otherwise, is not 'feminine'. This discourages women, who eventually give up their dreams.

What would give great impetus to women's sports are the government's patronage and determined backing by sponsors; dedicated coaching facilities and playgrounds, sadly missing, would have been a key factor in such support. Unfortunately, the government has been woefully wanting in its response, and there are hardly any sponsors who take an interest. It is about time that Pakistan recognised and honoured its women heroes. Provided excellent opportunities by the state to excel and wholeheartedly supported by society, sportsmen such as Jahangir Khan, Imran Khan, Javed Miandad, Islahuddin, Samiullah and many others did the country proud. Surely women should not be made to feel that their efforts are inferior.

Rangers in Punjab

IT is a welcome though belated decision, the details of which should nevertheless be closely examined. Giving the Punjab Rangers a frontline role in the fight against militancy may be one of the most consequential decisions the government of Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif has taken. Certainly, the decision, the details of which have yet to be hammered out or publicly revealed, has a federal dimension: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is likely to have been urged by the military leadership to have PML-N representatives in the provincial apex committee agree to an expanded role for the Rangers in Punjab. Therein lies the problem with civilian decision-making. Ever since the

military leadership publicly demanded that the army-led Punjab Rangers be given sweeping counterterrorism powers early last year, there was a whiff of inevitability about the decision to eventually do so because the civilian leadership did not — and is not — serious about building civilian-led counterterrorism capabilities. The assault on the Chotoo gang last April woefully exposed the police's planning and execution, and two major bombings in Lahore within a year — on Easter Sunday in 2016 and the Mall attack last week — have shown a province that has not been meaningfully secured.

So while the decision to empower the Punjab Rangers is the right one, much will depend on how the provincial government defines the extent of the Rangers' new powers and for what duration. The welcome scenario is apparent — precisely defined powers focusing on religious militancy and for a fixed duration. Whether the government will be able to achieve that depends on how the two sides approach the issue. For the PML-N, the key must be an acknowledgement that the province it rules is slowly being poisoned by a vast infrastructure of militancy and extremism. For desperately political reasons, the PML-N has remained stubbornly blind to the greatest threat to the stability and security of Punjab. The Sharif brothers and their key advisers need to accept that Punjab — like the rest of Pakistan — is in a state of war, a long, complex war against an enemy that is both shadowy and brazen. On the military's part, there needs to be recognition that some civilian concerns are legitimate and that the seemingly perpetual mission of the Rangers in Sindh has deepened political anxieties. Precisely defined, firmly time-bound Rangers' powers in Punjab are both possible and necessary.

Current account deficit

THE latest data released by the State Bank shows an alarming increase in the current account deficit. Coupled with falling reserves, the data points towards a worsening of the external sector. The current account deficit for the first half of the fiscal year almost doubled from the same period last year, despite a slight rise in direct investments. As a percentage of GDP, the deficit came in at 2.5pc in the first six months of this fiscal, compared to 1.5pc in the same period last year. The trade deficit accounted for the bulk of this worsening situation, which suggests that the revival of growth under way is lopsided. Most of the gap in trade is due to rising imports, which may in part be due to CPEC-related machinery and, therefore, transient. But it would be a mistake to take too much comfort from this thought.

For one, it isn't clear when CPEC-related imports will taper off, given the constant addition of more projects under the corridor umbrella. And secondly, once CPEC imports do subside, a new stream of outflows is likely to begin in the form of debt-service payments and repatriation of profits, so the pressure will move from the current account

to the financial account instead. For the moment, reserves still managed to register an increase from the corresponding period last year. But since July, reserves have been coming down, with the State Bank warning that this might not be a transient trend. A troubling situation appears to be taking shape, even though it presents no immediate risks. One is hard-pressed to understand how this slide into growing external deficits is supposed to be arrested. It is difficult to believe that somehow CPEC-related investments will boost exports. With no plan in sight, it is fair and reasonable to ask whether we will be back on the road to the IMF a few years from now.

With Afghan cooperation

As the state struggles to contain and put an end to a continuing spell of violence, the military leadership has emphasised that Pakistan and Afghanistan must “fight [a] common enemy, ie terrorists of all hue and colour”.

In comments attributed to Gen Qamar Bajwa by the ISPR, the army chief asserted in a security meeting that border cooperation and coordination between Afghanistan and Pakistan is essential. Gen Bajwa is also reported to have reiterated that “Pakistan and Afghanistan have fought against terrorism and shall continue this effort together”.

The evident shift in tone of the military leadership from anger and the threat of unilateral action across the Pak-Afghan border to coordinated action against the mutual threat of terrorism is precisely the bedrock on which long-term policy needs to be built. The past is a clear indicator of the futility of unilateralism or the pursuit of policies by either country that the other does not support.

Clearly, a bilateral framework of cooperation must accommodate exigencies and there is an urgent need to address the current spate of violence inside Pakistan. As the Charsadda attack yesterday indicates, Pakistan is facing a wave of terror attacks that is reminiscent of the very darkest days in the long fight against militancy.

The ebb and flow of militancy in the two countries requires flexible priorities and Pakistan is right in insisting that the anti-Pakistan militants who have found sanctuary in Afghanistan be targeted urgently. If Afghan security forces or the US-led foreign military contingents are unable to act decisively against them, then Kabul should consider allowing Pakistani forces to operate in the border regions where those militants are believed to have found sanctuary.

What Pakistan should be mindful of is to not conduct operations, especially putting boots on the ground, in Afghan territory without Kabul’s consent. Difficult as the border region

is, mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty must form the basis of a common policy against terrorism.

From US drone strikes to the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, Pakistan has always publicly protested any incursions into its terrain. It does not behove authorities here to deny Kabul even symbolic control over Afghan territory.

Unhappily, the Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani does not seem eager to heed the advice and take up the offer of Gen Bajwa.

In comments in Germany recently, Mr Ghani appeared to cling to a sceptical view of Pak-Afghan ties rather than reach out to Pakistan in its hour of grief. But the same ISPR statement on border cooperation notes that the “COAS also welcomed recent proposals from Afghan authorities”, suggesting that perhaps Mr Ghani and his advisers have been more open to mutual cooperation in private. If so, the emphasis should be on the cooperative steps that can be taken along the Pak-Afghan border.

PSL final

THE Pakistan Cricket Board has decided. It is ready to stage the PSL final in Lahore even if some of the big foreign players opt out of the show because of security reasons. The board now says it has the backing of all five franchises that make up the league, and it has provided a list of foreign cricketers who are willing to play in Pakistan. The franchises which qualify for the final, scheduled for March 5, can choose from among the players on this list. Or they can rely on Pakistani talent in their squads to see them through to the title. But whichever option they exercise, it will not be an ordinary game or ordinary final. This is going to be a statement of resolve by the country, a landmark in its fight to protect its people’s right to live by their own, long-nurtured values. It is going to be a statement that Pakistan had to issue sooner or later, even if it is a sensitive matter. The board is perhaps more confident after its plans for a Lahore final got the nod from those at the helm in Pakistan, and especially the army chief’s backing.

Pakistan cricket has suffered badly ever since the attack on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore in March 2009. All attempts at revival since have been unsuccessful, bar a short visit here by a Zimbabwe team. There has been a serious loss of revenue while the impact of this home drought on Pakistani cricketers has been grim. The lack of international exposure on Pakistani soil is often evident in the half-cooked performances of some of the young players who have been growing in isolation — with little access to the innovations and new techniques of international cricket. The search for restoration of the old order has seen PCB bosses knocking on many doors, but the required support —

some may call it a favour — has not been forthcoming. This leaves the board with little choice but to take the ‘local route’ for yet another attempt at bringing high-level international cricket back to the waiting fans here. This is not a bad script at all: Pakistani talent has been showcased in the PSL games in the UAE and considerable interest has been generated. A successful holding of the final on home turf should in all likelihood necessitate fresh evaluations and hopefully some positive projections about this country.

Buying dollars

ANYBODY who has had to deposit dollars or other foreign currency purchased from the open market knows the absurd obstacles that stand in the way. Routinely, bank tellers will examine the currency bills, almost literally under the microscope, and refuse to accept those that have even a slight mark on them, no matter how minuscule. Moreover, they often refuse to accept older issued currency. One could be purchasing dollars for any reason — for remitting to a child studying abroad, or making a payment to a friend or sending to relatives outside the country — but this absurd ritual of locating clean currency bills is experienced by everyone. Recently, the State Bank issued instructions to all banks to show a little more generosity when applying standards of purity to incoming foreign currency bills, but it is doubtful that the lecture will have much effect. After all, the banks claim they have to check the notes to satisfy the State Bank, where all foreign currency bills have to ultimately be deposited.

So how do we get rid of this absurd exercise, which imposes myriad costs upon people in need of foreign exchange? This is not an idle question for the rich. The nuisance that the State Bank is trying to address actually points to deeper problems in our foreign currency markets. The periodic bursting of the spread between the kerb and interbank rate for the dollar is another example. This also grows out of a disarticulation of the forex markets that connect banks and exchange companies. The disputes between the latter two are no secret, and quite often the State Bank is forced to step in to mediate and settle their differences. But where spreads are concerned, there is at least some sort of a benchmark that one can peg the discussions on. In the matter of soiled and marked bills what can be done is to stress the importance of a little common sense. And sometimes that is a lot harder than any complicated policy exercise.

Military courts' revival

The desperately misguided quest of the PML-N government to revive military courts will continue today and, improbably, the government may be contriving to make a terrible situation worse.

A parliamentary meeting has been brought forward and the government's intense lobbying will now take place with news of a new military operation dominating the national discourse overnight. The government may try and bulldoze the principled and sensible parliamentary resistance among elements of the opposition, but what would be even more shocking is if the government makes a rumoured concession to the religious right on the issue.

As reported in the media and openly acknowledged by the JUI-F in particular, the resistance on the religious right to military courts is not because the courts are anathema to the rule of law, but that they were instituted only for religiously inspired and sectarian militants. The religious right is demanding that if military courts are to be revived, no explicit reference is to be made to religion or sectarianism in the framework for the courts.

The context is vitally important. In the wake of the APS Peshawar attack, when the military leadership effectively forced parliament to give the army powers to try civilians for terrorism-related offences, the only resistance that parliament was able to put up was to keep the focus of military courts somewhat narrow — permitting only the trial of so-called jet-black terrorists waging war in the name of religion or sectarianism.

The explicit reference was introduced to prevent the military from expanding the use of the courts to other civilians deemed to be waging war on the state, such as the Baloch separatists. Perhaps the MQM too was concerned that, with the Karachi operation still relatively new and allegations about the party's links to India being aired publicly, political parties could be targeted by military courts. Other parties may have had similar concerns about legitimate political or regional struggles being caught in the fundamentally undemocratic pincers of the military courts.

It is vital to stress that military courts were a distortion of the Constitution and the rule of law that no democratic society ought to have inflicted on it.

There is no scenario in which such courts are justifiable. But that does not mean military courts cannot be made even worse in practice. The government's craven capitulation to the military would be compounded if it succumbs to political pressure from the religious right to exclude the specific references to religiously inspired or sectarian militancy in a revived framework for military courts.

From a slippery slope to the floodgates opening, the changes being demanded by the religious right are unconscionable and have frightening implications. The PML-N government will be no less to blame if military courts are revived, especially in an expanded form.

Consider what the government could have achieved if it had directed its lobbying efforts towards criminal justice reforms.

Islamic banking

IT was only a few months ago that we heard our State Bank governor hail Islamic banking for having “more stability and resilience” than traditional banks, and point towards the various directions where Islamic banking can make a greater contribution. The poor penetration of the small and medium enterprise sector as well as small farmers and low-income housing is among these. Instead, Islamic banks have preferred to stay with the same customers that traditional banks cater to — government and large corporates, with a small but growing consumer segment. Additionally, the regulatory framework for Islamic banks needs more attention given that the segment’s share of the total banking industry has hit a plateau at 13pc. Without branching out into the currently unbanked sectors while hitting a plateau in its growth means that Islamic banks are likely to build up more friction against conventional banks in the days to come. This growing competition only underscores the need to ensure that the regulatory framework is capable of dealing with the unique challenges faced by this nascent industry.

In a report released this week, the IMF has given some pointers regarding the areas where the governance and regulatory framework needs to be strengthened, and where the State Bank might want to focus. Two potential problem areas that the report points to are liquidity management and the proliferation of hybrid products. Since Islamic banks are shut out of two of the largest markets that banks operate in — overnight lending and government securities (other than sukuks) — they are finding it increasingly challenging to locate profitable areas to lend to. The growth of hybrid products is of particular concern, because in some cases the State Bank has actually used its own muscle in the industry to push some of these products, like bai muajjal contracts, onto reluctant partners. The IMF argues that such hybrid products present challenges like “the emergence of new complex risks, the applicability of existing prudential regimes, governance and consumer protection issues, and reputational risk”. In addition, the regulatory framework needs further work in areas like “deposit insurance, lender-of-last-resort (LOLR), and effective bank resolution regimes” according to the report. Given the reality that Islamic banks are now facing, it is increasingly important that their operations

and product offerings be regulated tightly so that they are held to the highest standards of morality by contributing to the development of the country while safeguarding the trust of the depositor.

Hardly healing

IT is sad to see a group of educated professionals so carelessly lose the support of those they are in contact with on a daily basis. The Young Doctors Association in Lahore — in fact, in Punjab generally — is today a source of frustration given the stories its members routinely generate. This is a far cry from their just struggle for better working terms a few years ago. Now the same group of doctors is routinely dressed by the once-friendly media in robes reserved for killers. The latest protest came after authorities raided a hospital on Monday to arrest a doctor allegedly involved in graft. The emergency ward of the Services Hospital in Lahore, where the raid took place, and the outpatient departments at seven teaching hospitals in the city were forced to close. The Young Doctors demanded legal action against the raiders whom they accuse of employing violence during the incident. The signals from the public on the other hand indicate that not many are prepared to accept the doctors' version as the truth. There have been far too many instances in the recent past where the doctors have stopped work in order to register their protest. Culled from the news reports the growing suspicion is that many of these strikes might have been without a genuine cause, or for narrow personal interests.

On Wednesday, amid a public outcry, the protest was scaled down. The strikers said they were limiting the suspension of work to the Services Hospital and the Children's Hospital, allowing the outpatient departments at the five other hospitals where operations had been halted to reopen. The Children's Hospital? Surely this is the height of callousness. Even if the reopening of some hospitals was meant to bring a semblance of sanity to the protest, much more is needed to restore the people's confidence in the justness of the mercurial doctors' case. That can only happen when these strikers are seen to have distanced themselves from the personal pursuits of a few individuals.

Another operation

TERRORIST outfits in the country have conveyed a chilling message over the last few weeks, and even yesterday in Lahore: no one is safe, neither civilians, nor law enforcement, nor the armed forces in the militants' escalating campaign of urban terrorism. And what seemed inevitable in the wake of this violence has now come to pass. A military operation has been launched across the country with the stated objectives

of eradicating residual terrorist threats, consolidating the gains made in counterterrorism operations thus far and tightening security along the borders. The operation, codenamed Raddul Fasaad, entails coordinated action by all wings of the armed forces as well as paramilitary organisations, civilian law-enforcement agencies and intelligence outfits. Even though the offensive has a countrywide canvas, Punjab — that has long been a hotbed of violent extremist groups that the provincial government has treated with kid gloves — is clearly the focus. This was underscored not least by the fact that the operation was announced after a high-level security meeting in Lahore chaired by the army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa.

Despite appearances however, Raddul Fasaad was not inevitable, had the government — both at the centre and in the provinces — not fallen short in countering extremism and terrorism. For this was the much-vaunted aim of the National Action Plan agreed upon in the anguish of post-APS Peshawar. The civilians were to supplement Operation Zarb-i-Azb that was targeting terrorists in northern Pakistan by taking action against hard-line madressahs, cracking down on terrorist cells in urban areas where such elements can easily find cover, initiating reforms in the criminal justice system, etc. Crucially, the centre and provinces had also pledged to craft a counter-narrative to push back against the poisonous ideology that has fuelled extremism in the country. Instead, they have demurred, obfuscated, clamoured for military courts and, most damningly, refused to acknowledge the dynamics of terrorism. Consider Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan's statement that banned sectarian organisations could not be equated with terrorist outfits. Or take Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah's shifting the blame for the Mall Road suicide bombing in Lahore on protesters gathered there, or the fact that groups like the ASWJ have taken out rallies despite being banned.

The reality is that a military force can only carry out kinetic operations; it cannot effect a change in mindset. And extremism is a mindset, one that has percolated through society for decades now. Only the government can counter it through an intelligent use of the resources at its disposal, that too if it displays a steely resolve that has been lacking so far. At the same time, even while recognising that a level of secrecy is necessitated by the situation, transparency must inform the operation: the military should clarify who it is targeting and specify a time frame for the campaign. A vague, open-ended engagement is never good strategy.

Accountability bodies

THE observation made by the Supreme Court is manifestly true. Accountability of high officials has broken down because the institutional system of checks and balances is not functioning. Good sense and propriety may have stopped the court from going further in its observations, but the facts speak for themselves: by design or through neglect, the political leadership of the country has allowed oversight and investigatory watchdogs to be rendered toothless. The Supreme Court named three institutions, NAB, the FIA and the FBR, though the scope of the institutional breakdown is much wider and encompasses everything from regulatory bodies to criminal investigation authorities. Nothing works as it should and when green shoots do appear, when there is a nascent flowering of individual initiative and daring, the potential threat to the powers-that-be is quickly smothered. As the exasperated court noted, supposedly independent watchdogs and investigatory bodies not only do nothing, but are often proud of and defiant about their dismal record. The sclerotic accountability system, if not retooled and re-energised, could become a threat to the democratic order itself. Time and again, threats to the democratic order, from within the system and by anti-democrats, have tapped into public disenchantment and been built on the refusal of the political class to submit to the rule of law, transparency and accountability.

What can be done? The political protagonists from the 1990s appear to have learned at least one lesson: accountability should not be used as a political tool against their opponents. But the PPP and PML-N have gone from one extreme to another — from accountability as vendetta to accountability as nonexistent, even when it is desperately needed. More than eight years of democratic transition has produced not one suggestion of note by either the previous government or the present one that could further the cause of public accountability. True, the PTI has made anti-corruption the cornerstone of its politics, but too many compromises inside the party and too few legislative or institution-strengthening ideas in the assemblies have left it with little achieved on its signature policy issue. Meanwhile, a judicial system based on adversarial, common law canons does not create the space for energetic intervention by the courts. As evidenced by the Panama Papers hearings, the courts have few options when other institutions choose to stall. Perhaps a stinging, well-argued judgement will help break the impasse.

SECP obligations

IT is heartening to see the corporate sector regulator, the SECP, start moving more energetically to curb abuses by brokers in the stock market. Ever since the owner of M.R. Securities made off with his clients' money, the apex regulator has been pursuing the matter, taking the authorities at the Pakistan Stock Exchange to task for their negligence, teaming up with the State Bank to curb the illegal use of leverage through badla in making deals with client money, and monitoring closely the positions held by a large number of brokers to ensure that they are sound in terms of regulatory compliance. All this is exactly what one expects from the apex regulator, and it can only be hoped that the new management of the PSX will cooperate better with this exercise to enforce the rules, and that the State Bank will also be proactive in lending its powers and expertise to help.

But there is one overriding priority that must be kept in mind when going through this exercise. The investors who lost their money due to the flight of the owner of M.R. Securities must be reimbursed. This will not be easy since there will be disputes over who is owed how much. But protecting the investors' money is the main priority around which the regulatory framework for the stock market should revolve, and making that a central concern will be a useful way in which the SECP can chart its course forward. Other than this, there are numerous other examples, such as late filing of financial results by listed companies, greater oversight of the veracity of the numbers, tighter vetting of a company's credentials prior to an IPO, and much more. Tightening up the investment environment in the country begins with regaining the trust of the investors who lose their money due to the flight of brokers. Pakistan's stock market has a bright future ahead of it, but it must go forth into this future with the full confidence of its small investors.

Panama hearings

IN its long, sometimes chequered, at other times commendable, history the Supreme Court has addressed and fashioned several defining moments. With the conclusion of the Panama Papers hearings, another such moment is at hand. Certainly, all the ingredients are present for a momentous decision: the fate of a prime minister and possibly a government in balance; an energised opposition that has issued full-throated denunciations and believes it has emphatically proved its case; a months-long media-feeding frenzy; the credibility of institutions of the state and the very system of accountability on public trial; and the highest court in the land that must demonstrate that it will fearlessly deliver verdicts based on the evidence before it and in line with the law of the land. Win or lose, there is much at stake for all sides, though there is a trace of democratic maturity in the pledge by the protagonists to accept whatever decision the court reaches.

As the country awaits the court's verdict, two things need to be reiterated. First, whatever the court's verdict, the system of accountability of public officials needs a thorough overhaul. The Panama Papers hearings rightly focused on Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the first family, but what has come to the fore since the papers were released last April is a disturbing and sweeping scale of potential illegalities, nepotism and corruption. Up and down the power structure and across it, public officials appear to use the mechanisms of the state and manipulate the law of the land for personal enrichment; the higher the official, the more egregious the violations. It remains to be decided by the Supreme Court if Mr Sharif and his family violated the law, but it is already clear that the law as it exists is inadequate. The vast fortunes that public officials and their families have accumulated in office are simply not compatible with a strong, functional democracy. Change must come.

Second, the politicisation of accountability is clearly impeding the process of accountability. The circus-like media atmosphere that surrounded the Panama Papers hearings reduced the issue of accountability to the political fate of the prime minister and his daughter, Maryam. While spectacular and immediate, the ouster of Mr Sharif or the barring from public office of Ms Sharif would not translate into broader gains for the democratic process. As recently as the last parliament, a prime minister was ousted by the Supreme Court while his successor also faced serious legal jeopardy. Debarred politicians usually find a way to return to politics. In part that is because the focus of politicians is on the ouster of their opponents as opposed to strengthening the system. It is not clear how the system can be strengthened when improvement depends on the very politicians who appear uninterested in improvement. Perhaps public pressure and responsible media reporting will make a difference.

Post-blast confusion

GIVEN the hair-trigger mood prevailing in Pakistan, the explosion on Thursday in Lahore's DHA area was bound to create panic. The number of casualties, with several dead and more than 20 injured as well as considerable damage to the surroundings and the vehicles parked nearby, appeared to suggest it was the latest manifestation in the recent, extended run of terrorist attacks countrywide. Parents rushed to collect their children from schools in the vicinity and shopkeepers pulled down their shutters. Soon, conflicting reports began to emerge in quick succession. First, provincial government authorities said it was a "generator explosion", but then a Punjab police spokesman described it as a bomb blast, a claim corroborated by the Counter Terrorism Department. For his part, Law Minister Rana Sanaullah cast doubt on that possibility by saying the building was an unlikely target as it was not yet open for business. To add to the

mayhem, reports of another explosion in the city's Gulberg locality began to proliferate for a while on television news channels until they were discredited. Later in the evening, the CTD stated that the DHA blast was a "gas cylinder explosion", a view that the provincial law minister reiterated in his press conference yesterday.

The fervid speculation and flurry of rumours that continued to do the rounds on social media and mainstream media until late at night on Thursday were entirely unnecessary — a consequence of shoddy management by those who should have done a far better job of handling the situation. After all, the public is rightly nervous, their trepidation justified by recent events, and even a car backfiring is cause for alarm. In such an atmosphere, it is doubly important for cooler heads to prevail, determine what can reliably be ascertained in the aftermath of an apparent attack and keep the public informed accordingly. Certainly, the electronic media has a tendency to sensationalise events, and it did not disappoint on this occasion either, but contradictory information from different official sources inevitably multiplies the sense of chaos and confusion. The trick for the authorities is to find a balance: they must communicate enough to convey a sense of having things under control but not so little that they give the impression they are downplaying the gravity of the situation, for that would merely engender more speculation. And as we all know, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

Militancy has no ethnicity

On Thursday, Imran Khan repeated a line that many have heard often enough: the Pakhtun are "wrongly and cruelly" targeted in the wake of terrorist acts in the country. The reference in this case was to the explosions in Lahore and Sehwan this month.

The protest by the PTI chief came amid renewed calls for arresting the menace of terrorism at a time when the Rangers are preparing to go deep into Punjab territory in an effort to root out militancy. But these demands of taking fresh aim have been tainted by a tendency to condemn and make suspects of an entire ethnic group.

In tense times such as these, it is all the more necessary to let go of old stereotypes, however convenient they may be. The social media, to give but one instance of the existing prejudice, was replete with 'beware' messages targeting the Pakhtuns; these were rooted, no doubt, in popular biases and typecasting nurtured over several decades.

The tendency is to blame it all on 'aliens' who are forever at odds with civilisation as we know it. They are the ones who bring evil to our peace-loving, tolerant nation, the thinking goes. On top of that, there is denial that 'we' have anything to do with the violence that has been erupting all around us for several years now.

There is nothing new about this formula. It is frequently applied the world over, even if it has often exacted a heavy price paid by those whom society has condemned. Ethnic

typecasting should be a thing of the past. It should especially have no room in nations that have themselves witnessed and experienced the bloodshed and hatred engendered by such strong biases.

Moreover, the offensive labelling routinely provides a cover to all those who escape suspicion on the basis of their ethnicity. If not for the sake of decent human values, then the myth must be exposed for a more focused, across-the-board targeting of suspects.

Dubai properties

A VERY valid question is circulating inside the National Assembly, thanks to the efforts of Asad Umar of the PTI: can the government tell us how much money has been sent abroad from Pakistan for the purpose of buying property in Dubai or in the rest of the United Arab Emirates in the recent past? Unfortunately, in this country, the whole scheme of sending and receiving foreign exchange is rigged in such a way as to make it impossible to find an answer. There is a good reason why this is important. For a number of years now, we have been hearing about billions of dollars worth of investment in Dubai real estate by Pakistanis. The latest release of data may show a large decline, but the amount is still just below \$1bn in the year 2016, down from \$2.1bn in the preceding year. In total, the data from the Dubai Land Department indicates that \$7.73bn have been invested by Pakistanis in Dubai real estate since 2013.

There are grounds to be careful with this data though. First of all, it includes investments by those non-resident Pakistanis who are living and earning abroad. Second, it includes perfectly legitimate investments, not necessarily made from so-called black money or other ill-gotten proceeds. It would be a mistake to assume that the full reported amount of \$7.73bn necessarily presents a problem. But in order to know the extent of the challenge these investments may pose, we need a simple reporting template that can tell us how much has been sent from here.

And that is where the problem comes in. The State Bank governor recently told a National Assembly standing committee that his institution has not granted any permission for outward remittances for investment in Dubai real estate. According to the Foreign Exchange Manual, any investment made abroad that exceeds \$5m requires cabinet approval, and any investment made abroad in amounts less than that, through the interbank market, requires State Bank approval. But the way the system is set up, one can simply send an outward remittance without declaring that it is for investment purposes, and under the prevailing law no questions can be asked. The only way this could come to the attention of the state is if the person involved decides to declare the assets acquired in his or her wealth declaration at home, in order to keep the money white. For those who have no intention of ever declaring their assets, the hawala system provides an easy route

to send the money with no questions asked. It is a marvel to note that our foreign exchange scheme is set up in a way that we can never even know the amount that is going from the country into real-estate investments abroad, let alone do anything to regulate or tax the enterprise.

Middle East questions

AS the international order experiences turbulence, much of it caused by the rise of Donald Trump, there are valid questions about what direction the crises in the Middle East will take. Primarily, many in the region and its surroundings are concerned about what the final status of the multi-front battles being waged against the militant Islamic State group, and similar extremists, will be. Will regional powers — assisted by the larger global community — manage to roll back this band of murderous zealots? Or will the vicious cycle of violence continue? At this point, it is difficult to say. On one end, in Iraq, that country's armed forces have been locked in a grinding battle of attrition with IS in the key city of Mosul. The Iraqis are advancing, but very slowly. The latest reports indicate that Baghdad's troops have entered western Mosul. However, many experts are of the view that the complete liberation of Mosul will take weeks, if not months. The difficulty of the campaign can be gauged by the fact that while the offensive was launched in October last year, Iraqi advances have been painstakingly slow. Thousands of civilians are also at risk, as IS resorts to desperate measures to hold on to the ancient city. The anti-IS campaign in Syria, on the other hand, has also produced mixed results. While the frequency of clashes between Bashar al-Assad's government and rebels — jihadi and non-jihadi — has come down, the fact that militants are far from subdued was reiterated with the devastating bombing near the town of Al Bab on Friday; over 50 people, mostly civilians, were killed in the atrocity, believed to have been carried out by IS.

For a successful offensive against the extremists, the government and the rebels in Syria must reach a political compromise. Peace talks are under way currently in Geneva, but even senior UN officials have warned not to expect any 'miracles' from the parleys. While resolving the Syrian quagmire, pacifying Iraq and defeating IS are all incredibly difficult but not impossible propositions, there are many 'what ifs' that may prove to complicate the situation even further. These include any ratcheting up of tensions with Iran by the right-wing hawks in Washington, as well as the possible recognition of occupied Jerusalem as Israel's capital by the Americans. Peace in the Middle East needs a sagacious vision by regional countries as well as external players.

Nigar Ahmed

THE 1980s threw up some of the most committed, unwavering civil society personalities in Pakistan, individuals who would find themselves fighting one of this country's toughest battles to secure fundamental rights. There were lawyers who pressed for justice and non-discrimination in society. There were journalists who took grave risks to keep the flag of freedom flying. There were other rights campaigners — teachers, other professionals, political activists — who marched ahead with their heads held high and who refused to bow to the oppressive regime of Gen Ziaul Haq. If anything, adversity added to their resolve and to the definitive tone of their brave slogans. Amongst them was Nigar Ahmed, who died in Lahore on Friday. She stood out in many ways — yet she blended so well with those pursuing just objectives that it was unthinkable to have the rights' fight without her participation.

Her efforts reached their peak when Gen Zia was at the height of his powers. Firm and blessed with a temperament and training that frustrated the most intimidating of individuals on the other side, Nigar Ahmed was amongst the founders of the Women's Action Forum — a platform that provided the much-needed stimulus to the opposition against the military dictator when political parties and others were finding it tough to make a loud enough impact. WAF, a source of some of the most celebrated, proudest stories of resistance from the time, came in 1981. In 1986, Nigar Ahmed joined hands with the famous lawyer and rights crusader Shehla Zia to set up the Aurat Foundation. Over the next three decades, she and her organisation would have a strong role in the furthering of women's rights and generally in all kinds of human rights campaigns. The observations that have followed her departure at the age of 72 recall how she led with a resolve that surprised just as it inspired and set souls free. Nigar Ahmed is no more but there is a lot to learn from her shining example.

Fighting militancy together

There have been many attempts before and, likely, the road ahead will be arduous, but Pakistan and Afghanistan must engage and continue to seek cooperative solutions.

Sensibly, the Pakistani political and military leadership appears to acknowledge the common threat of terrorism that the two countries face and has, in the wake of the recent terror wave here, redoubled its efforts to seek the Afghan government's assistance.

The disclosure by foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz that a joint mechanism may be announced soon to address the concerns that Pakistan and Afghanistan have regarding militant sanctuaries and cross-border terrorism is a welcome attempt to move past

debilitating blame games and focus on a problem that could have significant regional peace dividends.

Complex as the challenges are, there are at least two things that need to be reiterated. First, for all of the Afghan government's long-standing concerns, some of which are undeniably legitimate, the perception that Afghanistan has become willing to inflict punishment on Pakistan in order to elicit a change in policy has become a dangerously destabilising factor. Moreover, it is self-defeating.

The banned TTP and allied Pakistani militants who have found sanctuary in eastern Afghanistan are a threat to that country too. Unlike the Afghan Taliban, who have consistently clung to a nationalist agenda, the TTP and IS are fundamentally wedded to a pan-Islamist worldview. Their agenda, especially that of IS, does not stop at destabilising Pakistan but extends to conquering Afghanistan too.

Wrongheaded as some of the strategic choices by this country have been, Kabul's trying to build pressure on Pakistan by allowing anti-Pakistan militancy to proliferate on Afghan soil will not only destroy bilateral ties but also engulf Afghanistan. The Afghan state's frustration with Pakistan should not put the two countries on a path towards collective strategic suicide.

For Pakistan, the need is to not succumb to knee-jerk reactions that damage the relationship with the Afghan people. Targeting Afghan nationals in counterterrorism sweeps; closing border crossings used by peaceful Afghans; attempting to evict Afghan refugees with decades-old ties to this country — Pakistani authorities must not take steps that further alienate the Afghan people.

There has been little to no evidence shared with the public so far that the hubs of Afghan populations in Pakistani cities and towns are hubs of terrorism. Indeed, most Afghan communities house a hardworking population that contributes to the economy and helps sustain the historically close ties with Afghanistan.

Terrorism, it should be obvious, thrives in environments of fear and repression. Pakistan must defend itself and has a right to determine its strategic priorities. But those priorities must be rooted in an understanding of national security that is sensible, humane and of benefit to the region.

Gas politics

SINCE 2011, there has been a moratorium in place for new gas connections because of the dwindling supplies of domestic gas. Every government comes under intense pressure to grant more gas connections in the constituencies of important political personalities since these connections carry great political pay-offs and are viewed as signature emblems of success by constituents. But since domestic gas has been declining rapidly and has to be supplemented by imported LNG, which is multiple times more expensive, this important political promise has become increasingly more difficult for politicians to deliver on. Now we hear, via a case being heard in the Islamabad High Court, that 55 political personalities, including senior ministers in the government, have been granted a relaxation in this moratorium for connections to their constituencies. There is no other way to view this other than through the lens of patronage politics.

The politics of patronage where natural gas is concerned is not new, and part of the reason why there was a moratorium to begin with was to put an end to the whole game. Industry and residential consumers have competed ferociously with each other for access to piped domestic gas, and under the previous rulers, it was something of a norm for the government to attach demands of loyalty in exchange for granting such requests. But natural gas is far too important a resource to play politics with. Almost half our primary fuel needs are met with natural gas, and if access to this precious resource is going to be decided arbitrarily by the prime minister, it opens the door not only to large-scale corruption, but also massive misallocation of the precious fuel. Instead of discretionary approvals for new connections, the government ought to be more focused on tightening the legal regime to determine access that is above politics, and more importantly, price reform to encourage the judicious use of this resource. The manner in which these 55 connections have been granted has been below the radar of the media and courts, which raises further concerns about transparency. Now that the matter has been exposed, perhaps the government should also be asked about its plans to reform the gas sector to ensure continued provision of the vital resource without burdening the state with distortionary subsidies and the grounds upon which these particular requests were granted a relaxation from the moratorium.

Overloaded PIA

IF there is one thing the national carrier could make a career of, it is 'how not to do it'. Efficiency, courteousness, reliability and in-flight care all tend to be of standards that are the opposite of what passengers have a right to expect. Even so, PIA continues to plumb new depths of absurdities. It recently emerged that last month, a Boeing 777 aircraft

flying from Karachi to Madina was overbooked in violation of all rules, safety standards, and even basic sense. Seven passengers had to travel whilst standing. Excepting the cockpit, the aircraft had a seating capacity of 409; instead, it carried 416 persons. Amazingly, there is room in this story to get more bizarre. The extra passengers carried handwritten boarding passes; the senior purser claims that she told the pilot about the situation but that he told her to ‘adjust’; the pilot maintains that he only found out after the plane was in the air — and he did not return to offload, as protocol required, because that would not have been in the airline’s interest.

And yet, it could be said that it is all of a piece as far as PIA is concerned. This is the airline, after all, that not too long ago allowed the sacrifice of a black goat on the tarmac, at the steps of its aircraft, in a bid to ward off evil spirits. Meanwhile, given the situation prevailing on PK-743 last month, as one Twitter user mullied, the airline might as well consider the merits of jettisoning the meal carts in favour of stalls selling paan. Or, perhaps, offer special discounts for passengers willing to travel without a seat, thus formalising the flouting of rules and safety requirements. Customers put their lives in the airline’s hands; if PIA is blissfully unconcerned about its responsibilities, as would appear to be the case, there should be no confusion about it. Certainly, it has not much to lose in terms of its reputation.

Data on glaciers

FOR a number of years now, an interesting thesis has suggested that there is a phenomenon known as the ‘Karakoram anomaly’. In a nutshell, the thesis suggests that where glaciers in the eastern Himalayan range, in Nepal and Tibet, are known to be retreating due to the impact of climate change, in the western reaches of the range and the Karakoram there is evidence that many of them are in fact surging. Very little scientific measurements have been made with regard to the glaciers of Pakistan’s northern areas, comprising three of the world’s largest mountain ranges — the Himalayas, the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush. The result is that we are left to conjecture about the actual impact and dynamics of global warming in this region. From some preliminary observations made by one glaciologist by the name of Ken Hewitt, we understand that these ranges may be going through a process of change that is different from what is happening to their counterparts in the eastern Himalayas.

This is an oddity of staggering proportions, considering that the glaciers and snowfall of the northern areas are almost entirely the source of our water supply that powers the turbines in our dams and irrigates our land. Without the water that flows in such abundance from these mighty ranges every year, Pakistan would be an arid desert. With so much at stake, and with such an interesting thesis as the Karakoram anomaly floating around, one would think that far more attention would be paid to the dynamics of global

warming in the western Himalayas than is presently the case. But as it turns out, we remain woefully blind to what may be in store for us in the coming decades as the pace of global warming picks up.

A small group of dedicated individuals is making some effort to change that. Under the Pakistan Integrated Mountain Conservancy Programme, they have just finished the first winter trek of two of the longest glaciers in the range, in an attempt to gather data that would enable us to know how the glaciers are being impacted by global warming. Their efforts are welcome, but some key inadequacies remain. For one, their data gathering for the moment is restricted to photographs and GPS coordinates of selected points. For another, their research is on the Braldu glacier, and a small set of glaciers around the Shimshal area. The thesis of the Karakoram anomaly, however, rests in large part on observations of the Panmah glacier and its tributaries. The efforts of these dedicated individuals are to be applauded, but far more is going to be required before we can begin to say that the Karakoram anomaly exists, and whether or not it is representative of what is happening in the rest of the range at elevations above 3,000m. For that, the state needs to take the task more seriously.

Nationalist sentiment

WHEN a trust deficit spans decades, it becomes extremely difficult to bridge. While the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has aroused misgivings in Gilgit-Baltistan as well as all the provinces with smaller populations than Punjab that they will be shortchanged at the expense of the latter, Balochistan's apprehensions are the deepest. Their fears have become a lightning rod for nationalists in the opposition as well as separatist groups. Akhtar Mengal, president of the Balochistan National Party-Mengal, reiterated the sentiment at a well-attended rally in Kharan on Sunday, saying that he saw no benefit accruing to the province from the implementation of CPEC projects. The much-vaunted "game changer for the region", he alleged, would only benefit Punjab where related development projects have already been launched while the Baloch had for 70 years been deprived of even basic facilities.

While detractors would likely dismiss this view by saying that nationalists would by default adopt such a stance in order to stay relevant, that would betray a gross misreading of the situation and the sentiments of the Baloch — something that can be found in abundance in this country. Of the 2,600km that constitute CPEC's western alignment, 1,300km runs through Balochistan, not to mention the fact that the deepwater port of Gwadar which lies on its shores is the centrepiece of the project. Yet the province is a bystander in the planning and rollout of CPEC within its boundaries. Certainly, Sindh and KP, and GB in particular, have complained of the same to some extent from time to time. However, in Balochistan, the sidelining of the people's 'voice' takes on another dimension altogether. For many Baloch, it is the perpetuation of their grievances against the centre and their resentment that real control over their resources has long been exerted

by the establishment rather than the province itself — even after the NFC award. The problem thus is a political one, not a socioeconomic one alone that will be resolved by giving some CPEC-related job opportunities to the people. The government must engage with nationalist organisations like BNP-M, even if it does not agree with their views, and consider their input with regard to CPEC if this mega infrastructure project is indeed to be a harbinger of prosperity. It would also be sound long-term strategy: after all, despite the attendant risks from separatist elements, the party has chosen to remain within the electoral mainstream. For that, and for many more reasons, it should be heard.

AJK CJ's directive

IN his first address to officials of the Azad Kashmir Supreme Court, the new AJK Chief Justice Chaudhry Mohammed Ibrahim Zia, outlined, among other things, intentions that may have left many surprised. The chief justice spoke against prejudices — personal, regional, ethnic, etc — and against slackness, negligence and dereliction of duty. But what attracted most attention was his directive to the court staff: under him, their annual salary increments would be based on how regularly they offer their prayers. This may have reminded his audience of the times when the authorities sought to establish nizam-i-salaat by executive order; in fact, some sections of society observed that matters of faith are best left to an individual and his or her Maker, and that increments should not be linked to piety.

There is always an urge among the experienced to guide, preach and reform. And indeed, there are lessons to be learnt from the life of veterans in all fields. The point of the debate is not whether any experienced, successful and respectable personality, who is in a position to influence society, should or should not try to make a difference. Instead, it is a sound principle that he or she lead by example, instead of allowing the impact of personal beliefs to be felt through official posts. Where social, and not official, allegiance is desired from subordinates, the best and most durable impact is one which is made without the use of formal authority. Take the law that seeks to restrict spending on wedding feasts in Punjab. It has the province's chief minister relying on governmental force and authority to bring about social change. This is the easier way. He could have, instead, set an example of austerity through personal practice and trusted the public to follow suit. The same is true for those who would like their staff to be pious, visibly and within. Such people in high posts should seek strength in the own abilities to create a compelling enough personal example.